

COMIC ABSURDITY AND THE NOVELS OF
KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

By

WILLIAM GARY SHAW

Bachelor of Arts
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1963

Master of Science
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma
1968

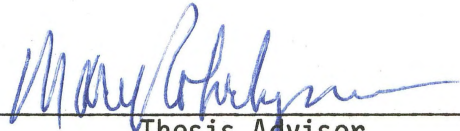
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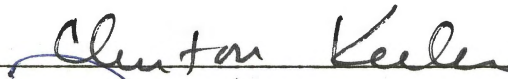
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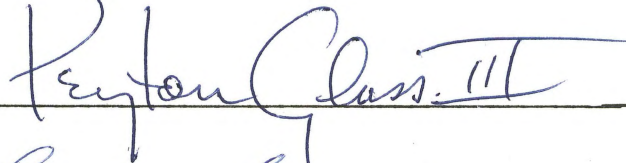
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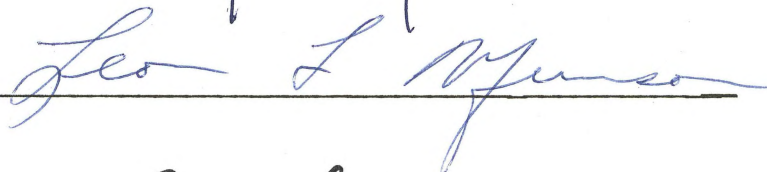
Thesis Approved:



Thesis Adviser









Dean of Graduate College

938995

PREFACE

I wish to express my thanks to my readers, but not just for serving on my committee and offering constructive help. I thank my major adviser, Dr. Mary Rohrberger, from whom I have learned both about literature and the art of teaching with a balance of pride and humility; I thank Dr. Clinton Keeler for being a continual intellectual stimulant; I thank Dr. Peyton Glass III for changing my whole life and literary perceptions by introducing me to Black Humor and a book called Catch-22; and I thank Dr. Leon Munson for his support and encouragement throughout my graduate years.

I wish also to thank Rita Handshy, whose typing and proofreading on short notice and with impending deadlines was invaluable. A note of thanks is also in order for Mrs. Martin in the graduate office for her cooperation and help in the final stages of completing this degree.

Finally, special gratitude is expressed for my daughter, Kimberly, for her understanding why Daddy was seldom home; this dissertation could easily have ridden with Jesse James for all of my time it stole from her.

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"... no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything" (Cat's Cradle, p. 34).

CHAPTER I

COMIC ABSURDITY

Why comic absurdity? I first chose the word comic only to imply humor, to insure that the tone of humor was never lost sight of amid all the chaos. I realize that novels such as Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Mother Night, and Cat's Cradle cannot be truly seen as comic in a traditional sense or in Northrup Frye's sense of the word, for "comedy usually moves toward a happy ending, and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is 'this should be.'"¹ The endings of Vonnegut's novels give no such feeling. According to Frye, "the obstacles to the hero's desire, then, form the action of the comedy, and the overcoming of them the comic resolution."² Or if the hero does not triumph, he at least escapes. In what Frye calls "the second phase of comedy, . . . the hero does not transform a humorous society but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before."³ But in Vonnegut's novels there is no real triumph over opposing forces, and the best these novels can do is parody conventional comic endings with a resulting irony. Unlike other novels in the comic absurd tradition such as Catch-22 and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Vonnegut's novels do not even posit an escape. There is no Yossarian or Bromden to light out for the territory. Proteus is imprisoned at the end of Player Piano, Rumfoord dematerializes and both Beatrice and Malachi Constant die to conclude The Sirens

of Titan, Howard W. Campbell, Jr. is imprisoned and eventually hangs himself in Mother Night, and Cat's Cradle ends not only with the death of Jonah, but all other life on earth. It would seem, then, that irony would be a much more appropriate term to describe these novels.

Why then cling to a term which obviously will be questioned? Besides being somewhat synonymous (at least on a non-literary level) with humorous, comic also has connotations and specialized meanings which coincide with what I propose to demonstrate in this study. Something is comic when it causes laughter or amusement, which these novels do. A comic is one who tells jokes or funny stories, which Vonnegut certainly does. A comic may also be a funny, often animated film short characterized by excessive violence. It is sometimes a picture-book or funny book or a short newspaper piece characterized by humor, two dimensional characters, and an oversimplified conflict between good and evil. The zany world of the Marx Brothers is a comic one, and film technique is not far from narrative technique in Vonnegut's novels. As an added bonus, comic makes a good pun on cosmic, which when coupled with the idea of absurdity, functions very well to describe Vonnegut's novels.

In addition, the absurd vision is a comic one; the more grotesque the horror is, the easier it lends itself to the ludicrous. And like Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and Albee, Vonnegut "employs the ludicrousness of comedy to show that life is itself absurd."⁴ Vonnegut combines the absurdity of Camus with that of Ionesco. "When Camus talked of the Absurd in The Myth of Sisyphus, he meant a life lived solely for its own sake in a universe that no longer made sense because there was no God to resolve the contradictions. . . . But for Ionesco, absurdity

was what it usually is: raging, hilarious farce."⁵ What Kierkegaard calls Despair is present in the absurdity of these novels, but the absurdity also contains inherent humor. The comic and nightmare elements are inseparable. These two conflicting but coexisting elements allow us the paradox of simultaneous distance and nearness, of laughter and horror. Vonnegut makes comedy work in the midst of human anguish, makes the horrors of life more bearable by emphasizing their ludicrous qualities. Thus awareness of absurdity can bring laughter as well as anguish. And laughter allows detachment which paradoxically leads to love or compassion.

Trying to discover a good definition for or explanation for comedy is a great deal like trying to hold mercury in one's hands; it keeps slipping through one's fingers. Most critics of Vonnegut's works are not much help since they generally avoid the issue by using a phrase such as, "an explained joke is never funny," or "when a joke is dissected, it abruptly ceases to be funny." They then go on to other aspects of Vonnegut's works. Even writers dealing with comedy avoid classification by saying, "we plague ourselves by trying to sort comedy from burlesque, satire, and farce . . . and the points where they overlap are none too clearly defined."⁶

Despite these examples of how to avoid obvious problems, I have attempted to analyze the techniques Vonnegut uses for comic effect and the relationship between them and absurdity. Although this effort may not be totally successful, I hope it is more useful than the usual dodging of the issue.

According to Robert Corrigan, "comedy operates in that middle zone between the serious and the absurd which Aristotle called the

Ludicrous. . . . The Ludicrous (whether it take the form of the grotesque, or exaggeration, or physical deformity) [is] the proper subject matter for comedy."⁷ Clearly, Vonnegut works within the proper subject matter for comedy; a writer who makes more use of the ludicrous would be hard to find.

The belief that ours is a chaotic universe without meaning, thus absurd, is a dominant theme in contemporary American fiction. In order to show this, contemporary novelists frequently either abandon conventional novel form or else parody the novel's conventions. Vonnegut conveys absurdity by parody and burlesque, ridiculous events, grotesque characters, juxtaposed incongruities, non-sequiturs, various forms of verbal wit, and anything else that might serve to destroy the reader's concept of a logical, orderly world.

Vonnegut has also had plays and numerous short stories published. My concentration on the novels was the result of several factors. First, I was interested in examining Vonnegut's themes and techniques in that one genre. Second, Vonnegut himself dismisses his short stories as hack work done solely to financially sustain his novel writing.⁸ And anyway, the short stories are filled with the same themes and techniques which are in his novels, and the latter better develop both. In fact, some of the short stories are incorporated into the novels.⁹ Third, while Happy Birthday, Wanda June is a good play, the same themes and techniques are also present in the novels. Fourth, the seven novels comprise an adequate spectrum to study the form and content of Vonnegut's work. And finally, Vonnegut has promised to write no more novels,¹⁰ which affords me the opportunity of dealing with the seven novels as a completed canon, not an in-progress report.

FOOTNOTES

¹Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 167.

²Anatomy of Criticism, p. 164.

³Anatomy of Criticism, p. 180.

⁴Robert W. Corrigan, "Comedy and the Comic Spirit," Comedy: Meaning and Form (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 11.

⁵A. Alvarez, Samuel Beckett (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1973), pp. 5-6. Farce is defined by M. H. Abrams in A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971) as "a type of comedy /which/ commonly employs highly exaggerated or caricatured character types, puts them into improbable and ludicrous situations, and makes free use of broad verbal humor and physical horseplay."

⁶J. L. Styan, "Types of Comedy," Comedy: Meaning and Form, p. 231.

⁷Comedy: Meaning and Form, p. 7.

⁸"Preface," Welcome to the Monkey House (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1970).

⁹"Harrison Bergeron," for example is incorporated into The Sirens of Titan and "EPICAC" into Player Piano.

¹⁰Richard Todd, "The Masks of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," New York Times Magazine (January 21, 1971), p. 30.

CHAPTER II

KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

For so popular a writer, there is precious little in the way of valuable criticism on Vonnegut. The only dissertation¹ which treats Vonnegut exclusively is mainly concerned with exploring parallels between Twain and him,² and convincing the reader that Vonnegut is, indeed, worth reading. In a later forty-four page pamphlet,³ the same author attempts to explain why Vonnegut is popular and discusses briefly his major themes and techniques. A collection of criticism is now available,⁴ but only six of its fourteen chapters are concerned with criticism of Vonnegut's novels; the others treat Vonnegut as a literary figure and a public figure and are more interested in biography than criticism.

While the number of articles on Vonnegut has grown considerably in the last three years, most of them center on one work (usually Slaughterhouse-Five or God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater), and they do little to determine an overall pattern in the Vonnegut canon. Many articles merely attempt to classify Vonnegut as a science-fiction writer or a black humorist. Vonnegut's personal popularity still outruns his literary success, and many of the articles are merely interviews with him as a person, not as a writer. No one to the best of my knowledge has tried to show that in all of his work Vonnegut uses

a consistent pattern in depicting an absurd universe which must be faced with laughter.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was ignored by public and critic alike for almost ten years; in fact, the name Vonnegut was almost as obscure in real life as that of Kilgore Trout in Vonnegut's novels. Vonnegut had three things working against his achieving critical acclaim: he was a science-fiction writer; he was contemporary; and, worst of all, he was funny. Consequently, his first book received rather bad reviews, and the next four were issued directly in paperback and were not reviewed at all. Not until Slaughterhouse-Five (his sixth novel, published in 1969) did Vonnegut receive any kind of literary acclaim. Shortly afterward, his earlier novels (most of which were long out of print) began to be published again. In the last five years Vonnegut has become such a college cult hero that students have stolen his books from the library shelves, and critics have begun to take notice of him. What most critics failed to realize is that Vonnegut's work is more than just science-fiction and that his subject is serious; it is only his technique that is comic.

Much of the existent criticism on Vonnegut concerns itself with trying to pigeonhole him, to determine whether or not he is a science-fiction writer. J. Michael Chrichton maintains that Vonnegut long ago extricated himself from the limitations of ordinary science-fiction.⁵ As Ernest W. Ranly states:

Vonnegut at times adds fantasy to his stories, whereas pure sci-fi permits only what is possible within a given scientific hypothesis. Vonnegut adds humor, a wild black humor, while most sci-fi is serious to the point of boredom. Vonnegut, generally, adds a distinctive sense and literary class. And, finally, Vonnegut seems pre-occupied with genuine human questions, about war, peace, technology, human

happiness. He is even bitterly anti-machine, anti-technology, anti-science. Surely, he is no longer an ordinary science fiction hack.⁶

The prejudice against the genre is obvious in Mr. Ranly's last word, and indeed, throughout the article. This prejudice is probably responsible for Vonnegut's attempts to shuck the sci fi label, complaining, "I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file drawer labeled 'science fiction' ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a comfort station."⁷

Yet Vonnegut obviously has some respect for science-fiction, as he has Eliot Rosewater say to a convention of science-fiction writers:

"I love you sons of bitches. . . . You're all I read any more. 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, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. 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, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distances without limit, over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell."⁸

Kilgore Trout, a science-fiction writer, is the messiah of this novel and is an important character in several others, and Rosewater believes that in ten thousand years' time, Trout will be the only hero of our age to be remembered. But, as is usual with Vonnegut, few statements are allowed to stand. Vonnegut ironically undercuts this assertion with the following:

Eliot admitted later on that science-fiction writers couldn't write for sour apples, but he declared that it didn't matter. He said they were poets just the same, since they were more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing

well. "The hell with the talented sparrowfarts who write delicately of one small piece of one mere lifetime, when the issues are galaxies, eons, and trillions of souls yet to be born."⁹

Ironically, too, Eliot, Vonnegut's spokesman hero, is declared insane and goes to an asylum at the end of the novel. And there is still further irony when one realizes how much Trout's literary career obviously parallels Vonnegut's early career.

Willis E. McNelly, writing for America, believes that Vonnegut fits comfortably within the science-fiction genre. McNelly compares the form to Eliot's objective correlative which enables us "to face problems we cannot otherwise face directly."¹⁰ Since he cannot face evils so incomprehensible as the fire-bombing of Dresden directly, Vonnegut uses science-fiction to give him distance and objectivity in order to retell the horror.

I choose to believe that nothing fits in pigeon holes but pigeons, and even then there are usually feathers left out. The contradictions in Vonnegut's own position reinforce my belief. I think Vonnegut uses whatever form helps him to get his point across. Since conventional novelistic techniques are no longer adequate to describe the absurd universe we live in, Vonnegut must use other forms. As Eliot Rosewater tells us in Slaughterhouse-Five, "Everything there was to know about life was in The Brothers Karamazov. But that isn't enough anymore." The tradition of realistic fiction is clearly inadequate to describe the contemporary experience.

According to Wylie Sypher, style is the index to the social consciousness of the artist's culture. In other words, the state of the culture in which an art form is produced will be reflected in that art form, not only in content but also in form. Or as John Somers puts it:

. . . cultures that find themselves in harmony with their environment produce naturalistic art. That is to say, paintings are organized according to space and novels according to time. But in times of cultural upheaval when men feel threatened by their environment, they produce a "non-naturalistic abstract" art. Narration, for example, abandons its traditional structural principle. Narrative events no longer follow one another in logical sequence, but are arranged according to spatial patterns in the novel, patterns which not only allow two events to occur simultaneously, but attempt to manifest the simultaneity in the texture of the narrative.¹¹

None of Vonnegut's protagonists is successful at fighting whatever absurdity he is up against. Paul Proteus's revolution fails; Malachi Constant fails at everything, and even Winston Niles Rumfoord finds he is only a puppet; Howard W. Campbell, Jr. does more good for the Nazis than the Allies, and is accosted by Nazis, Allies, Jews, and Communists alike; neither John nor the Bokononism he champions can stop Ice 9 from destroying the world; Eliot Rosewater has a minimal financial triumph, but he lands in an asylum for his efforts; Billy Pilgrim is defeated by the army, Tralfamadore, and an assassin's bullet;¹² and Dwayne Hoover ends up by being carted away as a madman. But if there are no heroes, there are also no villains in Vonnegut's novels. As Vonnegut comments in Slaughterhouse-Five, "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 enormous forces."¹³

Vonnegut carries the anti-heroism of his protagonists to a greater logical extreme than most contemporary writers. Catch-22's Yossarian is much more heroic than any of Vonnegut's protagonists because he openly defies and rebels against the cosmic order. McMurphy and Bromden both fight against the Combine in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, and even Sebastian Dangerfield opposes all the life squelching forces

in The Ginger Man. But Vonnegut's level of absurdity demands protagonists that are such anti-heroes that they cannot act. Like Bartleby, they "prefer not to." They refuse to participate in human suffering and either devote themselves to compassion and Agape love, or else cope with the absurdity surrounding them by total resignation. In The Sirens of Titan, Boaz devotes himself to the harmoniums in the caves of Mercury, saying, "I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I'm doing good." In God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Eliot tells the twins at their christening, "God damn it, you've got to be kind." And Malachi Constant declares near the end of The Sirens of Titan, "It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved." In Slaughterhouse-Five, Billy Pilgrim represents the alternative, being resigned to everything and deciding that it is all "pretty much all right." This kind of behavior seems far different from the rebelliousness of many anti-heroes; perhaps non-hero would be a better term to describe Vonnegut's protagonists. They simply resign themselves to the absurdity around them and come to terms with it the best way they can, and not always successfully either. Howard W. Campbell and Billy Pilgrim both experienced the horror of Nazi Germany, but whereas Campbell commits suicide out of guilt feelings, Billy acquires a kind of distancing through learning the Tralfamadorian concept of time which lets him live with the horror by concentrating on the good moments. Eliot Rosewater is somewhat successful at expunging his guilt by giving freely of his money and love. The rest (Paul Proteus, John, Rumfoord, Constant, and Dwayne Hoover) are caught up in an absurdity with which they cannot cope. Of this

latter group, none recognizes the absurdity around them for the joke it is, although each is given ample opportunity. In fact, Bokonon's last book (and the last page of Cat's Cradle) gives John the answer.

If, as Sartre stated, the absurd arises from the difference between what the world is and what man thinks it should be, in Vonnegut's work this absurdity is kept alive by people trying to establish order where there is none. Vonnegut's characters continually ask the question: "What are people for?" It is the question that the Shah of Bratapuhr wants to ask the giant computer, EPICAC, in Vonnegut's first novel; Malachi Constant's father looked in vain for a sign that would answer this question for him; Tralfamadorian creatures eradicated themselves when they could find no purpose to their lives; and one of the characters in Kilgore Trout's 2BR02B wants to ask God in Heaven the same question. Bokonon makes it plain in his Calypsos that man must ask this question, but gives no hope for any meaningful answer. As Ernest Ranly says of Vonnegut's world, "An utterly indifferent God controls a universe in which his prize creature, man, is so built that man thinks he must be able to discover a (non-existent) purpose for himself. Man is condemned to wait for a Godot who will never come."¹⁴ One might ask Ranly how an "indifferent" God can "control" the universe, but he is correct in saying that Vonnegut depicts an absurd universe in which man's ego demands that he find his own cosmic purpose while, in fact, none exists. Perhaps The Sirens of Titan is, as Leslie Fiedler states, "his most outrageously and attractively arrogant book; for in it he dares not only ask the ultimate question about the meaning of human life, but to answer it."¹⁵

Vonnegut is representative of a new group of novelists who not only see absurdity as an explanation of the twentieth century experience, but also as a way of coping with it. Richard Schickel said that Vonnegut had found in laughter an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential pain.¹⁶ If one can attain the absurd vision, he can laugh at rather than cry about his surroundings. And if laughter cannot provide the final escape, it can at least provide distance from events that defy a serious, rational approach. This idea is not new; Henri Bergson long ago called laughter "a momentary anesthesia of the heart, . . . the absence of feeling."¹⁷ And if, as Walpole stated, life is a comedy for those who think and a tragedy for those who feel, laughter (which is purely intellectual and totally void of feeling) transports us away from tragedy (feeling). Current novelists like Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. attempt to convey the absurdity around them and to present it in comic form.

The absurd, although seemingly tragic or at best ironic, is also funny. In works by these writers, absurdity and laughter are inextricably welded together. Laughter is the necessary response to absurdity. Therefore, if one perceives the universe as absurd, his reaction is to laugh at it--to see it as one big cosmic joke. Laughter is man's only defense against absurdity (unless insanity is considered). Laughter puts absurdity into perspective by allowing us to accept it intellectually, rather than being overwhelmed by it emotionally or driven mad by it, trying to find meaning logically where, in fact, none exists.

Vonnegut moves from an interior absurdity--one for which man is responsible--in Player Piano to an exterior absurdity--where man is prisoner in a purposeless universe--in The Sirens of Titan. Man creates his own absurdity in Player Piano; he has robbed his life of meaning, and there seems for awhile to be some hope of regaining that meaning. But as Proteus finally realizes and as Vonnegut's later novels show us, that hope is ill-founded; the madness around us is inevitable. The world of Jonah, Billy Pilgrim, and Dwayne Hoover is even more irrational and absurd than Ilium, New York.

In true twentieth century existential fashion, Vonnegut presents a world in which there is no meaning, in which man must create his own meaning, and even though he realizes that this invented meaning has no objective reality, the invention does satisfy his need for order and purpose in a purposeless universe. Over and over again Vonnegut tells us to invent better and better lies. It is Eliot Rosewater's advice to the psychiatrists in Slaughterhouse-Five, and it is the basis for Bokononism, the religion Vonnegut invents in Cat's Cradle--to live by foma, harmless and useful untruths. Vonnegut seems to recognize the impossibility of a really meaningful religion at the same time that he realizes the comforting qualities of religion, meaningful or not. His novels are full of phoney messiahs--Proteus, Rumfoord, Constant, Bokonon, Trout, and Eliot Rosewater. They also contain invented religions--The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, Bokononism, and the rewritten version of Christianity in Slaughterhouse-Five.

There is a lesson for twentieth century man in Vonnegut's writing, a message that tells us how to cope with the absurdity of our universe. It requires a complex response to a complex world. The trick is in

recognizing the absurdity, in seeing the world as a joke and learning to live with it, in knowing how to take the joke, and then dedicating oneself to one's fellow sufferers. This involves a synthesis of two very opposite reactions--laughter and compassion. The laughter allows enough distance to enable us to live with the chaos around us; the compassion for our fellow beings gives a purpose to human life.

It must be conceded that much of Vonnegut's writing appears to be satiric. His readers are quick to point out that he attacks war, technology, the military, science, religion, government, and progress.¹⁸ And Vonnegut frequently parodies future utopias founded on progress and advanced scientific technology because he can see no merit in constructing a world for the future upon the madness inherent in the present. But satire usually implies a positive norm--a corrective. The absence of this norm in Vonnegut's works removes them from the area of traditional satire. The satire is only apparent, almost a trick to make us search for the reassuring solid norm that turns out not to be there.

Although seemingly satirizing science, religion, and capitalism, Cat's Cradle, for example, deals mainly with the futility of human endeavors and the meaninglessness of existence. It is not conventional satire since there is no didacticism, no moral certainty, and no author who maintains a superior position. Similarly, other Vonnegut novels seem on the surface to be merely satiric, but I propose to go beyond the concept of traditional satire to explore the absurdity of the novels and the techniques used to convey this absurdity and insure that the response to it is a humorous one.

FOOTNOTES

¹David H. Goldsmith, "The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Bowling Green State University, June 1970.

²Both dabbled in non-gothic fantasy, neither was taken seriously early in his career, and both used non-sequiturs. "Each is a comedian, a literary prankster, and tall-tale teller, and each has suffered because he refused to dress his serious themes in respectable trappings."

³Goldsmith, Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).

⁴The Vonnegut Statement, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (New York: Delta/Dell, 1973).

⁵"Sci-Fi and Vonnegut," New Republic, 160 (April 26, 1969), 33-35.

⁶Karen and Charles Wood, "The Vonnegut Effect: Science Fiction and Beyond," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 134.

⁷"Science Fiction," Page 2, ed. Francis Brown (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 117.

⁸God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), p. 18.

⁹God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 18.

¹⁰"Science Fiction--The Modern Mythology," 123 (September 5, 1970), 125-27.

¹¹"Geodesic Vonnegut; or, If Buckminster Fuller Wrote Novels," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 231.

¹²Terms like victory and defeat, as they are commonly used, lose some of their meaning in Vonnegut's works. A philosophy based on acceptance ("So it goes") transcends these categories. Similarly, it may be argued that Billy's death is not an end and therefore not a defeat; violet light and a hum are as good as anything that previously occurred in Billy's life. But although Billy is able to accept his own murder, his friends and some readers of the novel still harbor the old associations between murder and defeat.

¹³p. 140.

¹⁴"What Are People For?" Commonweal, 94 (May 1971), 211.

¹⁵"The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut," Esquire, 74 (September 1970), 202.

¹⁶Harpers, 232 (May 1966), 103.

¹⁷"Laughter," in Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 63-64.

¹⁸The last of these is an obvious attack on General Electric, for whom Vonnegut once worked as a public relations man.

CHAPTER III

PLAYER PIANO

Player Piano (1952), Vonnegut's first novel, has all the trappings of science fiction; it is set in Ilium, New York, in the not too distant future when war has been abolished and automation has taken over nearly all jobs. People have become merely IBM cards; their aptitude is punched onto a keypunch card which controls their destiny. If their I. Q. is high enough, they go to college for a Ph. D. and a supervisory position over the machines. Otherwise they get a choice between the army and the Reclamation and Reconstruction Corps, or as they are called in the novel "Reeks and Wrecks." Deductions for everything they need (car payment, furniture payment, rent, various insurances, etc.) are automatically taken from their checks, leaving them only spending change. And their jobs consist of menial busywork. Neither the men, in their meaningless jobs, nor the women in their automated homes, have anything to do. People cry out for meaningful work, for a finished product they can take pride in, as when a man fashions a fuel pump gasket for Paul's car from a felt hatband. Even the Ph. D.'s in managerial positions have little to do and are occasionally put out of work by a machine of their own invention. For example, Bud Calhoun, a mechanical genius, complains to Paul:

"Ah haven't got a job any more," said Bud. "Canned."
Paul was amazed. "Really? What on earth for? Moral
Turpitude? What about the gadget you invented for--"

"That's it," said Bud with an eerie mixture of pride and remorse. "Works. Does a fine job." He smiled sheepishly. "Does it a whole lot better than Ah did it."

"It runs the whole operation?"

"Yup. Some gadget."

"And so you're out of a job."

"Seventy-two of us are out of jobs," said Bud. He slumped even lower in the couch. "Ouah job classification has been eliminated. Poof." He snapped his fingers.¹

Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel, is manager of the Ilium Works. The son of an important man in the system, Paul has an expensive home, several cars, a social-climbing wife, and a chance to move quickly up the management ladder all the way to the top. Paul's best friend, Ed Finnerty, a brilliant engineer, has just quit a similar job and dropped out of this society. Paul finds himself similarly discontented with the system in which machines have usurped the meaning of life from humans.

To move up the ladder of success, Paul first must betray Finnerty, who has joined an underground organization bent on destroying the machine-run system. Paul decides to quit, instead, but procrastinates until he is supposedly fired; actually he is released to get information about the rebellion from Finnerty. Instead Paul allows himself to be used as the Messiah of the rebellion's group, called the Ghost Shirt Society, whose aim is to destroy the machines and give man back some dignity and worth.

Paul is captured, tried, and convicted, but the revolution begins and he is rescued. The revolution at first looks successful, but the success is merely local and temporary. The government quickly contains it and demands the leaders' surrender. As they drive toward the police station to surrender, Paul and Finnerty see the very men who helped lead the revolution repairing the smashed machines to prove

their ingenuity and resourcefulness. The leaders realize that even if the revolution were successful, man would only rebuild the same technological madness. They surrender, leaving behind them "the people of Ilium, already eager to recreate the same old nightmare."

This is Vonnegut's first novel and his least successful. There is no suspense or surprise; everything is totally predictable and happens just the way the reader knows it will. Symbols are used with no subtlety, as though the fashioner were a blacksmith rather than an artist. For example, a cat which Paul has brought to catch mice in the plant encounters an automatic sweeping machine:

The cat arched her back and clawed at Paul's suit again. The sweeper was snuffling down the aisle toward them once more. It sounded its warning buzzer, and Paul stepped out of its path. The cat hissed and spat, suddenly raked Paul's hand with her claws, and jumped. With a bouncing, stiff-legged gait, she fled before the sweeper. Snatching, flashing, crashing, shrieking machines kept her in the middle of the aisle, yards ahead of the sweeper's whooshing brooms. Paul looked frantically for the switch that would stop the sweeper, but before he found it, the cat made a stand. She faced the oncoming sweeper, her needle-like teeth bared, the tip of her tail snapping back and forth. The flash of a welder went off inches from her eyes, and the sweeper gobbled her up and hurled her squalling and scratching into its galvanized tin belly.

Winded after a quarter-mile run through the length of the building, Paul caught the sweeper just as it reached a chute. It gagged, and spat the cat down the chute and into a freight car outside. When Paul got outside, the cat had scrambled up the side of the freight car, tumbled to the ground, and was desperately clawing her way up a fence.

"No, kitty, no!" cried Paul.

The cat hit the alarm wire on the fence, and sirens screamed from the gate house. In the next second the cat hit the charged wires atop the fence. A pop, a green flash, and the cat sailed high over the top strand as though thrown. She dropped to the asphalt--dead and smoking, but outside (pp. 11-12).

While this scene does foreshadow the major conflict in the novel, the blatant confrontation between animal and machine is hardly subtle.

On the other hand, Vonnegut does employ subtle irony effectively in the statement of the reasons for Paul's obtaining the cat: the mice are chewing through the insulation and disabling the "indestructable machines."

Another occurrence treated with a heavy hand is the confrontation between man and machine when Paul plays Checker Charley, a computer, for the checker championship of Ilium. After a loose connection in Checker Charley allows Paul to emerge victorious, Finnerty remarks: "If Checker Charley was out to make chumps out of men, he could damn well fix his own connections. Paul looks after his own circuits; let Charley do the same. Those who live by electronics, die by electronics. 'Sic Semper Tyrannis'" (p. 52).

Vonnegut is occasionally overly cute in this novel, too; when Anita tells Paul, "That man's got a lot of get up and go," he replies, "He fills me full of lie down and die" (p. 149). And there is rather shallow satire on college football when Coach Roseberry tries to buy a player for \$35,000, but refuses to let him go to college: Rosebury frowned. "Well--there's some pretty stiff rulings about that. You can't play college football, and go to school. They tried that once, and you know what a silly mess that was" (p. 241). Vonnegut's technique here is rather transparent. The argument is a cliché, and so is Vonnegut's treatment of it. It is more like something lifted from Mad or National Lampoon than an excerpt from a novel by a major twentieth century writer.

There is not as much figurative language nor as many humorous juxtapositions in Player Piano as in later Vonnegut novels, and characterization (not a Vonnegut strong point by traditional standards)

is not totally successful and not nearly as entertaining as that in subsequent novels. Vonnegut is still using conventional methods of character description which turn out to be rather skimpy and slight. The brevity remains the same in later novels, but the use of caricature is much more successful than his attempts at realistic character description in Player Piano. In fact, reading Player Piano is somewhat like reading Faulkner's Soldier's Pay; one realizes that techniques that later make the author good and mark his distinctive style here seem affected.

Player Piano also suffers slightly from being dated. Written about projections of the fears of the 1950's, it shows Vonnegut guessing wrong in places, although it must be conceded that he was accurate in many places, too. The growing widespread unemployment and riots of the past fifteen years and the rise of corporate bureaucracy shows him to be prophetic. On the contrary, vacuum tubes have been replaced by transistors, and Ed Finnerty has been replaced by thousands of young people who refuse to participate in the corporation's madness.

All of this does not mean that Player Piano is a total failure. Vonnegut does develop the anti-utopian theme rather dramatically and allows specific characters and relationships to develop this theme, while avoiding easy solutions and sentimentality.

Not everyone, however, agrees about the worth of the novel. Karen and Charles Wood praise it: "Vonnegut's first novel, Player Piano, is one of the best science-fiction novels ever written, and it rests uneasily in the science-fiction genre precisely because it is such a good novel. . . . Someone finally wrote a science-fiction novel that puts the emphasis on characters--upon human experience and actions."²

The Woods go on to place Player Piano very neatly and conventionally into the anti-utopian section of science-fiction literature as originated by H. G. Wells. Most critics use Vonnegut's concern with machines to classify Vonnegut as a science-fiction writer. But the simple classification seems fallacious. How much more science-fiction is there in this novel than some other contemporary novels which we would not consider labeling science-fiction? Vonnegut explains and defends his interest in machines: "I was working in Schenectady for General Electric, completely surrounded by machines and ideas for machines, and machines frequently got the best of it, as machines will. . . . All a writer has to do to get filed away as a science-fiction writer is to notice technology. The feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works."³

Vonnegut is certainly not the only contemporary novelist to be concerned with machines in his novels. In One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, "the Combine, a machine culture which harvests and packages men, is modern Evil; and Big Nurse, its powerful agent. She shares the comic strip villain's control over modern technology."⁴ She is also seen as a truck, a tractor, and a mechanical spider; and the Black boys, her helpers, are described as telephones, with radio tubes for eyes. Bromden describes the inmates as machines that aren't working right and the outside world as made up of mechanical men in mirrored suits and machined hats built by the Combine.

Another of Vonnegut's contemporaries, Thomas Pynchon, is concerned largely with parodying those forms of dehumanization that modern society forces upon itself either by mechanizing the human through

bureaucratic relationships or by humanizing the machine through a desire to substitute for the messily human.⁵ Man is seen as "inert," in Pynchon's words. He is replaced by SHROUD and SHOCK, robots who assume his duties. What Pynchon is obviously saying is that if people get anymore passive and mechanical, they can be replaced by machines, with no apparent loss. The same concern with mechanization can be seen in Pynchon's second novel, The Crying of Lot 49. One of the most moving passages in the novel is the description of the used car lot where "each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life."⁶ Vonnegut clearly has company in his concern with machines, technology, and mechanization.

Throughout Player Piano, Vonnegut humanizes machines and mechanizes humans. "Mechanical hands," "welding heads," "electric eyes," and "gaping jaws" are continuously present. Early in the first chapter, the machines are described as gymnasts: "Looking the length of Building 58, Paul had the impression of a great gymnasium, where countless squads practiced precision calisthenics--bobbing, spinning, leaping, thrusting, waving. . . . This much of the new era Paul loved: the machines themselves were entertaining and delightful" (p. 8). Immediately following this passage in the novel is a description of the music of the machines, the personification of the maypoles and cable, and the hypnotic mechanism of the female workers who watched over them:

At the door, in the old part of the building once more, Paul paused for a moment to listen to the music of Building 58. He had had it in the back of his mind for years to get a composer to do something with it--the Building 58 Suite. It was wild and Latin music, hectic rhythms, fading in and out

of phase, kaleidoscopic sound. He tried to separate and identify the themes. There! The lathe groups, the tenors: "Furrazz-ow-ow-ow-ow-ak! ting! Farr-azz-ow-ow . . ." The welders, the baritones: "Vaaaaaaa-zuzip! Vaaaaaaa-zuzip!" And, with the basement as a resonating chamber, the punch presses, the basses: "Aw-grumph! tonka-tonka. Aw-grumph! Tonka-tonka . . ." It was exciting music, and Paul, flushed, his vague anxieties gone, gave himself over to it.

Out of the corner of his eye, a crazy, spinning movement caught his fancy, and he turned in his delight to watch a cluster of miniature maypoles braid bright cloth insulation about a black snake of cable. A thousand little dancers whirled about one another, unerringly building their snug snare about the cable. Paul laughed at the wonderful machines, and had to look away to keep from getting dizzy. In the old days, when women had watched over the machines, some of the more simple-hearted had been found sitting rigidly at their posts, staring, long after quitting time (pp. 10-11).

The episodes concerning the sweeper and Checker Charley are further evidence of Vonnegut's concern with machines. At one point, Finnerty threatens to replace Anita with a machine, telling her: "If you don't show more respect for men's privacy, I'll design a machine that's everything you are, and does show respect. . . . Stainless steel, covered the sponge rubber, and heated electrically to 98.6 degrees" (p. 35). Later, Anita echoes Finnerty's threat by complaining to Paul that he, of all people, has dehumanized her:

"Finnerty was right," she sobbed. "All you need is something stainless steel, shaped like a woman, covered with sponge rubber, and heated to body temperature. . . . I'm sick of being treated like a machine! You go around talking about what engineers and managers do to all the other poor dumb people. Just look at what an engineer and manager did to me!" (pp. 215-216).

After Paul learns of Anita's affair, the mechanical phrase, "I love you, Paul," "I love you, Anita," is replaced by "I like you, Paul," "And I like you, Anita" with hardly any loss. And later, when Paul is sleeping with a prostitute, his response is the same:

"She mumbled in her sleep. As Paul dropped off once more, he murmured an automatic reply. 'And I love you, Anita'" (p. 224). This mechanization of one of the strongest human emotions, love, is equalled by Anita's sexual orgasm caused by Paul's being offered a promotion: "Anita slept--utterly satisfied, not so much by Paul as by the social orgasm of, after years of the system's love play, being offered Pittsburgh" (p. 116).

Paul, the Messiah of the Ghost Shirt Society, is mechanized, too, even when being championed by his mob of followers: "A moment later they emerged with a man on their shoulders. In the midst of their frenzied acclamation, he was marionette-like. As though to perfect the impression, bits of wire dangled from his extremities" (p. 279). Even the affable Baer is machine-like in his impartiality, in that "the only problems he interested himself in were those brought to him, and in that he went to work on all problems with equal energy and interest, insensitive to quality and scale."

The world of machines created by Vonnegut is an absurd world, a meaningless world in which man has no purpose. Despite the science-fiction trappings, Player Piano is just another way of presenting the absurd universe. The absurdity is no less real nor immediate because man had a part in making it. He doesn't seem to have much choice since at the end of the novel we are right back where we began; and Paul, the Messiah of the revolution, cannot conceive of anything else: "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" (p. 99). As the end of the novel points out, history could not lead anywhere else.

That this meaningless world no longer has room for heroics is supported by the "absurd tale" of how the sergeant got his medals:

"Well, boys, then the fun started. At seven hundred hours they tried a hundred-man patrol on us, to see what we had. And we had nothin'. And communications was cut to hell, so we couldn't call for nothin'. All our robot tanks'd been pulled out to support a push the 106th was makin', so we was really alone. Snafu. So, I sent Corporal Merganthaler back to battalion for help. . . . So over they come, screamin' bloody murder, and us with nothing but our goddamn rifles and bayonets workin'. Looked like a tidal wave comin' over at us. . . . Just then, up come Merganthaler with a truck and generator he's moonlight-requisitioned from the 57th. We hooked her into our lines, cranked her up, and my God, I wish you could have seen it. The poor bastards fryin' on the electric fence, the proximity mines poppin' under 'em. The microwave sentinels openin' up with the remote-control machine-gun nests, and the fire control system swiveling the guns and flamethrowers around as long as anything was quiverin' within a mile of the place. And that's how I got the Silver Star" (p. 220).

The hero here is passive, totally outside the action. There is only room in this world for the anti-hero. Even when Paul finally tries to act by quitting the system, his is a futile effort since he is fired first, and he is Messiah in name only, The Ghost Shirt Society paying no attention to him except as a symbol and a name. And the whole revolution is just another chaotic version of the absurd world, as Paul realizes toward the end:

"Lord," said Paul, "I didn't think it'd be like this."
 "You mean losing?" said Lasher.
 "Losing, winning--whatever this mess is" (p. 286).

As in other Vonnegut novels, ironies abound in Player Piano, reinforced by far-fetched figurative language to keep the comic absurd tone. The description of the phoniness of the Early American room in Paul's house is ironic in that the seemingly functional antique elements are strictly atmospheric novelties:

A huge fireplace and Dutch oven of fieldstone filled one wall. Over them hung a long muzzle-loading rifle, powder

horn, and bullet pouch. On the mantel were candle molds, a coffee mill, an iron and trivet, and a rusty kettle. An iron cauldron, big enough to boil a missionary in, swung at the end of a long arm in the fireplace, and below it, like so many black offspring, were a cluster of small pots. A wooden butter churn held the door open, and clusters of Indian corn hung from the molding at aesthetic intervals. A colonial scythe stood in one corner, and two Boston rockers on a hooked rug faced the cold fireplace, where the unwatched pot never boiled (pp. 95-96, italics mine).

Vonnegut's language (in italics) undercuts the aesthetic beauty of the room and causes us to focus on the uselessness of it instead. This uselessness is contrasted with Paul's desire to live the primitive life. The irony is reinforced by the juxtaposition of Paul's dream to lead a pioneer life with the sound of the automatic washing machine:

As, in his imagination, he brought home a bear to Anita and she cleaned it and salted it away, he felt a tremendous lift--the two of them winning by sinew and guts a mountain of strong, red meat from an inhospitable world. And he would mold more bullets, and she would make more candles and soap from the bear fat, until late at night, when Paul and Anita would tumble down together on a bundle of straw in the corner, dog-tired and sweaty, make love, and sleep hard until the brittle-cold dawn. . . .

"Urdle-urdle-urdle" went the automatic washing machine. "Urdle-urdle-ur dull!" (p. 96).

The onomatopoeic sound effects of the washer totally negate the earthy, natural language used in the preceding paragraph. The "dog-tired and sweaty, make love" world is overcome by the "Urdle-urdle-urdle" of the machine. This sudden intrusion of the machine on the idealized natural life that Paul longs for is very effective. A similar kind of irony can be seen in Anita's idea of an old-fashioned American homecoming:

Paul could see her creating this old-fashioned atmosphere--putting a drop of Tabu on the filter of the electronic dust precipitator, setting the clockwork on the master control panel, which would thaw a steak dinner and load it into the

radar stove at the proper moment, and turn on the television just as they crossed the threshold (p. 267).

Everything that contributes to the old-fashioned atmosphere is brought about by artificial, technological means.

Vonnegut does not confine his use of humor and irony to the world of Paul Proteus; it also shows up in the subplot. He uses the Shah of Bratapuhr to very good humorous effect in Player Piano. The Shah functions as a naif, providing a great deal of humor, especially in his refusal to see the citizens and soldiers as anything but slaves, despite Ambassador Halyard's protests. The Shah's non-language helps reinforce the absurdity, and Vonnegut's use of the Shah episodes to interrupt the main plot concerning Paul Proteus keeps the tone humorous and creates a disjointed feeling which helps control the tone of the novel. One can see here the beginnings of the technique of non-chronological, non-narrative development used in later novels such as God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and Slaughterhouse-Five. The Shah and his interpreter provide another moment of humorous irony in the end when they are impressed into the revolution because the Ghost Shirt Society thinks they are lodge brothers leading the rebellion.

Irony can also be seen in the sterile, white concrete of the island called The Meadows, where loudspeakers constantly interrupt people's conversations to tell everyone to make friends. The failure of the fully mechanized saloon is another example of irony and humor:

They'd set up the experimental unit about five doors down from where Paul now stood, with coin machines and endless belts to do the serving, with germicidal lamps cleaning the air, with uniform, healthful light, with continuous soft music from a tape recorder, with seats scientifically designed by an anthropologist to give the average man the absolute maximum in comfort.

The first day had been a sensation, with a waiting line extending blocks. Within a week of the opening, curiosity had been satisfied, and it was a boom day when five customers stopped in. Then this place had opened up almost next door, with a dust-and-germ trap of a Victorian bar, bad light, poor ventilation, and an unsanitary, inefficient, and probably dishonest bartender. It was an immediate and unflagging success (p. 23).

So the super-efficient machine is once again eschewed, if not defeated, by ever-erring man.

Another humorous example of natural man fighting against the mechanized society occurs in Vonnegut's parody of Tarzan, which shows Edgar Rice Burroughs Hagstrohm finally performing like the hero of his namesake. "Hagstrohm cut up his M-17 home in Chicago with a blow-torch, went naked to the home of Mrs. Marion Frascati, the widow of an old friend, and demanded that she come to the woods with him. Mrs. Frascati refused, and he disappeared into the bird sanctuary bordering the housing development. There he eluded police, and is believed to have made his escape dropping from a tree onto a passing freight--." The introduction of the two machines (the blow-torch and the freight train) into the standard Tarzan story add to the irony and humor. And his Jane's refusal to go with him points up the absurdity of his actions.

Vonnegut's figurative language is outrageous enough to add to the humor of the novel and foreshadows the techniques which are more consistent and sustained in The Sirens of Titan and later novels. This outrageousness can be seen in short descriptions such as the one of the Orange O machine which was "as popular as a nymphomaniac at an American Legion convention" (p. 292), or "a coffin /which/ slid onto a waiting freight elevator and was taken into the refrigerated bowels of

the station" (pp. 247-48). This kind of bizarre imagery becomes a Vonnegut trademark in later novels, as does the ability to economically isolate and ridicule a part of Americana. In this case it is the American Legion; in The Sirens of Titan it is the Jehovah's Witnesses, but the technique is the same.

Vonnegut sometimes conveys humor by startling paradox as when Paul tells the court, "The most beautiful peonies I ever saw were grown in almost pure cat excrement" (p. 275). But the quick phrase or sentence are not the only examples of Vonnegut's humorous description; some are longer and more fully developed and equally effective. During the revolution, an Automagic Market is bombed, and "an automagic cashier rolled into the street, still miraculously upright on its round pedestal. 'Did you see our special in Brussels Sprouts?' it said, tripped on its own wire, and crashed to the pavement by the limousine, spewing cash from a mortal wound" (p. 279).

When the Shah, who doesn't speak English, is getting a haircut, "the barber talked to the uncomprehending Shah after the fashion of an extroverted embalmer chatting with a corpse" (p. 175). Both the situation and the metaphor are humorous here, and the total breakdown of communication shows symptomatically the breakdown of an orderly universe. Vonnegut's presentations of incomprehensible dialogue, rather than being meaningless and repetitious, reflect the breakdown of both language and logic in an absurd world. The technique is reminiscent of Theatre of the Absurd.

Vonnegut does an excellent job of portraying the one character who beats the mechanized system, the TV hustler who bets people (always successfully) that he can tell what song an orchestra on

television is playing even with the sound turned off. Another masterful job of writing occurs when Vonnegut describes Paul's dream as an unconscious projection of his actions in the course of the novel. The surrealistic presentation of his unconscious rejection of the machine world, the machine father figure, and the machine wife allows the reader to understand the conflict through which Paul is passing.⁷

Vonnegut had to be careful not to allow the absurdity to overpower the humor in the novel and simply turn to despair. Paul is married to Anita because of her false pregnancy. The Ghost Shirt Society uses Paul just as remorselessly as do Kroner and the other high brass, and there is no meaning in the revolution either. Paul is fighting for a cause he doesn't fully understand for a leader who is secretly sure of failure although he predicts success. There is no resolution in the end since the novel concludes with a picture of utter chaos and the rebuilding of the same system. To keep the response to the novel humorous, Vonnegut had to juxtapose humor with the absurd or combine the two in a comically absurd situation. The result is an absurdity more akin to Ionesco than to Sartre. The combination of humor and absurdity can be seen when Paul asks what will happen to the revolution if the Army is called out. "'Both sides had better throw in the towel if somebody's crazy enough to give them real rifles and ammunition,' said Lasher. 'Fortunately, I think both sides know that'" (p. 259). The combination of the humorous and the absurd can also be seen in the clash between Paul's cellmate and the machine:

Paul's cellmate in the basement of police Headquarters was a small, elegant young Negro named Harold, who was in jail for petty sabotage. He had smashed a traffic safety

education box--a taperecording and loudspeaker arrangement--that had been fixed to a lamppost outside his bedroom window.

"'Look out!' it say. 'Don't you go crossin' in the middle of the block!'" said Harold, mimicking the tape recording. "Fo' two years, ol' loudmouth and me done lived together. An' evah last time some'un come on pás', they hits 'at 'lectric eye, and ol' loudmouth, he just naturally gotta shoot off his big ba-zoo. 'Don' step out 'tween two parked cars,' he say. No matter who 'tis, no matter what tahm 'tis. Loudmouth, he don' care. Jus' gotta be sociable. "Cayful, now! Don' you do this! Don' you do that!' Ol' mangy dog come bah at three in the mornin', and ol' loudmouth jus' gotta get his two cents suth in. 'If you drahve,' he tells that ol' mangy dog, 'if you drahve, don' drink!' Then an' ol' drunk comes crawlin' along, and ol' gravelthroat tells him it's a city ohdnance ev'y bicycle jus' gotta have a re-flectah on the back" (p. 264).

This combination of the humorous and the absurd preserves the comic tone in an otherwise very ironic novel.

Player Piano is different from most science-fiction novels not only because of the humor, but also because it is blatantly anti-scientific. Vonnegut's sympathy is obviously with the low I. Q. people on the other side of the river. We see little good in the super-intelligent engineers, or the machines they support. The machines here are as evil as Luthor in a Superman comic strip.

Vonnegut's first novel, with a mechanical music machine for a title, begins with the mechanical music of lathe group 3 playing the Building 58 Suite and ends, appropriately enough, with an attempt to mechanize drums: "Yep, if I had a decent little motor to go with what I got," said the youngster excitedly, "I'll betch anything I could make a gadget that'd play drums like nothing you ever heard before. See, you take a selsyn, and--" (p. 319). A player piano usurps man's creativity, but it is still dependent upon him to put the nickel in the slot or else pump the pedals. This interdependence requires that man

serve the machine, and the last scene of the novel shows the children only too willing to rebuild their fathers' machine madness.

Player Piano is neither just another worthless science-fiction book nor an example of Vonnegut's best writing. It fits somewhat uncomfortably in the comic absurd category because Vonnegut has not yet discovered how to develop the themes and techniques that make his later novels good. The years between Player Piano and The Sirens of Titan must have been good for Vonnegut as a writer; the latter was written by someone with a richer imagination, a clearer idea of theme, and a better control of technique.

FOOTNOTES

¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Player Piano (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1952), p. 63. Subsequent references to this source will be given parenthetically in the text of the chapter.

²"The Vonnegut Effect: Science Fiction and Beyond," The Vonnegut Statement, pp. 142-44.

³"Science Fiction," Page 2, p. 117.

⁴Terry G. Sherwood, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and the Comic Strip," Critique, 13, No. 1 (1971), 101.

⁵Jesse Paul Ritter, Jr., "Fearful Comedy: The Fiction of Joseph Heller, Gunter Grass, and the Social Surrealist Genre," Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation (University of Arkansas, 1967), p. 210.

⁶(New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1966), p. 5.

⁷An interpretation to the dream sequence is fully explored by James Mellard in his analogy to McLuhan's Mechanical Bride, The Vonnegut Statement, pp. 178-203.

CHAPTER IV

THE SIRENS OF TITAN

It was seven years before Vonnegut published his next novel, and both his style and his presentation of metaphysical ideas profit from this time lapse. Once again Vonnegut appears to be writing science fiction and satire, but these labels are misleading. The science-fiction is parody and underneath Vonnegut's apparent satire is the realization that the universe is chaotic and absurd. Vonnegut uses various forms of human or earthly absurdity to convey metaphysical or cosmic absurdity. His belief in a purposeless universe constitutes his main theme. In The Sirens of Titan (1959), published in paperback and promptly dismissed by critics who read it as just another science-fiction book and thus worthless in literary terms, one can plainly see this metaphysical view. Despite its science-fiction setting and events, it is a serious (although humorous) treatise on absurdity. In it, Vonnegut sees all human endeavors and progress throughout history as simply evolving to the point where Earthlings can supply a part for a crippled Tralfamadorian spaceship from another solar system. The only real meaning that Stonehenge and the Great Wall of China have are as messages to the stranded pilot (a robot named Salo) saying, respectively: "Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed." and "Be patient. We haven't forgotten you."¹ Similarly, the Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero meant in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from

from above, "We are doing the best we can," and the Moscow Kremlin was, "You will be on your way before you know it" (p. 271). Vonnegut concludes the messages by interpreting the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland as "Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice" (p. 272).

Salo waited for about 205,000 years. Vonnegut thus reduces 2,000 centuries of earthly progress to a set of trite messages and the production of a replacement part for a crippled spaceship. Furthermore, the part turns out to be nothing more than a piece from a packing crate which very much resembles a beer can opener. By making mankind's goal so trivial, by juxtaposing the seriousness with which man views his existence with the actual triviality and meaninglessness of that existence, Vonnegut conveys the absurdity in a humorous manner. The belittling effect of the enormous time span also contributes to the absurdity of man's existence.

Before the novel even begins, there is a quotation by an unidentified person named Ransom K. Ferm which parodies human progress. Ferm tells us that "Every passing hour brings the Solar System forty-three thousand miles closer to Globular Cluster M13 in Hercules--and still there are some misfits who insist that there is no such thing as progress." Immediately following this quotation is a dedication which parodies the disclaimers of other books, movies, and television shows:

DEDICATION:

For Alex Vonnegut, Special Agent, with love--All persons places, and events in this book are real. Certain speeches and thoughts are necessarily constructions by the author. No names have been changed to protect the innocent, since God Almighty protects the innocent as a matter of Heavenly routine.

Vonnegut thus parodies public display of affection, protection of the innocent, and God in the process. The full irony of this disclaimer is not realized until one returns to it after reading the book. Once the reader has been introduced to the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, the irony is more meaningful.

The story proper concerns mainly three people, the first of whom "had run his private space ship right into the heart of an uncharted chrono-synclastic infundibulum two days out of Mars. Only his dog had been along. Now Winston Niles Rumfoord and his dog Kazak existed as wave phenomena--apparently pulsing in a distorted spiral with its origin in the Sun and its terminal in Betelgeuse" (p. 13). Consequently, Rumfoord and his dog, Kazak, now materialize on Earth only one hour out of every fifty-nine days. Rumfoord, because of this accident, is also able to read minds and foretell the future. It should be obvious from terms such as "chrono-synclastic infundibulum" that Vonnegut is parodying science-fiction rather than making an attempt to write it seriously.

The other two principal characters are Rumfoord's wife, Beatrice, and Malachi Constant--the world's richest man. Rumfoord recruits Constant and Beatrice and a few hundred thousand other earthlings to form an army on Mars. The Martian soldiers are controlled by means of an antenna implanted in each of their brains. Rumfoord then has this robot-like army attack Earth. To say that the Martian invasion is not successful is tremendous understatement; poorly armed and organized, they are slaughtered.

A single, badly scorched man named Krishna Garu attacked all India with a double-barreled shotgun. Though there was no one to radio-control him, he did not surrender until his gun blew up (p. 69).

The only Martian military success was the capture of a meat market in Basel, Switzerland, by seventeen Parachute Ski Marines.

Everywhere else the Martians were butchered promptly, before they could even dig in (pp. 169-70).

The mastermind behind the Martian suicide was Winston Niles Rumfoord.

The elaborate suicide of Mars was financed by capital gains on investments in land, securities, Broadway shows, and inventions. Since Rumfoord could see into the future, it was easy as pie for him to make money grow (p. 172).

The Martian invasion/slaughter was predictable and not without purpose. Rumfoord uses the slaughter to found a new religion. While Earthlings are feeling remorse about mercilessly slaughtering the Martians, especially the last wave which consisted of unarmed women and children, Rumfoord tells them that the dead Martians were saints-- people who went to Mars and mounted the attack in which they died gladly in order to pull Earthlings together as brothers. He then proposes his new world-wide religion, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. The religion's motto is: "Take Care of the People, and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself" (p. 180). The two chief teachings of the religion are: "Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God" (p. 180).

Malachi, whose son Chrono was born to Beatrice Rumfoord on Mars, unwittingly plays a major part in the founding of this religion. He has been marooned by Rumfoord on Mercury for two years, then returned to Earth as a messenger² to fulfill Rumfoord's prophecy "that a lone straggler from the Army of Mars would arrive at Redwine's church someday," and that the first words he would utter would be: "I was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all." Malachi, Beatrice, and Chrono are then exiled to Titan, one of Saturn's nine moons. Titan is inhabited only by Salo, the eleven million year old robot from

Tralfamadore, Winston Niles Rumfoord when he is materialized there, and the Titanic bluebirds. Salo had been chosen to represent Tralfamadore and was to carry a sealed message from "One Rim of the Universe to the Other." He was now stranded on Titan, awaiting a replacement part for his disabled space ship. Rumfoord then dematerializes from this solar system forever, Beatrice dies on Titan, Malachi hitches a ride to Indianapolis with Salo, and Chrono stays on Titan with the Titanic bluebirds. Salo goes on his way through the universe, and Malachi dies two hours after arriving on earth. He freezes to death in Indianapolis while awaiting a bus which is accidentally delayed because of snow.

Like the rest of the novel, the ending reemphasizes the role of chance or accident in the divineless scheme of things. Even Malachi Constant's fortune came from a father who got rich by defying logic and using a chance system on the stock market:

This was Noel Constant's system:

He took the Gideon Bible that was in his room, and he started with the first sentence in Genesis.

The first sentence in Genesis, as some people may know, is: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Noel Constant wrote the sentence in capital letters, put periods between the letters, divided the letters into pairs . . . (p. 73).

He then looked for corporations with those initials, and bought shares in them. Thus his first investment was International Nitrate, followed by Trobridge Helicopter, etc.

As Vonnegut states early in the novel, life is "a nightmare of meaninglessness without end" full of "empty heriocs, low comedy, and pointless death" (p. 8). It was pure chance that allowed Rumfoord to become trapped in a chrono-synclastic infundibulum and start the whole nightmare that is the plot of the novel. Rumfoord even calls his

favorite room "an architectural accident." He tells Malachi of the universe: "It's chaos, and no mistake, for the Universe is just being born. It's the great becoming that makes the light and the heat and the motion, and bangs you from hither to yon" (p. 39).

Malachi's father leaves him one letter which is concerned with the quest for meaning in a meaningless world. What he tells Malachi, in part, is:

What I want you to try and find out is, is there anything special going on or is it all just as crazy as it looked to me? . . . I kept my eyes open for some kind of signal that would tell me what it was all about but there wasn't any signal (pp. 90-91).

This is a straightforward admission of absurdity. Like Beckett's two tramps in Waiting for Godot, Malachi's father waits futilely for anything meaningful. He is a parody of the traditional prophet who knows everything and passes the knowledge on to his son. As Sartre once observed, the absurdity arises from the contrast between the way things are and the way man thinks they should be. Even in Unk's (Malachi's) letter to himself is echoed man's desire for order and purpose in the universe. Number fifteen under Theology reads: "Somebody made everything for some reason" (p. 127).

It is interesting to compare Sartre's description of absurdity with Kant's definition of laughter as "the result of an expectation which, of a sudden, ends in nothing."³ Herbert Spencer's belief that laughter was the indication of an effort which encounters a void is very similar.⁴ In The Sirens of Titan, two possible responses to absurdity are given in the persons of Malachi Constant (alias Unk) and Boaz, an officer in the Martian army:

Unk was at war with his environment. He had come to regard his environment as being either malevolent or cruelly

mismanaged. His response was to fight it with the only weapons at hand--passive resistance and open displays of contempt (p. 200).

Unlike Unk, Boaz reacts with laughter:

He was laughing at the ferocious mess he was in--at the way he had pretended all his army life that he had understood everything that was going on, and that everything that was going on was just fine.

He was laughing at the dumb way he had let himself be used--by God knows who for God knows what.

"Holy smokes, buddy," he said out loud, "What we doing way out here in space? What we doing in these here clothes? Who's steering this fool thing? How come we climbed into this tin can? How come we got to shoot somebody when we get to where we're going? How come he got to try and shoot us? How come?" (pp. 182-83).

Both responses still reflect man's desire for order and purpose, but the second, despite its questions, accepts it all as a cosmic joke. Only Boaz finds contentment, by accepting the absurdity and devoting himself lovingly to the only creatures around to love--the harmoniums.⁵ As Boaz says, "I found me a place where I can do good without doing no harm." Boaz's actions represent a theme which recurs in one form or another in all of Vonnegut's works.

Malachi Constant does not realize the proper response until the end of the novel when he tells Salo, "It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (p. 313). It is this late blooming love of his fellow man that causes Malachi to go to Indianapolis to die because "'Indianapolis, Indiana is the first place in the United States of America where a white man was hanged for the murder of an Indian. The kind of people who'll hang a white man for murdering an Indian--' said Constant, 'that's the kind of people for me'" (pp. 314-315). There is obvious irony here since the people show their

compassion for their fellow man by murdering another of their fellow men because he has murdered still another of their fellow men.

The entire novel is a sort of comic elaboration of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."⁶ The world offers no comfort or meaning. Earth is merely a subservient relay station for a messenger from another planet engaged in a totally meaningless endeavor. Rumfoord may have been God to Earth, but we learn in the last part of the novel that he is only the dupe of a higher power, a machine remnant of a defunct civilization, and that this power is being manipulated by another meaningless power.

Everything that has happened on Earth for the past 203,117 years has been guided by Tralfamadore for the sole purpose of getting a replacement part to Salo so that he may continue carrying his most important message from one rim of the universe to the other. Malachi and Beatrice's son, Chrono, delivers that part--a piece of scrap metal from Mars about the size of a beer-can opener and shaped just right by Chrono's attempts to carve grafitti with it; it, along with a switchblade knife, has been Chrono's good luck charm. Thus the strings of the Malachi and Beatrice puppets have also been pulled by Salo, the mechanical man.

Adding to the absurdity is the revelation that the message that is so important that it must be carried throughout the universe turns out to be "Greetings." And despite this discovery by Salo, he continues his journey, dropping Malachi Constant off at Indianapolis just in time to freeze to death.

Besides this ridiculous plot, Vonnegut also uses various techniques of verbal wit to convey absurdity in a comic manner. These

same techniques occur throughout his novels and are effective in evoking both the feeling of absurdity and the desired comic response to it on the part of the reader.

One of Vonnegut's recurring forms of verbal wit which functions to insure a humorous response is the use of exaggerated, far-fetched imagery and metaphors. Early in the novel, "Bobby Denton an evangelist⁷ spitted his audience on a bright and loving gaze, and proceeded to roast it whole over the coals of its own iniquity" (p. 31). A few pages later, Vonnegut describes Miss Wiley, who "wore a frizzy black wig that looked as though it had been nailed to a farmer's barn door for years" (p. 87). On Mars, "A dog barked, barked with a voice like a great bronze gong" (p. 157). When Malachi Constant returns to the Earth as the Space Wanderer, he lands beside a church "which squatted among the headstones like a wet mother dodo" (p. 216). Rumfoord describes Constant as being "as benevolent as Marie Antoinette, as creative as a professor of cosmetology in an embalming college" (pp. 251-52). A part of the new religion is described thus: "Hanging Malachi Constant in effigy was an act of violence on the order of trimming a Christmas tree or hiding Easter eggs" (p. 254). Rumfoord even says of himself near the end of his reign, "Tralfamadore reached into the Solar System, picked me up, and used me like a handy-dandy potato peeler!" (p. 285).

This use of far-fetched, exaggerated imagery and metaphor, besides being very striking, reinforces the absurd vision of the novel. Vonnegut's use of imagery and metaphor are effective thematically, but at the same time they call attention to themselves; it is as if he is both using and simultaneously parodying the use of figurative language in

novels. This device also functions to keep us from taking the plot too seriously and to insure that the response to the absurdity is comic. For example, in the following passage he uses absurd language and a parody of periodic construction, complete with an overabundance of extraneous details to keep the comic tone and absurd vision intact: "The third man in the second squad of the first platoon of the second company in the third battalion of the second regiment of the First Martian Assault Infantry Division was called Unk" (p. 98). The use of the 3-2-1-2-3-2-1 number pattern, the fact that there are thirty words before a weak "to be" verb, and the unimportance of the climactic word at the end of the sentence all linguistically undercut any totally serious approach to the information conveyed.

Parody plays a large part in the novel from the very beginning, as we have already seen. Vonnegut makes a bid for the ultimate in personification in description of the factories on Mars: "Windows winked as dazzling torches inside went off and on. A doorway vomited spattering, smoking yellow light as metal was poured. The screams of grinding wheels cut through the soldiers' chant" (p. 135). The vomit and screams might be taken seriously if they occurred in Zola's Germinal, but here they are strangely out of place and parody descriptive language as well as describe. This description is followed immediately by the chant, which is a parody of both military cadence chants and of the cheers which cheerleaders use in sports events:

Terror, grief, and desolation--
 Hut, tup, thrup, fo!--
 Come to every Earthling nation!
 Hup, tup, thrup, fo!--
 Earth eat fire! Earth wear chains!
 Hup, tup, thrup, fo!
 Break Earth's spirit, spill Earth's brains!
 Hup, tup, thrup, fo!

Another technique that is common to all Vonnegut works is his use of quick, economical characterizations, many of which are only humorous caricatures. For example, Chrono's teacher on Mars is described as "a frail old lady named Isabel Fenstermaker. She was seventy-three, and had been a Jehovah's Witness before having her memory cleaned out. She had been shanghaied while trying to sell a copy of Watchtower to a Martian agent in Duluth" (p. 141). In this short passage, Vonnegut achieves characterization, humor, and a reminder of the chance-ruled universe, as he does again in the description of Miss Wiley as "a crazy looking little old lady with a lantern jaw who wore a frizzy black wig that looked as though it had been nailed to a farmer's barn door for years" (p. 87). This type of quick, slight characterization should not be looked upon as a weakness in Vonnegut's work; on the contrary, it functions very complexly on two levels. It reinforces the absurdity and keeps us from identifying too closely with the characters. If the latter occurs, the humorous response is lost because we begin to become emotionally involved with them, which makes humor impossible. Many of Vonnegut's characters fall into the category of what Bergson calls "The Dancing-Jack"--that is, characters who think they are speaking and acting freely, and consequently, retain all the essentials of life, whereas, viewed from a certain standpoint, they appear as a mere toy in the hands of another, who is playing with them.⁷ Malachi, Beatrice, Chrono, and eventually Rumfoord can all be seen this way. Even Salo, the robot, fits into this category.

Vonnegut also achieves a leveling effect by transposing unequal things, such as the trivial for the solemn or vice versa. He equates things which we suppose to have very different values. This, too, both

adds to the absurdity and enhances a comic response. On the space ship which takes Malachi Constant to Mercury, there were only two comic books: "They were Tweety and Sylvester, which was about a canary that drove a cat crazy, and The Miserable Ones, which was about a man who stole some gold candlesticks from a priest who had been nice to him" (p. 177). The reduction of Hugo's masterpiece to the status of a Tweety and Sylvester comic book requiring the same length plot synopsis is further evidence of parody, and the perfectly balanced parallel structure only heightens the comic effect. This same technique is established early in the novel when Vonnegut describes an old woman who "had a goiter, a caramel apple, and a gray little six-year-old girl. She had the little girl by the hand and was jerking her this way and that, like a ball on the end of a rubber band" (p. 9). The dehumanizing of the little girl and equating her with a ball, a goiter, and a caramel apple is indeed effective. But the best example of this technique occurs in the description of the Space Wanderer's change of fortune, from bad to good:

He had suffered mightily, and now he was being rewarded mightily.

The sudden change in fortunes made a bang-up show. He smiled, understanding the crowd's delight--pretending to be in the crowd himself, sharing the crowd's delight.

Rumfoord read the Space Wanderer's mind. "They'd like it just as much the other way around, you know," he said.

"The other way around?" said the Space Wanderer.

"If the big reward came first, and then the great suffering," said Rumfoord. "It's the contrast they like. The order of events doesn't make any difference to them. It's the thrill of the fast reverse--" (pp. 246-47).

Thus suffering and reward are equated. This denial of a logical order reinforces the absurd vision of the novel. In a chance, meaningless universe, it makes no difference whether the wheel of fortune turns

forward or backward. It might also be noted that this use of contrasts and fast reversals is a good description of Vonnegut's technique of writing and is also close to a definition of black humor.

One prevalent technique for insuring a comic response to this novel is the radical juxtaposition of incongruities. This juxtaposition may take the form of simple irony, such as having really powerful people appear as poor and servile. Malachi Constant's father, the richest man alive, lived his entire life in a cheap hotel room, didn't bathe much, and consorted only with a cheap prostitute. Similarly, Moncrief, Rumfoord's butler, is in reality the Prime Minister of Earthling Affairs. "Moncrief died of old age in his bed in the servant's wing of the Rumfoord mansion two weeks after the war ended" (p. 172). Even the officers of the Martian army are only figureheads and robots; the real commanders are disguised as common soldiers.

Perhaps the most obvious juxtaposing of incongruities occurs in the relationship of Salo's statues and their names:

He gave frightful titles to all his statues, as though to proclaim desperately that he did not take himself seriously as an artist, not for an instant. The title he gave to the Neanderthal family derived from the fact that the baby was being shown a human foot roasting on a crude spit.

The title was This little Piggy (p. 289).

Similarly, another statue "was of a nude woman playing a slide trombone. It was entitled, enigmatically, Evelyn and Her Magic Violin."

Another incongruous juxtaposition arises out of the sculpture itself:

There at first glance, was a young man without vanity, without lust--and one accepted at its face value the title Salo had engraved on the statue, Discovery of Atomic Power.

And then one perceived that the young truthseeker had a shocking erection (pp. 288-89).

There is also the incongruity of situation. Malachi Constant, a broken man, is trying to come to grips with himself and his fate. As

he is making a stammering try at soul-searching about his exile from Earth, a news-media technician in charge of microphones tells Constant, "If you're going to talk, speak in a perfectly normal tone, and keep your lips about six inches away from the microphone" (pp. 257-58). The juxtaposition of Malachi's final farewell to Earth with this trivial technical jargon gets much the same effect as learning that "Chrono's chief treasures were a good-luck piece and a switchblade knife" (p. 292).

Vonnegut's use of tongue-in-cheek understatement is also effective at evoking a humorous response. He tells us of Salo: "His voice was an electric noise-maker that sounded like a bicycle horn. He spoke five thousand languages, fifty of them Earthling languages, thirty-one of them dead Earthling languages" (p. 268). The grim humor in the last statement contributes to the absurdity of man's existence in much the same way that the 200 century wait did in the beginning of the novel.

According to Bergson, "a comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form."⁸ Vonnegut achieves this by repeated substitution of unexpected words for the expected ones in phrases that are so well-established that they are clichés. Rumfoord says to Constant, "I tell you, Mr. Constant, it's a thankless job, telling people it's a hard, hard Universe they're in" (p. 25). Or when Chrono is playing German batball on Mars, which is composed mainly of iron, we learn that "young Chrono slid into home in a cloud of rust" (p. 142). The use of the word, claptrap, in an otherwise religious speech achieves the same humorous effect. And when Unk, Space Wanderer, Malachi Constant returned to Earth, "He was filled with the heedless, tender violence of a man who has had his lifetime

cruelly wasted. Unk was forty-three years old. He had every reason to wither and die" (p. 217). The use of Universe, rust, and wither and die for the expected world, dust, and live interrupts (while also completing) the logical flow of things. A cliché is usually a self-completing phrase, one which, if the speaker forgets half-way through, the audience can chant in unison. These clichés, however, do not complete in the expected way, but rather by the logic of inversion. Their completion jars our sense of order by being at variance with our expectations.

Non-sequiturs and instant reversals achieve the same effect. Upon entering Rumfoord's garden, Malachi sees a sign:

Beware of the Dog! the sign outside the small iron door had said. But inside the wall there was only a dog's skeleton. . . . The skeleton was . . . a conversation piece installed by a woman who spoke to almost no one. No dog had died at its post there by the wall. Mrs. Rumfoord had bought the bones from a veterinarian, had them bleached and varnished and wired together (pp. 11-12).

When describing Mrs. Rumfoord, Vonnegut tells us, "money, position, health, handsomeness and talent aren't everything" (p. 12). He goes on to say that "She plainly detested Constant, whom she had never met" (p. 15) and insisted that he "behave, as best he could, like the gentleman he was not" (p. 16).

On Mars, the antenna planted in Unk's brain caused him to do whatever his leader wanted in order to avoid an excruciating pain in the head. "The antenna also would give him orders and furnish drum music to march to. They said that not just Unk but everybody had an antenna like that--doctors and nurses and four-star generals included. It was a very democratic army, they said" (p. 102). We do not normally think of radio-controlled robots as democratic, and the tag-line of

"they said" adds to the irony; in addition, this dehumanization fulfills another of Bergson's requirements for humor, the most basic one--mechanization. "The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity."⁹ This humorous mechanical elasticity is intensified by the drum music the robot-like men march to:

The men had marched to the parade ground to the sound of a snare drum. The snare drum had this to say to them:

Rented a tent, a tent, a tent;

Rented a tent, a tent, a tent.

Rented a tent!

Rented a tent!

Rented a, rented a tent (pp. 104-05).

We have already seen one instant-reversal in the oxymoronic description of Malachi's "tender violence." This technique is also used in the paradoxes which describe the earth he returns to:

The purity of the rains that fell on Earth could be tasted. The taste of purity was daintily tart.

Earth was warm.

The surface of Earth heaved and seethed in fecund restlessness. Earth was most fertile where the most death was (p. 216).

By creating humor out of the bleakest examples of an indifferent universe, Vonnegut suggests how to cope with the twentieth century experience on earth. He begins with the premise that the universe is absurd. He then outlines a formula for coping with this fact and still keeping our sanity. It is not a new formula: Fielding told us in the preface to Joseph Andrews that all things are potentially laughable, and Twain taught us in The Mysterious Stranger that laughter is the best weapon mankind has against the absurdity that is life.

To reemphasize these lessons, in addition to the natural affinity between absurdity and laughter, Vonnegut uses a number of established techniques to provoke laughter and insure that we respond in the correct manner. But there is also a third suggestion in this novel--

compassion. Vonnegut repeatedly tells us to care for our fellow man. Only God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater makes this plea more plainly. To remain mentally healthy in this chaotic existence, Vonnegut suggests, requires three things: a recognition or acceptance of the inherent absurdity; a realization that this absurdity is humorous (learning to take the joke); and a dedication to compassion (loving our fellow man in the face of this absurdity). The dissociation and compassion are not really contradictory since the first is directed at the absurd scheme of things and the second is reserved for our fellow victims. Kierkegaard's "leap to faith" is founded on a similar apparent contradiction. Furthermore, since absurdity wipes out all distinctions, it reduces ego and thus makes us more ready and able to love. One need only look at the development of Malachi Constant to see this process in action.

In The Sirens of Titan, besides improving his use of humorous techniques, Vonnegut found a vehicle (science-fiction fantasy) to convey absurdity and provide the detachment necessary for the reader to see it as humorous. The result is both a funnier and more profound book than Player Piano.

FOOTNOTES

¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., The Sirens of Titan (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), p. 271. Subsequent quotations from this source will be noted parenthetically in the text of the chapter.

²His name means "faithful messenger."

³Comedy, p. 116.

⁴Comedy, p. 116.

⁵Harmoniums, according to Vonnegut, are the only form of life on Mercury--small cave-dwelling organisms resembling spineless kites that feed solely on vibrations. The harmoniums' response to their own absurdity echoes Vonnegut's theme as shown in the behavior of Boaz. Note Vonnegut's description of them: "Having found a place that promises a good meal, the creatures lay themselves against the wall like wet wall-paper. . . . They reproduce by flaking. The young, when shed by a parent, are indistinguishable from dandruff. There is only one sex. . . . There is no way in which one creature can harm another, and no motive for one's harming another. Hunger, envy, ambition, fear, indignation, religion, and sexual lust are irrelevant and unknown. The creatures have only one sense: touch. They have weak powers of telepathy. . . . They have only two possible messages. The first is an automatic response to the second, and the second is an automatic response to the first. 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.'"

⁶Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world . . .

⁷Comedy, p. 111.

⁸Comedy, p. 133.

⁹Comedy, p. 66-67.

CHAPTER V

MOTHER NIGHT

Vonnegut's next book, Mother Night (1961), seems to be different from the book that precedes it and Cat's Cradle, which follows it. Both Player Piano and The Sirens of Titan were set in the future. "In Mother Night Vonnegut turns for the first time to the past. The characters are all (somehow) survivors of World War II."¹ Nearly every character in the novel is grotesque, bent out of shape by war, hatred, and bigotry. Moreover, the absurdity in Mother Night seems, at first glance, "a little darker than the others, a little less comic."² When asked if he thought it stood out in this way, Vonnegut replied: "Yes, well, I think it does. It's more personally disturbing to me. It had meanings for me. Oh, because of the war and because of my German background, and that sort of thing. . . . So, sure, I did tend to get somewhat involved with that."³

Perhaps Vonnegut was more involved in this novel than any other before Slaughterhouse-Five. The parallels between Campbell's and Vonnegut's lives in Germany are obvious. Both were Americans in Germany, both were ironically enough protected from both Germans and Allies, both escaped physically unharmed but guilt-ridden, etc. Vonnegut was not so involved, however, as to lose sight of the absurdity or mar the humor in the novel. As Jerome Klinkowitz says, Vonnegut's absurd humor works in triplets in this novel:

Campbell's wartime buddy Heinz Schildknecht is not merely comically robbed of his dearer-than-life motorcycle by Campbell, his best friend; on the second turn Heinz shows up as a gardener for a rich expatriate Nazi in Ireland, courting fame as an authority on the death of Hitler ("Hello out there, Heinz . . . What were you doing in Hitler's bunker--looking for your motorcycle and your best friend?" /p. 89/), and on the third is gathering evidence for Campbell's prosecution. Vonnegut's is a spiraling, madly rebounding absurdity. A hangman's noose suggestively placed in Campbell's apartment by the American Legion is not merely laughed at and discarded. Instead, "Resi put the noose in the ash can, where it was found the next morning by a garbage man named Lazlo Szombathy. Szombathy actually hanged himself with it--but that is another story" (p. 112). Double turn: Szombathy is despondent because as a refugee he is barred from practicing his profession of veterinary science. Triple turn: Szombathy is particularly despondent because he has a cure for cancer, and is ignored. Absurdity to the third power rules the world.⁴

In addition to the humor of the multiple absurdities, the characteristic techniques of humor which we have already seen in The Sirens of Titan and will see in all subsequent Vonnegut novels are very much in evidence here, and are effective in preserving the humor in an otherwise bleak novel. Mother Night is also "the first book of his to feature the short chapter form. There are 174 pages and 45 chapters."⁵

It is also in Mother Night that Vonnegut begins using his fatalistic cries "So be it" and "Hi Ho." "From Mother Night to Slaughterhouse-Five, the absurd is ordered around by 'Hi Ho,' 'So be it,' 'Busy, Busy, Busy,' and 'So it goes.'"⁶ One need only add "And so on" to bring the list up to date and include Vonnegut's latest novel, Breakfast of Champions. Other formal idiosyncrasies which Vonnegut continues to cultivate include fragmented chronology, quick but sharp scene and character development, and extremely fast narration.

The plot of Mother Night runs something like this: Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a playwright living and writing in Germany in the 1930's,

is recruited by Frank Wirtanen as a spy for the Allied forces. He becomes an excellent propaganda broadcaster for the Nazis, while actually sending out coded messages to the Allies:

My broadcasts carried coded information out of Germany. The code was a matter of mannerisms, pauses, emphases, coughs, seeming stumbles in certain key sentences. Persons I never saw gave me my instructions, told me in which sentences of a broadcast the mannerisms were to appear. I do not know to this day what information went out through me. From the simplicity of most of my instructions, I gather that I was usually giving yes or no answers to questions that had been put to the spy apparatus. Occasionally, as during the build-up for the Normandy invasion, my instructions were more complicated, and my phrasing and diction sounded like the last stages of double pneumonia.⁷

Campbell is successful as a Nazi and an Allied spy beyond Hitler's or Roosevelt's wildest dreams. His wife is eventually captured and presumed dead at the end of the war, and Wirtanen helps Campbell escape to New York. He is financially solvent since both of his wealthy parents died (of broken hearts), thinking their son a traitor. They did, nevertheless, leave him numerous stocks and other financial windfalls.

Campbell becomes a virtual recluse, living in Greenwich Village and mourning his dead wife, Helga, who had literally meant the world to him. "Only one thing counted-- . . . The nation of two. . . . And when that nation ceased to be, I became what I am today and what I always will be, a stateless person" (p. 34). Like most truths in this novel, this one functions on more than one level. Since Campbell is rejected by Germans and Americans as being a traitor, he is a stateless person.

Campbell's life is abruptly interrupted when the Reverend Doctor Lionel Jason David Jones, D. D. S., D. D., leader of The White Christian Minutemen, finds out where he is and champions him as an unsung

hero. Jones even manages to get Helga back and reunite her with Campbell. But Jones's publicizing Campbell as a Nazi hero leads to complications; he is immediately severely beaten by a World War II veteran and is forced to depend on Jones and his followers for his physical safety. To complicate things even further, Campbell learns that his only friend, George Kraft, is really a Communist agent named Potapov who is using him, and that Helga is in reality not Helga, but her little sister, Resi, also a Communist agent helping Kraft/Potapov to abduct Campbell and take him to Moscow as living proof of what rotten war criminals the United States harbors.

This abduction is avoided when Jones, Kraft, et al. are arrested by the F. B. I. Helga (really Resi) commits suicide, swearing her love and allegiance to Campbell to the very end. Jones and Kraft go to prison and Campbell is allowed to go free. Israeli sympathizers have wrecked his apartment, and Bernard B. O'Hare (Post Americanism Chairman for the American Legion and the man who captured Campbell at the end of World War II) is waiting there to kill him. Unfortunately, O'Hare is drunk and Campbell easily defeats him, breaking O'Hare's arm in the process.

Free from O'Hare, Campbell immediately contacts Israeli agents to take him to Israel for trial for his war crimes. A fellow prisoner with Adolph Eichmann, Campbell's innocence is assured when Wirtanen breaks all the rules of secrecy and swears that Campbell was an American spy, loyal not to the Nazis but to the Allies. Absolved of guilt in the courts, Campbell nevertheless decides to hang himself "for crimes against himself."

The novel is not nearly as chronologically ordered as this plot synopsis. It begins in 1961 with Campbell in a prison in Jerusalem. In the fifth chapter Vonnegut flashes back to a New Year's Eve party in Germany in 1944; in the sixth chapter, he describes the fifteen years Campbell spent in New York City; and in the next chapter, Vonnegut begins with Campbell's birth in 1912 and traces his childhood until the war. This type of development is typical of the rest of the novel. The disrupted chronology helps to reinforce the absurd chaos that is Campbell's life.

Another Vonnegut technique used effectively in this novel is the sacrifice of suspense by telling the reader what will happen in chapters to come. For example, heavy foreshadowing destroys suspense when Vonnegut tells us that Szombathy and Resi Noth will commit suicide, then drops them only to treat their deaths fully in a later chapter. The same technique can be seen in his description of Jones' bodyguard: "Krapptauer was sixty-three, had done eleven years in Atlanta, was about to drop dead" (p. 54). Vonnegut relativizes everything; he negates the effect of suspense and makes everything equal by reducing it all to the same level.

Much of the information in Mother Night comes to us in non-narrative forms (letters, biographies, Campbell's books, magazine articles, and songs), further disrupting the narrative flow and our logical and chronological expectations. This technique, too, Vonnegut further develops in subsequent novels, especially God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.

Howard W. Campbell, Jr. is accosted by absurdity on every front. "Faced with the pressures of Nazi Germany, Campbell takes a solace not

unusual in Western Culture: he retreats first to art, and then to love."⁸ Campbell escapes from the world in which Hitler's war machine is growing larger day by day; he escapes by writing poems such as "Reflections on Not Participating in Current Events" and plays such as his "medieval romances about as political as chocolate éclairs" (p. 26). This escape ends when all of a sudden one day he unexpectedly meets Wirtanen and becomes a spy.

His escape to love is just as absurdly thwarted, for Helga is captured and his attempt at a purely romantic celebration of grief for her departure is violated by at least three things. First, he inadvertently broadcasts her death: "At that climactic moment in my life, when I had to suppose that my Helga was dead, I would have liked to mourn as an agonized soul, indivisible. But no. One part of me told the world of the tragedy in code. The rest of me did not even know that the announcement was being made" (p. 140). Second, the invasion of his personal feelings arises from the plagiarized pornography of his private diary describing his and Helga's sex life together (including fourteen color pictures). And finally, the third blow to his pure love is accomplished by his accidentally and unknowingly being unfaithful to Helga's memory by sleeping with her little sister. As Campbell sums up his agonizing life:

The part of me that wanted to tell the truth got turned into an expert liar! The artist in me got turned into ugliness such as the world has rarely seen before.

"Even my most cherished memories have now been converted into catfood, glue, and liverwurst!" I said.

"Which memories are those?" said Wirtanen.

"Of Helga--my Helga," I said, and I wept. "Resi killed those, in the interests of the Soviet Union. She made me faithless to those memories, and they can never be the same again" (p. 156).

Moreover, once Helga is gone, so are Campbell's creative powers which removes artistic creativity as an escape. Even Campbell's satisfaction that somebody got some good out of his creations is ruined by the discovery that the apparent good brings suffering and death. When talking of the Russian who plagiarized all of his works, Campbell benevolently says:

"I'm glad about Bodovskov. I'm glad somebody got to live like an artist with what I once had. You said he was arrested and tried?"

"And shot," said Wirtanen.

"For plagiarism?" I said.

"For originality," said Wirtanen. "Plagiarism is the silliest of misdemeanors. What harm is there in writing what's already been written? Real originality is a capital crime, often calling for cruel and unusual punishment in advance of the coup de grace" (p. 156).

It seems that when Bodovskov ran out of Campbell's work, he started some writing of his own--"a two-thousand-page satire on the Red army, written in a style distinctly un-Bodovskovian. For that un-Bodovskovian behavior, Bodovskov was shot" (p. 157). Bodovskov is another example of a character pretending to be who he is not, and the establishment of his true identity leads to his death.

Toward the end of the novel, Campbell, realizing the absurdity of it all, states: "I had taught myself that a human being might as well look for diamond tiaras in the gutter as for rewards and punishments that were fair" (pp. 174-75). Bernard B. O'Hare thinks he has found a purpose to life--at least to his unsuccessful and miserable life. He tells Campbell, "Just when you think there isn't any point to life . . . then, all of a sudden, you realize you are being aimed right straight at something" (p. 187). The something that O'Hare is aimed at is Campbell. He is to be St. George and kill the evil dragon, Campbell. But Vonnegut shows how successful this attempt at finding

meaning in life is; O'Hare misses! Not only does he fail to destroy Campbell, his arm is broken and he is humiliated in the process.

O'Hare is last seen throwing up, or in Vonnegut's words: "He flashed the hash down the stairwell from four stories up" (p. 190). Vonnegut uses the parody of the medieval romance quest to undercut the meaning of O'Hare's existence.

Vonnegut also seems to disagree with O'Hare about what evil is. Campbell, in a speech which makes him sound a great deal like a mouth-piece for the author, echoes the sentiments of Mark Twain's "War Prayer" and Bob Dylan's "With God on our Side": "There are . . . no good reasons ever to hate without reservation, to imagine that God Almighty Himself hates with you, too. Where's evil? It's that large part of every man that wants to hate without limit, that wants to hate with God on its side. It's that part of every man that finds all kinds of ugliness so attractive" (p. 190). Although the sentiments expressed here might be closer to our own, Campbell makes the same mistake as O'Hare. He expects the world to be logical and orderly, for one act to be better than another, for good and evil to be clearly delineated. He is still attempting to find order in an absurd universe, and his failure to do so eventually leads to his death since he assumes that the fault lies in him rather than in external forces. Perhaps Dr. Epstein's mother, a survivor of Auschwitz, is more perceptive than most of the characters: "His mother understood my illness immediately, that it was my world rather than myself that was diseased" (p. 194). If Campbell could have fully accepted this explanation, the ending of the novel might be different.

Throughout the novel, Campbell attempts to order his universe, but his efforts are usually thwarted. His attempts to be ineffective and ludicrous in his role of Nazi propagandist backfire very badly. "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!" (p. 122). As a matter of fact, he has been more successful as a propagandist than he could ever imagine. Even Helga's father, the Chief of Police who has always hated him and suspected him of being a spy, tells him near the war's end:

"And do you know why I don't care now if you were a spy or not? . . . Because you could never have served the enemy as well as you served us," he said. "I realized that almost all the ideas that I hold now, that make me unashamed of anything I may have felt or done as a Nazi, came not from Hitler, not from Goebbels, not from Himmler--but from you." He took my hand. "You alone kept me from concluding that Germany had gone insane" (p. 75).

Even back in New York his obvious attempts at satire are misunderstood, as when he delivers a eulogy for one of the Nazi bigots in *The White Christian Minutemen*:

I delivered my eulogy of August Krapptauer, saying, incidentally, what I pretty much believe, that Krapptauer's sort of truth would probably be with mankind forever, as long as there were men and women around who listened to their hearts instead of their minds.

I got a nice round of applause from the audience, and a drum-roll from the Black Fuehrer (pp. 136-37).

The irony is wasted on Campbell's audience who cannot see the intended meaning and applaud surface banalities which reinforce their own brand of bigotry.

With his every attempt to do anything turning out wrong, it is no wonder that Campbell has doubts about his own guilt. His reasons for becoming a great spy were not the noblest. He didn't enlist out

of a patriotic desire to help make the world safe for democracy. Wirtanen attributes his decision to the fact "that you admire pure hearts and heroes. That you love good and hate evil, and that you believe in romance" (p. 30). But Campbell knows that there are other reasons not mentioned by Wirtanen:

He didn't mention the best reason for expecting me to go on and be a spy. The best reason was that I was a ham. As a spy of the sort he described, I would have an opportunity for some pretty grand acting. I would fool everyone with my brilliant interpretation of a Nazi, inside and out. And I did fool everybody. I began to strut like Hitler's right-hand man, and nobody saw the honest me I hid so deep inside (p. 31).

Maybe Campbell played his part so well that he fooled himself. One should not forget that the moral of the book is: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (p. v). The complexity and relevancy of this moral becomes more apparent when one considers Campbell's situation. Vonnegut's character here exemplifies Pirandello's ideas on created truth. There is the actor and there is the part he plays (or more accurately is asked or forced to play). Each of these "parts" contains a separate truth--the truth of the actor and the truth of the part in which he finds himself. These truths are not mutually opposed; they are co-existent. If the play is viewed in this way, the actor gains a dissociating double vision of himself. He is both the actor or person and the participant in the script. As such he is in a position constantly to evaluate the way in which he plays his part. Therefore he is simultaneously actor and evaluator. Further, as actor, he knows where the script is going; as character, he does not because he is involved in it. Thus he is at once secure and insecure ontologically.⁹

Morality itself, when applied to Campbell, becomes meaningless. Since Campbell is always in a script either written by himself or someone else, he is unable to control his situation or actions. Morality is dependent upon a relationship between actions and consequences so that one can assume responsibility for his actions. But for Campbell, this relationship does not exist; therefore, morality is difficult to establish.

Perhaps the most condemning evidence against Campbell's role in the war comes from Wirtanen, his American employer. Wirtanen lets Campbell know that he has his doubts about what side Campbell was really serving:

"Three people in all the world knew me for what I was--" I said. "And all the rest--" I shrugged.

"They knew you for what you were, too," he said abruptly.

"That wasn't me," I said, startled by his sharpness.

"Whoever it was--" said Wirtanen, "he was one of the most vicious sons of bitches who ever lived."

I was amazed. Wirtanen was sincerely bitter.

"You give me hell for that--knowing what you do?: I said. "How else could I have survived?"

"That was your problem," he said. "Very few men could have solved it as thoroughly as you did."

"You think I was a Nazi?" I said.

"Certainly you were," he said. "How else could a responsible historian classify you? Let me ask you a question-- . . . If Germany had won, had conquered the world-- . . ."

So I projected myself into the situation he described, and what was left of my imagination gave me a corrosively cynical answer. "There is every chance," I said, "that I would have become a sort of Nazi Edgar Guest, writing a daily column of optimistic doggerel for daily papers around the world. And, as senility set in--in the sunset of life, as they say--I might even come to believe what my couplets said: that everything was probably all for the best (pp. 143-44).

That this is a world in which nothing is certain, in which truth and lie are indistinguishable is foreshadowed in the Editor's Note to the novel. Vonnegut tells us that "lies told for the sake of artistic

effect--in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell's confessions, perhaps--can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth" (p. ix). Or as Chief Bromden said, "It's the truth even if it didn't happen."¹⁰ Thus the author casts doubts not only about the conclusions to be drawn from the novel, but upon the material itself. Campbell's denial in chapter twenty-seven, "So I didn't dream that, either" (p. 113), suggests that perhaps he did dream some of it, or at least thinks that he possibly did, either of which questions reality.

We are reminded throughout the novel what an absurd world it is, a world in which buckling the ankles of a man condemned to hang is no different from buckling a suitcase (p. 12). And Campbell often does lip service to recognizing this absurdity, even if he can't absolve his guilt from this recognition. "All people are insane," he said. "They will do anything at any time, and God help anybody who looks for reasons" (p. 87). The Kafkaesque unremembered guilt and irrational punishment is also present:

The man hit me right through the newspaper before I could comment.

Down I went, banging my head on an ash can.

The man stood over me. "Before the Jews put you in a cage in a zoo or whatever they're gonna do to you," he said, "I'd just like to play a little with you myself."

I shook my head, trying to clear it.

"Felt that one, did you?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"That one was for Private Irving Buchanon," he said.

"Is that who you are?" I said.

"Buchanon is dead," he said. "He was the best friend I ever had. Five miles in from Omaha Beach, the Germans cut his nuts off and hung him from a telephone pole."

He kicked me in the ribs, holding Resi off with one hand. "That's for Ansel Brewer," he said, "run over by a Tiger tank at Aachen."

He kicked me again. "That's for Eddie McCarty, cut in two by a burp gun in the Ardennes," he said. "Eddie was gonna be a doctor."

He drew back his big foot to kick me in the head. "And this one--" he said, and that's the last I heard. The kick was for somebody else who'd been killed in war. It knocked me cold (p. 111).

The parallels to Roland Weary and Paul Lazzaro's punishing Billy Pilgrim for crimes he didn't consciously commit in Slaughterhouse-Five are obvious. In fact, Campbell's world becomes as unsteady as that of Billy Pilgrim. When Campbell awakes from his beating and sees a leopard skin bedspread, he cries, "Don't tell me--I've joined the Hottentots" (p. 112). The initial humor in this farfetched explanation of the leopard skin gives way to a deeper irony when one realizes that in Campbell's absurd world, this explanation is no more implausible than what happens in the rest of his life. He is seduced, betrayed, and kidnapped all in the name of love, loyalty, and friendship.

Campbell clearly doesn't know what to believe. By the time Resi, alias Helga, admits that she is a Communist agent and tells him that she really does love him, Campbell is no longer buying. And Potapov, alias Kraft, by corroborating her story, does little to help convince him:

Resi turned to me. "I am a communist agent--yes. And so is he. He is Colonel Iona Potapov. And our mission was to get you to Moscow. But I wasn't going to go through with it--because I love you, because the love you gave me was the only love I've ever had, the only love I ever will have.

"I told you I wasn't going through with it, didn't I?" she said to Kraft.

"She told me," said Kraft.

"And he agreed with me," said Resi. "And he came up with this dream of Mexico, where we would all get out of the trap--live happily ever after" (p. 164).

The fairy tale tag line does little to insure credibility. Even the reader, at this point (or even later), doesn't know who or what to believe. Was she really going to help Campbell escape and was Potapov going to help her? Or was Potapov only using her? Or are they both

lying? Truth and illusion have become indistinguishable. Since all three are spies and pretend to be what they are not, it is impossible to ascertain their motives or plans. Regardless of where the truth is, Campbell loses.

Not all of the absurdities in this novel are bleak. If so, there would be no comic tone at all. But Vonnegut presents even the darkest situations in preposterous and ludicrous fashion. He shows the terrors of an absurd world while simultaneously dissolving them in laughter. He continually reminds us that the absurd is funny. This reminder might not destroy the terror of an absurd universe, but it does provide us with the distancing to keep from being overwhelmed by it. Many of the absurd situations in Mother Night have a humorous side, as when we discover Hitler's appreciation of the Gettysburg Address, and Goebbels' fear that perhaps Abraham Lincoln was a Jew: "'The name Abraham is very suspicious, to say the least,' said Goebbels" (p. 15). And the most important note that Adolph Eichmann smuggled to Campbell from one prison to another asked the question: "Do you think a literary agent is absolutely necessary?" Campbell's reply: "For book club and movie sales in the United States of America, absolutely" (p. 128). Similarly, the biggest fan Campbell's antisemitic broadcasts had in America was none other than Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "He used to listen to you gleefully every night" (p. 146).

The striking imagery and language seen in The Sirens of Titan are much in evidence in this novel, too, and help to preserve the comic tone, even if the humor is macabre. In the Introduction Vonnegut tells about the bombing of Dresden: "Everything was gone but the cellars where 135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread

men" (p. vii). In the novel itself, he describes the war: "There were pictures of men hung on barbed-wire, mutilated women, bodies stacked like cordwood--all the usual furniture of world wars" (p. 20). The substitutions of Hansels and Gretels, gingerbread men, and furniture jar the reader since they suggest a humorous, rather than serious, completion to a very serious phrase. A similar effect occurs when Campbell makes a comparison between things not normally compared: "My new furnishings were all war surplus, like myself" (p. 36). This dehumanizes Campbell, which is only fitting for someone who has been used as well as a pig in a slaughterhouse or a handy-dandy potato peeler.

Vonnegut's farfetched similes also occur often enough to help keep the tone of the novel from becoming morose. He describes the Hangwomen for the Hangman of Berlin as being "as pretty as catfish wrapped in mattress-ticking" and what was left of the home of Werner Noth as "looking like a mouthful of broken teeth" (p. 82). As in The Sirens of Titan, the similes are so grotesque that they seem to parody figurative language at the same time that they are figurative language. Campbell's introductory music on the short-wave radio is described as "a fragment of Brahms' First Symphony, as though played on kazoos" (p. 135).

Vonnegut is also fond of quick, grotesque, humorous characterization. He makes use of the substitution of an unexpected word and a reversal in the second sentence for the humor in his description of Campbell's mother: "She was a beautiful, talented, morbid person. I think she was drunk most of the time" (p. 20). In the same vein, the description of Krapptauer already alluded to is worth further inspection: "Krapptauer was sixty-three, had done eleven years in Atlanta,

was about to drop dead. But he still looked garishly boyish, as though he went to a mortuary cosmetologist regularly" (p. 54). The grotesqueness in the final simile obviously provides the closing humorous touch. Even animals are not immune from Vonnegut's use of the grotesque for humorous purposes. Note the description of Resi Noth's dog: "The dog was a dachshund that had, on a wartime diet, lost all its hair and been all but immobilized by dropsical fat. The dog looked like some early amphibian meant to waddle in ooze" (p. 77).

There is also the humor of naive observation in the style of Huckleberry Finn; Resi Noth, upon seeing a Veteran's Day parade for the first time, is amazed. "What struck her so funny was the drum major-ettes, kicking at the moon, twitching their behinds, and twirling chromium dildos. 'I've never seen such a thing before,' she said to me. 'War must be a very sexy thing to Americans'" (p. 105). As is often the case, the naif's words are true beyond her knowledge.

Some of the humor seems merely whimsical as when "a black cat crossed between me and the door of the building. 'Ralph?' it said" (p. 177). Similarly, when Campbell needs new clothes after being beaten up, "the Black Fuehrer gave me a tiny orange sports coat that made me look like an organ-grinder's monkey" (p. 121). His description of the stairs in his apartment as "the oak and plaster snail of the stairwell" (p. 181) and his threat to fill anybody who tried to jump him with tiny twenty-two calibre holes "as though by a sewing machine" (p. 147) achieve the same humorous effect.

Parody plays a part in the humor of Mother Night; the novel is dedicated to Mata Hari, one chapter is entitled "Chapter Six Hundred and Forty-three," and Campbell calls Wirtanen "my blue fairy

godmother" (p. 31). Chapter thirty-eight ends with the phrase, "And, where there's life--There is life" (p. 170). When Resi tells Campbell that he has changed, he replies, "People should be changed by world wars, else what are world wars for?" (p. 100). The irony in this conversation is intensified when one considers that Resi is the one who has really changed; she is literally no longer the same person. The war changed her identity from Resi to Helga.

Vonnegut uses irony to both assert and counterbalance the terrible void of existential nothingness which surrounds Campbell. The inherent humor in the irony helps us avoid the nausea of existentialism. For example, we learn that the stars for the hilt of the ceremonial dagger are not five pointed stars, but six pointed stars of David--hardly fitting for a Nazi uniform. Campbell explains to the reader that he is presenting a full history of the Reverend Doctor Jones "in order to contrast with myself a race-baiter who is ignorant and insane. I am neither ignorant nor insane" (p. 52). Does this phraseology suggest that Campbell is a race-baiter, although not ignorant or insane? Vonnegut does tempt us to believe this at times, with Campbell's fascination with Helga's white hair and his collection of recordings of "White Christmas." And in the course of the novel we learn that he is rather ignorant of most things and that he is at least schizophrenic. His contrast between himself and Jones is more of a comparison than he wants to admit.¹¹

Not just Campbell, but every major character and most of the minor ones in the novel are schizoid, leading at least two lives. Campbell is aware of the condition in himself and states: "I've always known what I did. I've always been able to live with what I did. How?

Through that simple and widespread boon to modern mankind--schizophrenia" (p. 136). But schizophrenia is not just a clinical name for a mental disorder; it is a description of the whole mad world around Campbell. Not only are his best friend (Kraft) and his lover (Resi) communist agents who are working against him, but his best friend in Germany (Heinz) was really a Jew and a member of the anti-Nazi underground, also working against him. Even Arpad Kovacs, a Hungarian Jew, had forged papers and served out the war in the S. S. He tells Campbell, "'I was such a pure and terrifying Aryan that they even put me in a special detachment. Its mission was to find out how the Jews always knew what the S. S. was going to do next. There was a leak somewhere, and we were out to stop it.' He looked bitter and affronted, remembering it, even though he had been that leak" (p. 10). Kovacs then tells Campbell that he had been congratulated personally by Adolph Eichmann and was sorry that at the time he didn't realize how important Eichmann was. When asked why, he replies, "I would have killed him" (p. 10). The problems with establishing true identities intensifies the instability of Campbell's world. One cannot be sure with whom or what he is dealing, or even of his own identity.

Only in an absurd, schizophrenic world could the Reverend Doctor Jones, vehemently anti-Catholic and anti-Negro, have as his two most loyal friends and workers Father Patrick Keeley and the black Fuehrer of Harlem. It is an upside down world in which Kraft, a Russian spy since 1935 can say indignantly, "It makes me ashamed to be an American!" (p. 42). It is a world in which Campbell must bury a dog he has shot because as an old man tells him, "If you don't, somebody will eat it" (p. 80). Nothing very logical happens in the novel. Even when

Jones is captured and screams, "This day will go down in history," the calm reply from his captor is, "Every day goes down in history" (pp. 171-72). In this world Campbell can only muddle through, waiting for the day someone will cry, "Olly-olly-ox-in-free."¹²

Although moved around at will by absurd forces, Campbell's world is somewhat of his own making. He did make the choice to become a spy. It is no accident, I think, that Campbell carries a pawn from his chess set with him. But the irony of this act is intensified when one considers the symbolic implications of his having carved it himself.

Campbell laments that he "served evil too openly and good too secretly," but his suicide results more from not being able to adjust himself to the absurdity around him. If he could only have listened to Dr. Epstein's mother and realized that it was the world that was sick and not him, he might have been able to absolve himself of the guilt that led to his self destruction. The trick lies in seeing the cosmic joke and learning how to laugh at, and thereby, live with it. Campbell's failure to do this, as Vonnegut and Scholes stated earlier, make this a less comic book than The Sirens of Titan which precedes it and Cat's Cradle which follows it. The absurd humor is present throughout the novel; Campbell just can't see it. He is denied the comic vision and is overwhelmed by the absurdity around him. If he could only recognize the joke and learn how to take it like Jonah in Cat's Cradle, his plight might prove less bleak.

FOOTNOTES

¹Tim Hildebrand, "Two or Three Things I Know about Kurt Vonnegut's Imagination," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 123.

²"A Talk with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 115.

³"A Talk with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," p. 115.

⁴"Mother Night, Cat's Cradle, and the Crimes of Our Times," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 161.

⁵Hildebrand, p. 122. Vonnegut once stated on educational television that he wants his books to be read by those in power. He realizes that these people do not read long books and hopes that Presidents, dictators, executives, etc. will find time in their busy schedules to read a few short chapters now and then. However, these techniques are very successful in matching Vonnegut's form to his content. One should not dismiss the stylistic reasons simply because Vonnegut gives an extrinsic reason for his book and chapter length.

⁶Jess Ritter, "Teaching Kurt Vonnegut on the Firing Line," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 37.

⁷Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Mother Night (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), p. 23. Subsequent references to this source will be noted parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

⁸Jerome Klinkowitz, The Vonnegut Statement, p. 165.

⁹I am indebted in this paragraph to Professor Peyton Glass, III, for developing the ideas on ontological insecurity and for suggesting that I read Pirandello's preface to Six Characters in Search of an Author.

¹⁰Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1962), Signet edition, p. 13.

¹¹Vonnegut's technique here is similar to that of T. S. Eliot, where surface contrasts, upon closer examination, turn out to be parallels. For example, when Prufrock says, "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," we accept this momentarily only to realize later that Prufrock is indeed a great deal like the Prince of Denmark who thought too much and acted too little. Such a technique allows the author to undercut the very information he is giving the reader and thereby keep him off balance and unsure. It is a kind of "insecure" dramatic irony.

¹²In the child's game of hide-and-seek, this is the cry which means that the game is over, and everyone still hiding can come out because it's time to go home. See pp. 17, 18, and 34.

CHAPTER VI

CAT'S CRADLE

Unlike its immediate predecessor, there can be little doubt but that Cat's Cradle (1963) is a funny novel. It begins with a parody of Melville's Moby Dick as the narrator says, "Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John." This statement establishes the first person narrator who functions throughout the novel, the second of Vonnegut's books in which this point of view is used. Vonnegut's use of first person narration accomplishes just the opposite of more traditional novels which employ this point of view. Melville, for instance, used Ishmael to gain our trust and convince us that the story was true since it was a first person account by a narrator we trusted. On the contrary, Vonnegut begins by reminding us of a fiction about an almost unbelievable sea story and a Biblical account of another improbable whale story. Whereas Melville aimed at verisimilitude and a willing suspension of disbelief, Vonnegut seems deliberately to destroy the illusion of objective truth or reality. Furthermore, Jonah immediately embraces Bokononism, a religion founded on lies, in which the first book states: "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies."¹ Thus we have the same ambiguity, the same doubt about what is real, that existed in Mother Night.

Jonah is a writer attempting to write a book about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima called The Day the World Ended. He is especially

interested in getting information on how Nobel Prize physicist Felix Hoenikker, the father of the atomic bomb, spent that day. Since Dr. Hoenikker is now dead, Jonah attempts to obtain this information from his three grotesque children--Newt (a midget), Angela (a giantess), and Frank (a "pinch-faced" fugitive from the F. B. I.). While researching a story for a magazine article Jonah discovers Boknonism, a religion founded on helpful lies, which plays an ever increasing role in his life and in the novel.

According to Boknonism, humanity is organized into "teams that do God's will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a karass" (p. 11). Jonah is thrust into a meeting with all of the people in his karass when he is assigned by a magazine to do a story on Julien Castle, an American medical missionary on an island called San Lorenzo. Here he encounters the members of his karass: the three Hoenikker children; Dr. Castle and his son; Papa Monzano, the dictator of the island; and Monzano's adopted daughter, Mona.

Jonah learns that the Hoenikker children each have a sliver of ice-nine, the last thing invented by Dr. Hoenikker shortly before his death. It has the capability of turning all water into ice which has a melting point of 114.4 degrees Fahrenheit. He also learns that Frank has given his portion to Papa Monzano in exchange for a high government position.

Papa Monzano is dying very painfully of cancer, and Frank persuades Jonah to be the next ruler of San Lorenzo, mainly by offering him the beautiful Mona as the ruler's wife. Papa Monzano then commits suicide by swallowing his portion of ice-nine and freezing solid. Before his body can be disposed of, an air show by the six planes in

the San Lorenzo Air Force is staged; one of the planes crashes into Papa's castle, and Papa's body falls into the sea. His body starts a chain reaction which freezes all the water on the face of the earth within one week.

Jonah, Mona, Bokonon, and a few others survive, but it is a lifeless planet that they inhabit. One by one they commit suicide by touching their tongues to the blue-white frost covering everything. Jonah postpones his suicide for six months until he has finished his book on human stupidity.

The plot in Cat's Cradle develops chronologically for the most part, except for flashbacks and remembrances of the Hoenikker children; but the narrative is interrupted by letters, songs, "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" (in both American and San Lorenzo dialect), excerpts from The Books of Bokonon and The History of San Lorenzo, an index for the latter, a passage from Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology, and the San Lorenzo National Anthem. These interruptions disrupt the flow of the narration and remind the reader how chaotic Jonah's world is. Furthermore, Vonnegut continues to use with good effect his technique of short sentences, often isolated in separate paragraphs. For example, Vonnegut describes Mona:

Her dress was white and Greek.
 She wore flat sandals on her small brown feet.
 Her pale gold hair was lank and long.
 Her lips were a lyre.
 Oh God.
 Peace and plenty forever (p. 98).

This passage reads more like a poem than a prose passage. Coupled with the extremely short chapters, this technique helps keep the reader slightly off balance. And the last two lines of this quotation call for a response from the reader that he is not ready to make, causing

him to wonder if he is supposed to take them seriously, or laugh at them as parodies of narrative technique.

In Cat's Cradle Vonnegut again presents an absurd universe. No one can be sure who is in his karass until after death, just as he never knows what God's will is or how he is accomplishing it. Any attempt to determine the karass necessarily ends at best in a granfalloon or false karass, which shows the futility of attempting to find the meaning of life:

Hazel's obsession with Hoosiers around the world was a textbook example of a false karass, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done, a textbook example of what Bokonon calls a granfalloon. Other examples of granfalloons are the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows--and any nation, anytime, anywhere.

As Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

If you wish to study a granfalloon,

Just remove the skin of a toy balloon (pp. 67-68).

Besides the obvious poke at some of the idiocies which Vonnegut thinks people take too seriously, and the parody of religion/philosophy in the poem, he also forces us to see that life is meaningless. For if those things which people take seriously are shams, then what is left to order their lives? Even politics and nationalism are granfalloons. "Pay no attention to Caesar," says Bokonon; "Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what's really going on" (p. 73). This humorous twist of the church/state conflict is re-emphasized in the name of the elaborate fortress to defend what no one wants anyway; it is called Fort Jesus.

The absurd theme is aided in this novel by the recurring use of the accidental and coincidental. Jonah unexpectedly finds his family name on a grave marker in Ilium, New York. All of the so-called

members of his karass ending up on San Lorenzo at the same time defies plausibility. And Papa Monzano's body slides into the water (a freak accident) ending all life on earth.

The novel is full of absurd happenings. San Lorenzo's hale-and-hearty-one-hundred-man-volunteer-team-to-help-America-fight-the-Germans get on their ship and are promptly "sunk by a German submarine right outside of Bolivar harbor." They gave their all, accomplished nothing, and are honored for it every year. Chapter 76 is entitled, "Julien Castle Agrees with Newt that Everything Is Meaningless." A wrang-wrang, according to Bokonon, "is a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example of the wrang-wrang's own life, to an absurdity." Maybe we are wrang-wrangs for one another. One of Julien Castle's conversations with Jonah shows Castle waiting like Malachi Constant's father for the meaning that never comes:

I undertook to explain the deeper significance of the cat's cradle, since Newt seemed disinclined to go through that song and dance again.

And Castle nodded sagely. "So this is a picture of the meaninglessness of it all! I couldn't agree more."

"Do you really agree?" I asked. "A minute ago you said something about Jesus."

"Who?" said Castle.

"Jesus Christ?"

"Oh," said Castle. "Him." He shrugged. "People have to talk about something just to keep their voice boxes in working order, so they'll have good voice boxes in case there's ever anything really meaningful to say" (p. 116).

That there is never anything really meaningful to say in the novel is reflected in the conversations in which there is no communication. In dialogue which sounds as if it could have come from a Pinter or Beckett play, Vonnegut uses the breakdown of language to reflect the breakdown of logic. The unintelligible gibberish of the native dialect

occurs frequently in the book and communicates absolutely nothing to us. That it has no meaning for the reader is proven by Vonnegut's translating every word of it. Frank's conversation with Jonah about the new dictator for the island is nothing but a string of meaningless clichés such as: "I want to talk cold turkey to you, man to man! . . . There's no sense in beating around the bush. I'm a pretty good judge of character, if I do say so myself, and I like the cut of your jib. . . . I think you and I could really hit it off. . . . We've both got things that mesh. . . . We need each other. . . . I like the cut of your jib!" (pp. 132-33). Needless to say, Jonah knows as little at the end of the conversation as he did at the beginning, and the repetition of the meaningless phrase only heightens the effect.

Jonah is often in conversations in which his response is inappropriate or at least non-committal and non-communicative, but no one really notices since there is no communication anyway. His responses to Mom really do not add anything to her statements:

"How's the writing going?" Hazel asked me.
 "Fine, Mom, just fine."
 "When you going to show us some of it?"
 "When it's ready, Mom, when it's ready."
 "A lot of famous writers were Hoosiers."
 "I know."
 "You'll be one of a long, long line." She smiled
 hopefully. "Is it a funny book?"
 "I hope so, Mom."
 "I like a good laugh."
 "I know you do" (p. 185).

The only possible meaning in Jonah's responses is the irony about his book being funny, and Mom misses that. Frank Hoenikker is even more imperceptive when he fails to note the obvious sarcasm of Jonah's responses to his statements:

"I've grown up a good deal."
 "At a certain amount of expense to the world." I could

say things like that to Frank with an absolute assurance that he would not hear them.

"There was a time when people could bluff me without much trouble because I didn't have much self-confidence in myself."

"The mere cutting down of the number of people on earth would go a long way toward alleviating your own particular social problems," I suggested. Again, I made the suggestion to a deaf man (p. 187).

In addition to the breakdown of language, Vonnegut also shows the destruction of the meaning of history as an effective way of presenting absurdity. As stated by Richard Lehan,

When the metaphysical rebel rejects God, he assumes that man is responsible for history. When man can no longer define himself in relation to God, he can at least define himself in relation to the past and to his own immediate times. Unlike Hegel and Marx, the existentialist rejects the teleological belief that history is being directed toward some predetermined end. He can accept Carlyle's belief that history is the record of the human mind as it manifests itself in action without, of course, the Carlylean belief that these motives are being directed from beyond. . . . When history loses its meaning life becomes absurd.²

Vonnegut's view of human history is much closer to that of Mark Twain than to Carlyle. As in "The Mysterious Stranger" and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, history is seen as a descent rather than an ascent. Man's weapons have increased to the point where he can destroy the world, but there is no similar growth in the moral means of controlling such power. Seen this way, history becomes for all of us what it was to Joyce--a nightmare from which we are trying to awake.

Jonah mocks the meaning and importance of history with a tongue-in-cheek recording of a very historical event:

"Papa" Monzano was the first man in history to die of ice-nine.

I record that fact for whatever it may be worth. "Write it all down," Bokkonon tells us. He is really telling us, of course, how futile it is to write or read histories. "Without accurate records of the past, how can men and women be expected to avoid making serious mistakes in the future?" he asks ironically.

So, again: "Papa" Monzano was the first man in history to die of ice-nine (p. 159).

Another relevant statement is offered later in the novel: "'History!' writes Bokonon. 'Read it and weep'" (p. 168).

Vonnegut frequently uses chance happenings and equates elements that are usually on a very different scale to keep the absurd tone in this novel. When a ship wrecked near San Lorenzo, all the people on board drowned. Only the rats and the cargo of furniture came ashore. As Philip Castle nonchalantly tells Jonah, "So some people got free furniture and some people got bubonic plague" (p. 110). Besides this equation of very different gifts, Vonnegut also uses parallel structure to intensify the equation rhetorically. The style might also be a perversion of the very balanced prose and poetry of an age which still had stable values. But here, the leveling of everything makes one thing just as good as another. Philip continues the story about the plague: "Father worked without sleep for days, worked not only without sleep but without saving many lives, either" (p. 111). Once again the parallel structure and unexpected equation of elements usually occupying different rungs on the ladder of values is very effective. Later that night, while looking at all of the corpses by flashlight, Dr. Castle giggles and tells Philip, "Son, . . . someday this will all be yours" (p. 112). Dr. Castle laughs at the horror around him, thus enabling him to come to terms with it; he dissociates himself from the suffering and death by making a joke of it. He also shows an awareness of the futility of human endeavors to make things better. Nothing really changes despite Dr. Castle's "aspirin and boko-maru." In such a universe, Vonnegut does not even try to suggest a way to reform man or the situation; he merely provides a way of coping with such an

absurd, purposeless universe, and that way is laughter. The perversion of the well known cliché which Dr. Castle mouths to his son provides the humor.

Dr. Castle's hospital provides Vonnegut with two more opportunities to use the equation of unequal entities. Castle tells Jonah, "I couldn't possibly run the hospital of mine if it weren't for aspirin and boko-maru." And later Jonah learns that Dr. Schlichter von Koenigswald, a former camp physician at Auschwitz, is helping Dr. Castle and "saving lives right and left." Remarks Castle, "Yes. If he keeps going at his present rate, working night and day, the number of people he's saved will equal the number of people he let die--in the year 3010" (p. 127). The equation of unequals here is intensified by Vonnegut's use of periodic construction--with a very unexpected ending.

Vonnegut often mixes the trivial with the important in the novel, thus equalizing everything again. In his letter to Jonah, Newt writes, "Aren't the gorges beautiful? This year, two girls jumped into one holding hands. They didn't get into the sorority they wanted. They wanted Tri-Delt" (p. 18). The dead-pan presentation of this event in a prose style which shows no emotional involvement combines with the addition of the last bit of trivial information to insure that the response is humorous. A similar effect is achieved when Newt tells Jonah about Angela bundling up "her three children" (including her father, Dr. Hoenikker) to send them off in the morning; they are very much alike, except as Newt says, "Only I was going to kindergarten; Frank was going to junior high; and Father was going to work on the atom bomb" (p. 20).

In some of these instances the equation also deepens to include a less obvious irony. Such is the case when the bartender in Ilium tells Jonah what he thinks of Frank Hoenikker: "He was just one of those kids who made model airplanes and jerked off all the time" (p. 25). The irony in this statement is completed near the end of the novel when we learn from Frank that the real reason he always went to the model shop was that he "was screwing Jack's wife every day" (p. 136). Vonnegut never lets us know whether we are supposed to believe Frank or the bartender and Jack. By confronting us with two contradictory versions of the truth, Vonnegut forces us to see that there may not be one truth, but many--or none. Truth is not thought of very highly in Vonnegut's novels anyway, and especially not in this one since it is championed only by the scientists. The useful lies of Rumfoord in The Sirens of Titan and of Bokonon are superior to truth.

In what has by now become a characteristic style of his, Vonnegut has Jonah totally sacrifice suspense by telling us on page 65, "When it came time for the Mintons to die, they did it within the same second." And later in the novel (but considerably before everyone's death), he muses about the characters around him: "Dead--almost all dead now" (p. 153). Such statements not only destroy the novelistic conventions of suspense and denouement, they also create a tone of resignation much as the phrase, "So it goes," will do later in Slaughterhouse-Five. Since everything is inevitable and purposeless, Vonnegut can tell us the end or the beginning at any time. This technique continues to be important in Vonnegut's later novels, especially Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions.

As in The Sirens of Titan, Vonnegut uses comic incongruity and instant reversals to convey the tone of comic absurdity. "Life is sure funny sometimes," Jonah tells us. "And sometimes it isn't," says Marvin Breed, the grave monument salesman (p. 51). In such contradictory statements, Vonnegut sets up a certain expectation on the part of the reader, and then destroys it in the following sentence. This kind of reversal suggests a world in which the unexpected is as likely to happen as the expected; it defies cause and effect and logical expectations; it suggests an absurd world. The same technique can be seen when, following a lengthy and scholarly definition of Fata Morgana, Jonah finishes with, "Fata Morgana was poetic crap, in short" (p. 62). Similarly, Jonah's estimation of Frank Hoenikker is immediately reversed by Philip Castle. Jonah says, "Frank Hoenikker's a lucky man." Castle replies, "Frank Hoenikker is a piece of shit" (p. 105).

The incongruous becomes commonplace in Cat's Cradle. Dr. Julien Castle, the saintly, Schweitzer-like doctor "forestalled all reference to his possible saintliness by talking out of the corner of his mouth like a movie gangster" (p. 114). His behavior in the novel is rather unsaintly, too. Also incongruous is the first response to the death of Papa Monzano by ice-nine. It is a non-verbal response:

Little Newt threw up.
And then we all wanted to throw up.
Newt certainly did what was called for.
"I couldn't agree more," I told Newt (p. 161).

Vonnegut even juxtaposes references to a Walt Disney movie with the end of the world:

A curious six months followed--the six months in which I wrote this book. Hazel spoke accurately when she called our little society the Swiss Family Robinson, for we had survived a storm, were isolated, and then the living became

very easy indeed. It was not without a certain Walt Disney charm (p. 184).

But Disney's world was a warm one with life everywhere; here all is frozen and dead, and rather than fighting for survival the people commit suicide to end the purposeless existence.

As usual, irony plays a large part in this Vonnegut novel and helps control the tone. Felix Hoenikker could not care less about a prison inmate's manuscript about the end of the world, but he is interested in the string which binds it (p. 16); this string provides the raw material from which he fashions the cat's cradle. He is so absent-minded that he leaves his wife a tip after breakfast (p. 19). His secretary's name is Miss Faust. His boss tells Jonah, "The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become" (p. 36). The irony in this statement becomes obvious when one compares it to Bokononism, the religion founded on lies. Hoenikker's boss also tells Jonah about Ilium, "There isn't much in the way of night life. Everybody's life pretty much centers around his family and his home" (p. 28). But we know that Jonah has just spent the night with a prostitute whom he met in the first bar he found in town. And we also know how undevoted to his family Felix Hoenikker was.

McCabe (and later "Papa" Monzano) and Bokonon have a symbiotic relationship on San Lorenzo. While publicly hating one another, they both realize the necessity of preserving one another. Bokonon must have the tyrant, McCabe, to pit his religion against, and although supposedly trying to kill Bokonon, "McCabe was always sane enough to realize that without the holy man to war against, he himself would become meaningless" (p. 120). The only meaning lies in the drama these men have invented.

The Vonnegut brand of parody and burlesque functions in Cat's Cradle, too. As mentioned earlier, the very first sentence in the novel is a parody, but "Call me Jonah" functions on a more complex level than is evident at first glance. Besides parodying the opening of Melville's Moby Dick (Jonah is also left to tell the tale at the catastrophic end, too), it also suggests the Biblical story of Jonah. But this Jonah, although moved to the scene of the action, accomplishes nothing and saves no one. His mission is not divinely inspired or directed (despite his belief that "somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail), and the only result of it is that he gets to see first hand the end of the world. The Biblical parallel is also reflected in his belief that something is controlling his destiny (p. 11), but the vagueness of this admission of faith, coupled with Jonah's conversion to Bokononism, heightens the parody.

Bokononism is, of course, a parody of Christianity, "with its ex-carpenter founder, its Caesar (McCabe), its outlawed status, its parabolic teachings."³ The Books of Bokonon parody the Biblical Psalms with their calypsos, and there is an excellent parody of the Book of Genesis, which gives a basis for man's search for meaning in a meaningless universe.

In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness.

And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"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.

And he went away (p. 177).

If there is any purpose or meaning in life, it is up to man to either discover it or invent it; there is none inherent, and God could not care less. Furthermore man condemns himself to absurdity here since it is his expectation which is at variance with the way the world is.

Bokononism doesn't take itself as seriously as does Christianity; the above passage is preceded on the title page with the warning: "'Don't be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but foma!'" Foma, of course, are lies" (p. 177). Bokonon openly admits throughout his religious teachings that his religion is founded on lies. He states at the beginning: "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." And Jonah warns us, "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either" (p. 14). Vonnegut never lets us forget that this book is fiction, and thus a kind of lie. As in Mother Night, we are not sure what to believe and what not to. In a sense, Vonnegut creates the same kind of insecurity in the reader that his characters experience.

There is an element of parody in "Papa" Monzano's musical corpse, which is frozen solid and makes a musical ringing sound when someone strikes it. Eliot, in "The Hollow Men," said that the world would end not with a bang but a whimper; in Cat's Cradle it ends with the musical ring of a marimba, and the frozen body of "Papa" Monzano is "shaped like an andiron" (p. 159). "Papa's" last rites burlesque a part of the Catholic faith, and Vonnegut gives them in their entirety. Papa repeats Dr. von Koenigswald's words, line by line, and some are given in both

American and San Lorenzo dialect. Furthermore, Dr. von Koenigswald is not a priest, not even a believer in Bokononism, but an ex-Nazi.

There is a comic allusion to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as the people of San Lorenzo shoot an albatross, make canapés of it, and all perish. Jonah is spared because a taste of one of the canapés makes him sick. The use of ice instead of the expected fire to end the world is, in itself, ironic. It may be an allusion to Frost's poem; one could certainly make a case for the lack of compassion or passion being a cause of the end by ice.

The indexing of Philip Castle's History of San Lorenzo burlesques scholarly tradition, and both modern art and comic books are burlesqued by the artist who stays in Jonah's apartment. Besides wrecking the apartment, he kills Jonah's cat and turns it into an art piece: "There was a sign hung around my dead cat's neck. It said, 'Meow'" (p. 59). The cat with its vocal utterances printed on a square beside it is very much like a comic strip character. Vonnegut also points out the danger of learning and human aspirations in a rather perverted version of the phrase, "A little learning is a dangerous thing." Bokonon says, "Beware of the man who works hard to learn something, learns it, and finds himself no wiser than before. . . . He is full of murderous resentment of people who are ignorant without having come by their ignorance the hard way" (p. 187).

The San Lorenzo National Anthem is sung to the tune of "Home, Home on the Range," and the words are a most inaccurate description of the miserable island they describe, ending with:

What a rich, luck island are we!
Our enemies quail,
For they know they will fail
Against people so reverent and free (p. 97).

Vonnegut also has an entertaining and effective burlesque of marital fidelity, substituting boko-maru for sexual intimacy as Jonah asks Mona:

"Is--is there anyone else in your life?"
 She was puzzled. "Many," she said at last.
 "That you love?"
 "I love everyone."
 "As--as much as me?"
 "Yes." She seemed to have no idea that this might
 bother me.
 I got off the floor, sat in a chair, and started putting my shoes and socks back on.
 "I suppose you--you perform--you do what we just did with--with other people?"
 "Boko-maru?"
 "Boko-maru."
 "Of course."
 "I don't want you to do it with anybody but me from now on," I declared. . . . "As your husband, I'll want all your love for myself" (p. 141).

There is an added element of burlesque here, of the Suzi Wong type of naive, sexually promiscuous girl with a heart of gold. Boko-maru, it should be remembered, is a mingling of awareness of two people brought about by placing the bare soles of their feet together. There is an obvious pun on soles-souls. Jonah and Mona's first attempt at this experience burlesques the wedding night, complete with doubts, fears, and gushy language (p. 139).

Vonnegut does not confine his use of parody and burlesque to the content of the novel; he burlesques the conventional novel form with 127 chapters in 191 pages. And the names of the chapters often function similarly, names like "A Tentative Tangling of Tendrils," "Newt's Thing with Zinka," "Vice-President in Charge of Volcanoes," "When Automobiles Had Cut-glass Vases," "What God Is," "Mayonaise," "Meow," "A Karass Built for Two," "How I Almost Lost My Mona," "Bell, Book, and Chicken in a Hatbox," and "The Pissant Hilton." Vonnegut is clearly

making fun of the novelistic form which has tried to order reality for so long. Such an attempt must fail, and Vonnegut does not try; he merely pokes fun at the tradition instead.

There are various attempts to order chaos and discover meaning in the novel, all futile. "If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reason," writes Bokonon, "that person may be a member of your karass" (p. 12). But trying to determine anything about one's karass is doomed to failure in the form of a granfalloon. Bokonon openly warns against trying to use our finite minds to comprehend the infinite as he tells of an Episcopalian lady who claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly: "She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing" (p. 13). One cannot even find meaning in Bokononism because Bokonon refuses to take the religion seriously and constantly reminds us that it is a pack of foma, or lies. With characteristic irony he reminds us throughout that all of the true things he tells us are really lies.

Man's need to find order and understanding is given in a Bokonon song quoted to Jonah by Julien Castle:

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 (p. 124).

At one point Jonah shrieks, "My God--life! Who can understand even one little minute of it?" "Don't try," Castle replies. "Just pretend you understand." This pretense seems to be as close to meaning as we get in Cat's Cradle. The novel, itself, must necessarily end in the failure of a granfalloon since it is an attempt on Jonah's part to discover what

his karass is about. As he tells us early in the novel, "I intend in this book to include as many members of my karass as possible, and I mean to examine all strong hints as to what on Earth we, collectively, have been up to" (p. 13).

Vonnegut's invented religion teaches a very primary existential lesson--that whatever meaning there is in the universe must be created by man, not God. The lies of Bokononism are beneficial since they restore man's peace of mind, happiness, and comfort in a world in which these possessions are hard to come by. In one of his many calypsos, Bokonon gives his invented purpose for forming the new religion:

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 (p. 90).

Bokononism may not have created a paradise, but it did take life, which is tragic or at least pathetic, and transform it into comedy. As Julien Castle tells Jonah, "When it became evident that no governmental or economic reform was going to make the people much less miserable, the religion became the one real instrument of hope. Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and better lies" (p. 118).

Truth and illusion become indistinguishable in this novel. And truth is not necessarily any better than lie. Truth, in the hands of science, brings destruction while the gentle religion founded on lies brings peace and comfort. And can something really be a lie if everyone believes it? Faith, which plays a large part in many religions,

means that one believes even in the face of contrary evidence. Objective reality becomes less important than illusion; indeed, the former may not exist. As Thomas Pynchon wrote in V., Stencil "had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality; it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment."⁴ Perhaps the people in one's karass determine what reality is.

The confusion of reality and illusion is a popular device in contemporary novels when the novelist wishes to convey the absurd. We have already seen that confusion achieved in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest as the paranoid narrator, Bromden, makes no distinction between the two. Perhaps one of the most effective portrayals of the truth/illusion confusion occurs in Joseph Heller's Catch-22. Heller writes of the chaplain:

It was even possible that none of what he thought had taken place, really had taken place, that he was dealing with an aberration of memory rather than of perception, that he never really had thought he had seen what he now thought he once did think he had seen, that his impression now that he once had thought so were merely the illusion of an illusion, and that he was only now imagining that he had ever once imagined seeing a naked man sitting in a tree at the cemetery.⁵

The language is as confusing to us as the quest for reality is for the chaplain. Both language and reality/illusion confusion contribute to the absurdity. Similar statements of philosophic relativism can be found in the conclusion of "The Mysterious Stranger" and Tweedledee and Tweedledum's discussion of the Red King's dream in Through the Looking Glass. There are, therefore, precedents for Vonnegut's technique; he is, in fact, using a somewhat standard method of evoking absurdity.

In The Sirens of Titan, Vonnegut showed the futility of belief in a meaningful and purposeful universe at the same time that he presented a world without free will. Human "progress," too, was shown to have no

worthwhile purpose, at least not for earthlings. In Cat's Cradle, Vonnegut reworks these same themes, aided by far less science-fiction gadgetry; in fact, the only fantastic part of the novel is ice-nine, and it isn't that far from the potential of already existing chemical and biological weapons.

Vonnegut does show the danger of science and the amorality of Felix Hoenikker. When told after the first atomic bomb blast that science has now known sin, Hoenikker replied, "What is sin?" And upon being told by his secretary, "God is Love," he questions, "What is God? What is Love?" He pays no attention to his family and invents things with no regard for their effects upon people, admitting readily that people are not his business. Scientific amorality could hardly be presented more effectively. It is a great deal like Tom Lehrer's song about Werner von Braun: "Vunce the rockets go up, who cares vere they come down? That is not my department."

Vonnegut seems to realize that recognizing the danger of science will do no good, since science is looked on as inherently good by the people in power throughout the novel. It is never questioned and is worshipped by "Papa" Monzano as "magic that works." The novel might seem at first glance to be merely another satire on scientific progress, but as Charles Harris so aptly points out, "Cat's Cradle goes far beyond protest. Like The Sirens of Titan, its main comment is upon the futility of human endeavor, the meaninglessness of human existence."⁶

Cat's Cradle cannot really be seen as just satire or a novel of protest since both of these classifications imply hope for reform. Vonnegut gives little reason to hope for reform on either a personal or

collective level. We have seen how little good the altruistic Dr. Castle's sacrifice does, and even little Newt's statement of love for everyone goes sour in this novel when we find that he has only been used. All that is left for man is to resign himself to the absurdity and to recognize it as the cosmic joke it is. There is not even an escape through love in this novel; the closest we can come to Boaz's solution in The Sirens of Titan is the Mintons, who lived together and died together. As Bokonon says of maturity, it "is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything" (p. 134). Laughter then is seen as the last and only resort. If it does not remedy, at least it makes us more comfortable with absurdity. The futility of higher aspirations can be seen in the Fourteenth Book of Bokonon, entitled, "'What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?'" It doesn't take long to read The Fourteenth Book. It consists of one word and a period. This is it: 'Nothing'" (p. 164).

Admittedly, the plot of Cat's Cradle is potentially pessimistic, concluding as it does with the end of life on earth, but Vonnegut gives us the distancing to cope with it by making a joke of it. In addition to the humor in the elements of parody already discussed and the obvious ironies, Vonnegut once again employs farfetched language and imagery to preserve the humorous tone. Jonah tells us the morning after his night with the prostitute, "My soul seemed as foul as smoke from burning cat fur" (p. 27). Later he tells us about the cute-but-dumb secretary who "was ransacking her mind for something to say, finding nothing in it but used Kleenex and costume jewelry" (p. 31).

There is black humor in the form of a rather bad pun about the division of ice-nine when Jonah describes the three slivers that the Hoenikker children inherit as "chips, in a manner of speaking, off the old block" (p. 43). There is an equally grim joke when Philip Castle, describing the effects of the plague, says, "After death, the body turns black--coals to Newcastle in the case of San Lorenzo" (p. 111).

Frank Hoenikker's physical appearance is the occasion of a number of outrageous similes and metaphors. Jonah thinks Frank "Looked like a child kept up long after his customary bedtime" (p. 97). When discussing the important matters of state, "Franklin Hoenikker--the pinch-faced child spoke with the timbre and conviction of a kazoo. . . . Frank meant to inspire camaraderie, but his head looked to me like a bizarre little owl, blinded by light and perched on a tall white post" (p. 132). Philip Castle describes Frank very simply: "I could carve a better man out of a banana" (p. 111).

The same grotesque description can be seen in the first encounter with the people of San Lorenzo. "The islanders were oatmeal colored. . . . The women's breasts were bare and paltry. The men wore loose loincloths that did little to conceal penes like pendulums on grandfather clocks" (p. 95). Looking at Newt's painting, Jonah thinks, "It consisted of scratches made in a black, gummy impasto. The scratches formed a sort of spider's web, and I wondered if they might not be the sticky nets of human futility hung up on a moonless night to dry" (p. 113).

Both Jonah and Dr. Castle note that the cat's cradle in Newt's picture is just as meaningless and unfathomable as his father's string-play when Newt was a small boy. The only meaning that the string

possesses is the artificial meaning that our imagination provides. As far as Newt is concerned, there is "No damn cat, and no damn cradle." The cat's cradle functions throughout the novel to remind us that there is no inherent meaning, only that which man invents. The best we can do is to invent better and better lies.

Perhaps the most outrageous language in the novel occurs when "Bokonon translates pool-pah at one point in The Books of Bokonon as 'shit storm' and at another point as 'wrath of God'" (p. 163).

Readers familiar with other Vonnegut works can recognize another technique of humor when the narrative flow is interrupted by the intrusion of a character from a previous novel. In Cat's Cradle, although the name is changed, we recognize from Mother Night the Reverend Doctor Lionel Jason David Jones, D. D. S., D. D. "His doctorate, which he invited me to examine, was awarded by the Western Hemisphere University of the Bible in Little Rock, Arkansas. He made contact with the University through a classified ad in Popular Mechanics, he told me" (p. 145). Even if one hasn't read the previous novel, there is humor in the unexpected link between religion and Popular Mechanics, especially when one realizes how much of this novel is concerned with the clash between science and religion.

There is a grim sort of humor in the reasons behind the invention of ice-nine. It was invented to get rid of mud; in a Bokononist sense it succeeds, since man is mud. The same kind of grim humor can be seen when Dr. Hoenikker plays with the string from a novel about the end of the world; he makes a cat's cradle with it and sings, "Rock a bye Baby," ending with "Down will come Craydull, Catsy and all." How prophetic! His playing at the lab first give the world the atomic bomb;

his playing with ice-nine ends the world in the same way the song ended Catsy.

Cat's Cradle needs all the humor it contains to avoid the tone of despair. There is no other saving grace for man. Unlike The Sirens of Titan, there is no Boaz or Malachi Constant to decide that the purpose of human life is to love whoever is around to love. That redemptive quality will have to wait for Eliot Rosewater in the next novel. In this novel, both Newt and Angela are used in the name of love, and the end of the novel finds Jonah and Mona drifting farther apart: "My heavenly Mona did not approach me and did not encourage me with languishing glances to come to her side" (p. 156).

According to Cat's Cradle, there is no progress or purpose to the history of man; it is merely a chain of absurd events, an up-dating of the history Twain gave us in "The Mysterious Stranger." From Twain's account of senseless wars and killings, Vonnegut continues by beginning the book with the atomic bomb and ending it with ice-nine, a much more effective way of destroying the world. Newt Hoenikker's complaint about the title object can be seen as the purpose or meaning given in the novel: "Nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands . . . No damn cat, and no damn cradle" (p. 114).

Vonnegut recognizes man's need to understand and to believe in a purposeful universe, but what he gives us is a joke. It is simply taking Hardy's "God Forgotten" or Crane's "A Man Said to the Universe" one step further, the step from pathos to laughter. Cat's Cradle concludes with the ultimate joke in the face of the ultimate absurdity--the senseless and accidental destruction of all life on earth. And in the final joke Jonah finds the purpose he has been searching for in the

final words of Bokonon, the final sentence for The Books of Bokonon:

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 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 (p. 191).

FOOTNOTES

¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Cat's Cradle (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1963), p. 14. Subsequent quotations from this source will be noted parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

²A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 146.

³David H. Goldsmith, Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice, p. 19.

⁴(New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1963), p. 174.

⁵(New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1961), p. 276.

⁶Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press, 1971), p. 63.

CHAPTER VII

GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER

Unlike Vonnegut's previous novels, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater can actually be read as a comedy. In a way, Eliot Rosewater triumphs over the humorous society--over business, fire, automation, his father, Norman Mushari, and Fred Rosewater.

Eliot, the protagonist of the novel, is a middle-aged millionaire who is president of the Rosewater Foundation, repository for the fourteenth largest family fortune in the United States. Eliot is an ex-athlete, ex-war hero, a drunk, a science fiction buff, a volunteer fireman fanatic, and the closest thing to the good samaritan that American soil has produced. He is also insane, at least by society's standards, possibly because of guilt feelings for having killed his mother (accidentally), having killed three unarmed German firemen in World War II (also accidentally), and having too much money (according to Eliot, also accidentally). At least as much as Malachi Constant was, Eliot is also a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all.

Eliot leaves the high life of the city to go to Rosewater, Indiana, a town literally owned by the Rosewater Corporation. There, he tries to love the most unlovable people in the county. He and his wife, Sylvia, entertain "morons, perverts, starvelings, and the unemployed"¹ until she can stand it no longer, has a nervous breakdown, burns the fire station, goes to France, and starts divorce proceedings

against Eliot. He promptly moves out of the family mansion and into a dilapidated dentist's office above a greasy-spoon restaurant and begins dispensing love and money to the county misfits who call or come to see him with their troubles. His services are advertised on the back of volunteer firemen's cars and trucks and in pay telephone booths.

Meanwhile, an unscrupulous young turn-coat lawyer is trying to prove Eliot insane and thereby allow the fortune to fall into his cousin Fred's hands. Eliot's father, Senator Lister Rosewater, accuses Eliot of trying to hurt him and of destroying the woman who loved him. Eliot leaves Rosewater, Indiana, and then there is a year's lapse in the novel which represents the period of amnesia after Eliot's collapse. We rejoin him in the sanitarium where he has been recovering for the past year. Eliot's favorite science-fiction writer, Kilgore Trout, is on hand to say that Eliot is not only sane, but that the social experiment in Rosewater County was the most important one of our time since it attempted to solve the problem of how to love unproductive and socially useless people.

But Fred's lawyer has convinced several Rosewater County residents to swear that Eliot is the father of their illegitimate children. This plan gets slightly out of hand as there are fifty-seven paternity suits against Eliot. These suits can be disproven by bloodtests, but instead Eliot gives \$100,000 (a trifling sum compared to the fortune involved) to Fred, and has his lawyers draw up legal papers acknowledging that every child in Rosewater County said to be his is indeed his, regardless of blood type. Thus, in a way, Eliot triumphs by defeating Fred and assuring that his /Eliot's/ philanthropy will continue even after he /Eliot/ is gone.

According to David Goldsmith in one of the few published studies devoted to Vonnegut's work, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is unquestionably Vonnegut's best novel to date. Instead of focusing on the abstract, philosophical aspects of the human condition, as he had done previously, Goldsmith asserts that this time Vonnegut seeks a practical answer, one that could be of more tangible use than the nihilistic whining of Howard W. Campbell or the hero of Cat's Cardle.² Goldsmith errs, I think, in both his judgment and his criterion for same. Mother Night is at least as good a novel as Rosewater, examining as it does the same problem from a different viewpoint.

Rosewater is one side of the war guilt coin, and Mother Night is the other. Both Howard Campbell and Eliot Rosewater are trying to come to grips with the guilt they feel for the atrocities they performed in war--Campbell's Nazi propaganda broadcasts and Eliot's shooting of three unarmed firemen, one only a boy. It is important to remember that in both of these cases, the guilt comes about from actions that were unintentional. Campbell didn't actively seek employment as a spy and propagandist, and Eliot didn't intentionally kill the uniformed firemen in a smoke-darkened building. Nevertheless, the guilt that both feel is overwhelming. In Campbell's case it leads to tragedy and a complete failure to come to terms with it on a personal level although he is pardoned by society at large. In Eliot's case the guilt is resolved on a personal level, although his society thinks him insane.

The practical answer Goldsmith refers to as being unique in Rosewater is not really new in Vonnegut's work; Malachi Constant proposed the same purpose to human life in The Sirens of Titan, and Boaz, in his own way, lived it in the same novel. The idea of the need for

uncritical love, moreover, is also not new, being present in Mother Night.

Goldsmith's criterion for reaching such a judgment seems founded purely on utilitarian rather than on aesthetic grounds. The reason Rosewater was better received critically than Vonnegut's other novels is because it most nearly conforms to the mainstream of fiction, employing little of science fiction gadgetry or even the conventions of the spy novel. Rosewater is a good novel, but it is a good novel mainly because it is structurally sound and because Vonnegut uses the techniques he has mastered extremely well in this novel. He is at his characteristic best in the use of pastiche technique and brevity. The result is a high-impact, sharply focused novel.

Jonah also rejects nihilism in Cat's Cradle, using the poet, Krebs, as his wrang-wrang. As Jonah tells us:

After I saw what Krebs had done, in particular what he had done to my sweet cat, nihilism was not for me.

Somebody or something did not wish me to be a nihilist. It was Krebs's mission, whether he knew it or not, to disenchant me with that philosophy. Well, done Mr. Krebs, well done (Cat's Cradle, p. 59).

Cat's Cradle is not simply nihilistic; it presents a way of alleviating pain (by the invention of pleasant lies) and of coping with absurdity (laughter).

The plea for better and better lies in Cat's Cradle is also seen in Rosewater. Eliot tells all the people in Rosewater County that they have something to live for and that they are loved--a blatant lie. But he then makes the lie true, for as he tells them, the fact that such an important man as Eliot Rosewater pays attention to them proves that they are worth something.

We also see the moral of Mother Night echoed in Rosewater. Cut into the fountain at the asylum is the sentence: "Pretend to be good always, and even God will be fooled" (p. 177). So the same appearance/reality confusion is present in this novel too. Reality is also questioned upon Eliot's return to the world from his amnesia: "He closed his hand around the racket handle experimentally, to discover whether it was real and whether he was real" (p. 177). Once again Vonnegut confronts us with a world in which objective reality seems uncertain. It is a world in which madness passes for normality, and compassion and sanity are considered neurotic.

It is astonishing to realize how many digressions interrupt the flow of the narrative in Rosewater, but upon closer examination one finds that the digressions are the novel. Included in the novel are various letters; a private detective's report on Eliot; Senator Lister Rosewater's speech to the Senate and his law defining obscenity; a psychiatrist's report on Eliot's wife, Sylvia; part of a novel by Charles Garvey Ulm; part of Eliot's own unfinished novel; telephone calls; part of A History of the Rosewaters of Rhode Island; quotations from The American Investigator; an excerpt from Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer; various examples of graffiti; two excerpts from Kilgore Trout science-fiction novels; a right-wing propaganda pamphlet; an oath by Selena, the Buntlines' maid; a poem by Eliot; a poem by Roland Barry; an excerpt from The Bombing of Germany; and the sound of a bird singing.³ None of these entries is irrelevant; rather the seeming disjointedness contributes to the absurd tone by keeping the reader slightly off balance and making him wonder what is coming next or how this part fits into the whole.

In Rosewater, Vonnegut once again proves himself a master of economical prose style. In an extremely short novel with minimal characterization, he conveys a great deal. He first gives necessary exposition and enough information to make us dislike Norman Mushari, while withholding the introduction of Eliot until we already know enough about him to be curious. We immediately start comparing his behavior to the warped picture we have been given by Mushari, whom we know we do not trust or agree with.

Other characters are very briefly delineated, but well enough to become memorable. For example, Amanita Buntline is a pseudo-intellectual lesbian who eats fisherman salad⁴ at a homosexual restaurant; her daughter, Lila, is a sailing champion who has also cornered the porno market in Pisquontuit.⁵ Lila checks periodically to see if her father, described as a cross between Cary Grant and a German Shepherd, is still alive. Although minor characters, the Buntlines are easy to remember, each having some exaggerated physical appearance or behavior pattern which we do not easily forget.

Vonnegut's economical prose style can also be seen in the passage following the excerpt from Kilgore Trout's Pan-Galactic Three-Day Pass. In the excerpt, Boyle is told by the C. O. who was the size of a beer can and shaped like a plumber's friend and by the padre, "an enormous sort of Portuguese man-o'-war, in a tank of sulfuric acid on wheels," to get ready to leave right away since there had been a death back home.

"Is it--is it--Mom?" said Boyle, fighting back the tears. "Is it Pop? Is it Nancy?" Nancy was the girl next door. "Is it Gramps?"

"Son--" said the C. O., "brace yourself. I hate to tell you this: It isn't who has died. It's what had died."

"What's died?"

"What's died, my boy, is the Milky Way" (p. 174).

This presentation, itself, is a good reminder of absurdity on a cosmic level, ending as it does with not just earth but the entire galaxy; but the following paragraph concerning Eliot is more important:

Eliot looked up from his reading. Rosewater County was gone. He did not miss it (p. 174).

This short paragraph made up of three short sentences, juxtaposed with the report of the death of a large part of the universe, tells us most effectively that the Rosewater County part of Eliot's life is gone; he will never go home anymore.

Similarly, Vonnegut often uses one sentence paragraphs, isolating an idea into a paragraph all its own:

He blew his brains out.

Sons of suicides seldom do well (p. 103).

Such isolation focuses attention where Vonnegut wants it and makes it unnecessary to explain further his ideas. It is a most effective use of understatement.

As in earlier novels, Vonnegut's use of future tense accomplishes the destruction of suspense, thus equating everything. He writes of Eliot: "His black telephone was about to ring. Eliot would awake and answer it by the third ring. He would say what he said to every caller, no matter the hour" (p. 55).

Despite its apparent conventionality (at least by Vonnegut standards since there is no science-fiction gimmickry), Rosewater abounds with absurdity. Seen objectively, life on earth is absurd--as Eliot describes "an inhabited planet with an atmosphere that was eager to combine violently with almost everything the inhabitants held dear. He was speaking of Earth and the element oxygen" (p. 22). In this view

man is simply fighting a losing battle, futilely attempting to keep "our food, shelter, clothing and loved ones from combining with oxygen" (p. 22). Later, the absurdity of life can be seen as Eliot again objectively distills it to its bare essentials. In Eliot's unfinished novel, he tells what a colossal bore Heaven is, and what people get when they opt for life on earth: "What they want and what they get are three dimensions--and comprehensible little packets of time--and enclosures making possible the crucial distinction between inside and outside" (p. 81). Eliot is also concerned about a growing malaise on people's part:

It used to be that most of us who didn't want to go back to good old Earth were souls whose meat had been tortured in slow and fancy ways--a fact that should make very smug indeed proponents of corporal and capital punishments and deterrents to crime. But something curious had been happening of late. We have been gaining recruits to whom, by our standards of agony, practically nothing happened on Earth. They scarcely barked a shin down there, and yet they arrive up here in shell-shocked battalions, bawling, "Never Again!"

"Who are these people?" I ask myself. "What is this unimaginably horrible thing that has happened to them?" And I realize that, in order to get proper answers, I am going to have to let myself be reborn (p. 82).

Eliot is indeed reborn when he goes to Rosewater county, and he finds that the malaise is caused by the fact that these people are so useless and their lives are so meaningless that they are better off dead.

The meaninglessness of life is also seen in one of Kilgore Trout's short stories presented in the book. In "2BR02B," "suicide parlors were busy places, because so many people felt silly and pointless," and Vonnegut returns to the question asked by the Shah of Bratipuhr in Player Piano, as one of Trout's characters wants to ask God a question he never could get answered on earth: "What in hell are people for?"

Perhaps the most meaningless life in Vonnegut's fiction is that of Stewart Buntline; he has resigned himself to doing so little that his daughter has to check periodically to be sure that he is alive. He might as well imitate Fergus in Thomas Pynchon's V. and paint z's on a helium filled ballon floating over his head. After finding out that his only interest is in the Civil War and that it is all that gives his life meaning, we then learn that "he was through with misguided pity. He was through with sex, too. And, if the truth be told, he was fed to the teeth with the Civil War" (p. 119). Buntline's life is just as meaningless as the poor misfits' to whom Eliot devotes himself in Rosewater county. Despite their differences on the economic scale, they are essentially the same. And if Harry Pena is meant to represent a more meaningful life by working with his hands as people in the old days, this champion of virility and nostalgia is nevertheless made impotent by the knowledge that he is going bankrupt and that he only got into this work because of an accident which caused him to inhale a chemical which damaged his lungs and made it impossible to work indoors anymore.

Vonnegut describes the absurdity of a world in war when he gives the background of Fred Rosewater's ancestors. "When the Civil War came, George raised a company of Indiana riflemen, marched off with them to join the nearly legendary Black Hat Brigade. Under George's command was Noah's substitute, the Rosewater village idiot, Fletcher Moon. Moon was blown to hamburger by Stonewall Jackson's artillery at Second Bull Run." Noah then receives a sarcastic letter from George telling him that if he didn't feel that he got his money's worth from Moon, he could "write General Pope for a partial refund." The absurdity

becomes more obvious in George's wartime experience:

By the time of Antietam, George Rosewater had become a Lieutenant Colonel, and had, curiously, lost the little fingers from both hands. At Antietam, he had his horse shot out from under him, advanced on foot, grabbed the regimental colors from a dying boy, found himself holding only a shattered staff when Confederate cannister carried the colors away. He pressed on, killed a man with the staff. At the moment he was doing the killing, one of his own men fired off a musket that still had its ramrod jammed down the bore. The explosion blinded Colonel Rosewater for life (pp. 99-100).

This absurd experience reads like an Ionesco staging of Crane's The Red Badge of Courage. The complete lack of reason for the loss of his fingers and eyes points up the lack of reason in general.

Although the townspeople can't understand it, George finds the way to cope with the absurdity of his blindness and instant poverty. "People found him remarkably cheerful." He makes a joke of being cheated out of his land. When a lawyer tells George (who is laughing), "People should always read things before they sign them," George, who is blind, replies, "You can bet your boots that from now on I will" (p. 100). According to his friends, "George Rosewater obviously wasn't a well man when he came back from the war, for no well man, having lost his eyes and his patrimony, would have laughed so much" (pp. 100-01). But in Vonnegut's terms, George has simply recognized the joke and made the proper response to it. His only protest is itself in the form of a joke, a rather bitter and appropriate joke which he leaves on his brother's new home: "One morning the workmen found the brigadier's uniform nailed to the front door as though it were an animal skin nailed to a barn door to dry" (p. 101).

Perhaps the best metaphor for man's plight in an absurd universe is conveyed in the description of Fred Rosewater's shins:

His shins were covered with scars and scabs, as though he had been kicked and kicked and kicked every day of his life. Lila thought that maybe it was a vitamin deficiency that made Fred's shins look like that, or mange.

Fred's gory shins were victims of his wife's interior decorating scheme, which called for an almost schizophrenic use of little tables, dozens of them all through the house. Each little table had its own ashtray and dish of dusty after-dinner mints, although the Rosewaters never entertained. And Caroline was forever rearranging the tables, as though for this kind of party one day and another the next. So poor Fred was forever barking his shins on the tables (p. 113).

If it isn't the tables, then her Electrolux vacuum cleaner attacks Fred's shins. There is no pattern to the arrangement of the tables that would allow Fred to predict where they will be next. As in his life, nothing is stable; there is no reason or purpose. The past is no help in an ever-changing, chaotic present. Fred may be defining his essence with every step, but it is a painful process, and he has the scars to prove it. And each new decision is as meaningless as the last.

The world in Rosewater is just as absurd as that of other Vonnegut novels. It is a world in which Selena has to thank Mrs. Buntline for the sunset; in which "the only get-rich-quick scheme that was open to them was to insure themselves and die soon" (p. 97). It is a world in which Eliot can write a check to every person at a convention and tell them, "There's fantasy for you. And you go to the bank tomorrow, and it will all come true" (p. 21). It is a world in which Eliot can warn the hero and heroine of Aida, who are placed in an airtight chamber to suffocate, "You will last a lot longer, if you don't try to sing" (p. 29). And most absurd of all, it is a world in which Eliot can tell Sylvia, "I'm going to care about these people. . . . I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and

unattractive" (pp. 35-36).

Eliot unconsciously contributes to the absurdity of the world around him; his behavior is clearly schizophrenic when Mary Moody makes the mistake of calling him on the fire department line:

"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!" He slammed the receiver down.

A few seconds later, the black telephone rang. "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 (p. 150).

Such gross inconsistencies do not contribute to a stable environment.

As in earlier Vonnegut novels, Rosewater contains numerous ironies which contribute to the concept of absurdity. Eliot makes the last payment on a client's motor scooter, and "the client killed himself and a girlfriend two days later, smashed up on Bloomington" (p. 85). "Roland Barry, who has suffered a nervous breakdown ten minutes after being sworn into the Army at Fort Benjamin Harrison . . . had a one hundred per cent disability pension" (p. 169). And "out of sixteen winners of the Young Hoosier Horatio Alger Award, six were behind bars for fraud or income-tax evasion, four were under indictment for one thing or another, two had falsified their war records, and one actually went to the electric chair" (p. 164).

Kilgore Trout provides the novel with various ironies which contribute to absurdity. "The greatest writer alive today" and "greatest prophet" is "a stock clerk in a trading stamp redemption center in Hyannis!" (p. 19). Trout, who has earlier been described as looking

"like a frightened, aging Jesus, whose sentence to crucifixion had been commuted to imprisonment for life" (p. 115), had to shave off his beard because, as he tells Eliot, "Think of the sacrilege of a Jesus figure redeeming stamps" (p. 185). Trout's writing is the occasion for further irony as Norman Mushari "didn't understand that what Trout had in common with pornography wasn't sex but fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world. . . . So Mushari felt swindled as he wallowed through the garish prose, lusted for sex, learned instead about automation" (p. 20).

Mushari is also unaware that he is the brunt of an office joke. "Mushari, being tone-deaf, did not know that he himself had an office nickname. It was contained in a tune that someone was generally whistling when he came or went. The tune was 'Pop Goes the Weasel'" (p. 10).

Amanita Buntline pays seventeen dollars for a toilet paper cover made from a tin can and presents it to Caroline Rosewater, saying, "People get what they deserve" (p. 128). Caroline misses the irony, and Amanita, I think, sees only half of it, herself. Only Bunny Weeks, who has fleeced Amanita for seventeen dollars, is in a position to fully appreciate the irony of the situation.

Amanita's daughter, Lila, buys all the pornography from the local news store, thereby creating still another ironic situation:

The relationship between Lila and the news store was wonderfully symbiotic, for hanging in the store's front window was a large medallion of gilded polystyrene, awarded by the Rhode Island Mothers to Save Children from Filth. Representatives of that group inspected the store's paperback selection regularly. The polystyrene medallion was their admission that they had not found one filthy thing. They thought that their children were safe, but the truth was that Lila had cornered the market (p. 112).

Perhaps the most ironic situation in the novel concerns the plight of Harry Pena, champion of virility, work ethic, and free enterprise; he is going broke for all his manly efforts. Furthermore, it was only a chance encounter with carbon tetrachloride which drove Harry out of doors; before that he was a "poor insurance bastard" like Fred Rosewater. So the hard-working, virile fisherman is losing his business while Bunny Weeks, a homosexual restaurant owner, is making enough money to be in banking. Bunny tells Amanita and Caroline about Harry, "Real people don't make their livings that way any more. Those romantics out there make as much sense as Marie Antoinette and her milkmaids. . . . That's all over, men working with their hands and backs. They are not needed" (p. 131). So the Harry Penas of the world are doomed to the same fate as the misfits whom Eliot is helping in Rosewater county. Men like Harry are losing everywhere, Bunny tells them, as "four stupid, silly, fat widows in furs laughed over a bathroom joke on a paper cocktail napkin." Looking at them, Bunny concludes, "And look who's winning. And look who's won" (p. 131).

Both Eliot and his father are deluded about the kind of people Eliot is working with:

It was the Senator's conceit that Eliot trafficked with criminals. He was mistaken. Most of Eliot's clients weren't brave enough or clever enough for lives of crime. But Eliot, particularly when he argued with his father or bankers or his lawyers, was almost equally mistaken about who his clients were. He would argue that the people who, in generations past, had cleared the forests, drained the swamps, built the bridges, people whose sons formed the backbone of the infantry in time of war--and so on. The people who leaned on Eliot regularly were a lot weaker than that--and dumber, too. When it came time for their sons to go into the Armed Forces, for instance, the sons were generally rejected as being mentally, morally, and physically undesirable (p. 56).

Eliot is even deluded about not being deluded. Later in the novel, when he is telling Sylvia about Mary Moody's twins, we find: "Eliot revealed here that he had no illusions about the poeple to whom he was devoting his life. 'And firebugs, too, no doubt, no doubt.' The Moody family had a long history of not only twinning but arson" (p. 91). Thus even when Eliot thinks he is being honest and objective, Vonnegut provides ironic undercutting for his every word.

The subtitle of the novel itself becomes ironic in the course of the narrative. The Buntlines' maid, Selena, writes Daddy that she must be too wicked and dumb to appreciate how wonderful Pisquontuit really is. She suggests that maybe it is a case of pearls before swine, but we realize that this phrase fits her employers and their society much better than her. This society is made up of the pseudo-intellectual, ignorant rich who can play Beethoven albums at 78 R.P.M. and never know the difference, or art collectors who have Picassos, but would rather have a sailing champion for a daughter. Before such people, anything of value would be pearls before swine.

Although there is not as much parody and burlesque in this novel as in The Sirens of Titan or Cat's Cradle, both are present and one of the instances of parody is elaborated considerably. Eliot imagines himself Hamlet and writes his wife, whom he calls Ophelia, from Elsinore, California. Eliot realizes the problem of being a twentieth century Hamlet. He says, "Hamlet had one big edge on me. His father's ghost told him exactly what he had to do, while I am operating without instructions" (p. 31). Such is the plight of the modern hero in an absurd universe. In a relativistic world, there can be no absolute solutions. Without stable norms, he is lost; relative morals and

situational ethics provide no directions for him, and he must make it on his own, creating his meaning as he makes each decision along the way. Even Senator Rosewater continues the parody of Hamlet when he echoes Ophelia by saying of Eliot, "What a noble mind is here o'erthrown" (p. 47).

There is a parody of the Bible in Eliot's letter which tells of his ancestors in language such as, "And Noah begat Samuel," etc. until he gets to himself and writes, "Begat he not a soul" (pp. 14-15). This parody is continued in the paternity suits against Eliot and his accepting the fatherhood of all of the bastards in Rosewater county. Eliot's unfinished novel burlesques reincarnation and transmigration of the souls as we learn that "the immortal soul of Kublai Khan now inhabits the meek meat of a veterinarian's wife in Lima, Peru. The immortal soul of Bonaparte peers out from the hot and stuffy meat of the fourteen-year-old son of the Harbor Master of Cotuit, Massachusetts. Great Caesar's ghost manages as best it can with the syphilitic meat of a Pygmy widow in the Andaman Islands." And Richard the Lion-Hearted is now imprisoned "in the flesh of Coach Letzinger, a pitiful exhibitionist and freelance garbage man in Rosewater, Indiana" (p. 80). So there seems to be no more logic to life after death than in this lifetime. We simply start the whole absurd process over again.

Orson Welles' Citizen Kane might also be the object of an ironic allusion since Fred's sailboat is named Rosebud II. It would be more logical for the Buntlines, who are wealthy and discontented like Kane, to own such a boat instead of their Bunty. In any case, unlike Kane's sled which provided the meaning for an otherwise rich but meaningless life, the boat does little to bring meaning to life in Pisquontuit.

Vonnegut returns to the burlesque of a tragic hero when he tells us of Fire Chief Charley: "Like all real heroes, Charley had a fatal flaw. He refused to believe that he had gonorrhea, whereas the truth was that he did" (p. 162). This might even be seen as a comic allusion to a particular tragedy--Ibsen's Ghosts. At any rate, the tragic hero has diminished to a level that even Arthur Miller never dreamed of.⁶

The final parody, of course, occurs in the final sentence of the novel as Eliot raises his tennis racket like a magic wand and gives his message to the multitude: "And tell them to be fruitful and multiply." This Biblical parody is a fitting end to the "begetting" of children discussed earlier. It also fulfills the demands for a comic ending by providing the hope for regeneration, love, and the distribution of blessings.

As in earlier novels, Vonnegut continues to destroy the reader's logical expectations for an orderly world by using radical juxtaposition of incongruities. "I've gone sixteen hours without a drink!" Eliot tells Sylvia; "I don't miss the poison at all! Cheers!" (p. 33). Later, "Eliot took a drink of Southern Comfort, was uncomforted" (p. 92). This kind of instant reversal is used throughout Rosewater, and it should also be noted that Vonnegut removes the conjunction that would normally occur in the sentence, thus making the incongruous items clash even more effectively.

The technique of instant reversal is used extensively in this novel. Eliot's grandfather, Samuel, denied the poor workers a living wage and then gave paintings to museums "for the spiritual elevation of the poor. The museums were closed on Sundays" (p. 13). Since Sunday is the workers' only day off the chance of their benefiting from the

museum is very slim. And anyway, their working all the time would make it all but impossible to acquire the artistic taste to appreciate great art. "Ironically, one of the studies Eliot paid for had to do with alcoholism in San Diego. When the report was submitted, Eliot was too drunk to read it" (p. 17). And after he accidentally killed three firemen during World War II, "Eliot seemed reasonably well for about ten minutes after that. And then he calmly lay down in front of a moving truck" (p. 64).

Sylvia's mental state frequently reflects the instant reversal pattern, too. Her psychiatrist writes at one point: "She is certainly happy. Prognosis: Another breakdown by and by" (p. 45). The psychiatrist also proves prophetic. The effect of the instant reversal is heightened by the illogical's becoming reality: "Many men proposed, but she was too happy to think either of marriage or divorce. And then she fell to pieces again in July of 1964" (p. 45). Extreme happiness does not usually lead to a nervous breakdown.

Caroline Rosewater plays an integral part in two of the instant reversals. Fred, trying to sell life insurance to two workmen, says, "I wouldn't be anything without my bride, and I know it." This leads us to believe the description of "his bride" which follows will picture a domestic, devoted wife. Instead we read, "Caroline was the mother of an unattractive, fat little boy, poor little Franklin Rosewater. Caroline had taken lately to drinking lunch with a rich Lesbian named Amanita Buntline" (p. 98). In fact, about all we see Caroline do for Fred is ask him for money and move the tables around so that he can bark his shins on them again. Vonnegut also sets up an instant reversal when Caroline is having lunch with Amanita; Caroline says, "Harry

Pena /who is busy slaughtering fish/ is so much like God." Bunny Weeks replies, "If that's God out there, I hate to tell you, but God is bankrupt" (p. 130).

Aside from the instant reversals, there are other radical juxtapositions in the novel. Senator Rosewater's repulsion at the sight of bodily hair is well documented in the novel; in fact, "pubic hair was to him the most unmentionable, unthinkable of all materials" (p. 158). He thought that the Rosewater Law which he authored was a masterpiece because it actually defined obscenity. "Obscenity, it said, is any picture or phonograph record or any written matter calling attention to reproductive organs, bodily discharges, or bodily hair." It is the last item that most bothers the Senator, for as he says later, "The difference between pornography and art is bodily hair!" (pp. 71-72).

After this bit of information, we read:

Now Eliot came out of the lavatory, all naked and hairy . . .
/and/ began to play unconsciously with his pubic hair. . .
 Eliot had now found a hair that was a lulu. He kept extending and extending it until it was revealed as being one foot long. He looked down at it, then glanced at his father, incredulously proud of owning such a thing.
 The Senator was livid (pp. 158-59).

At times the intrusion of an unexpected response accomplishes the blow to our logical expectations, as when Eliot fails to recognize his Dad's voice and treats him like one of the usual derelicts who normally call him. But the Senator's response is a surprise; Eliot answers the phone in his usual manner: "This is the Rosewater Foundation. How can we help you?" The quick response is: "You might start by getting a haircut and a new suit." Eliot continues to fail to recognize him until the Senator blurts out, "It's your God-damned Dad!" (pp. 84-85).

Eliot's sexual responses are usually total surprises. When he reads the truths written by the poet that he had financed, his response surprises him. Eliot begins to read the first chapter: "'I twisted her arm until she opened her legs, and she gave a little scream, half joy, half pain (how do you figure a woman?), as I rammed the old avenger home.' Eliot found him possessed of an erection. 'Oh, for heaven's sakes,' he said to his procreative organ, 'how irrelevant can you be?'" (p. 70). A few pages later his response is even more of a surprise: "He read now the account executive's fiancée's seduction of her father's chauffeur. Suggestively, she bit off the breast-pocket buttons of his uniform jacket. Eliot Rosewater fell fast asleep" (p. 74).

Mushari's response is just as unexpected when he learns that Eliot is not the pervert he hoped for, that in fact Eliot is devoting his sexual energies to Utopia. "Frustration made Norman Mushari sneeze" (p. 73). Vonnegut also uses the young lawyer in his technique of equating diverse elements, thereby leveling them. Vonnegut writes, "Little Norman Mushari was only twelve in those troubled days, was assembling plastic model airplanes, masturbating, and papering his room with pictures of Senator Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn" (pp. 23-24).

Vonnegut uses the Civil War to yield yet another radical juxtaposition. When war broke out, "George raised a rifle company, marched away at its head. Noah hired a village idiot to fight in his place. . . . Abraham Lincoln declared that no amount of money was too much to pay for the restoration of the Union, so Noah priced his merchandise in scale with the national tragedy" (p. 11).

Fred Rosewater's every action reflects incongruity. He keeps the manuscript history of his ancestry next to the rat poison. He thinks of suicide, but remembers that he has to take out the garbage. Later he does try to hang himself, and Norman Mushari walks in. "Fred moved quickly, barely escaped being caught in the embarrassing act of destroying himself" (p. 146). The only peace he knows occurs when he can recline on his boat, "put one hand on his genitals, feel at one with God" (p. 132). The real world of Harry Pena clashes with the sham world of Fred; when Fred raves over a picture of a pretty girl in a bikini, Harry tells him that he is a fool since it isn't a girl but a picture. "It's done with ink on a piece of paper. That girl isn't lying there on the counter. She's thousands of miles away, doesn't even know we're alive. If this was a real girl, all I'd have to do for a living would be to stay home and cut out pictures of big fish" (p. 109).

Fred is also instrumental in a false climax, another of Vonnegut's techniques which defies logic. Fred's build-up to have his wife read about his ancestors rises to a climax only to come toppling to a ridiculous, meaningless nothing:

"All right," said Fred, "now let's read this story of the Rhode Island Rosewaters together, and try to pull our marriage together with a little mutual pride and faith."
 . . . Fred now gripped the corner of that page between his thumb and forefinger, and dramatically peeled it from wonders lying below.

The manuscript was hollow. Termites had eaten the heart out of the history (p. 145).

Such a build-up to nothingness is more of a burlesque of novelistic technique than a continuation of traditional technique. Vonnegut achieves a similar effect when Eliot activates the loudest fire alarm in the Western Hemisphere:

The awful shout of the horn hurled the Senator against a wall, curled him up with his hands over his ears. A dog in New Ambrosia, seven miles away, ran in circles, bit his tail. A stranger in the Saw City Kandy Kitchen threw coffee all over himself and the proprietor. In Bella's Beauty Nook in the basement of the Court House, three-hundred-pound Bella had a mild heart attack. . . .

There was no fire. It was simply high noon in Rosewater (p. 153).

Besides anti-climaxes such as these, there are some rather obvious incongruous juxtapositions such as Heaven and graffiti; written on Heaven's walls and the Pearly Gates are such phrases as: "Welcome to the Bulgarian World's Fair," "You ain't a man till you've had black meat," and "Where can I get a good lay around here?" The last question is even answered: "Try 'Lay of the Last Minstrel,' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson." And Eliot adds a verse:

Those who write on Heaven's walls
Should mold their shit in little balls.
And those who read these lines of wit
Should eat these little balls of shit (pp. 79-80).

Eliot's Christening speech to Mary Moody's twins is another example: "God damn it, you've got to be kind" (p. 93). Sometimes Vonnegut merely yokes together a string of adjectives which are unharmonious, such as when he tells us "The tone of the meeting was frank, sentimental, forgiving, sometimes hilarious, and fundamentally tragic always. There was brandy" (p. 46). The adjectives themselves clash badly enough, but the tagged on phrase at the end seems totally out of place. The pictures in Eliot's office do not seem to fit together either. "Eliot found that certain pictures cheered people up, particularly pictures of baby animals. His visitors also enjoyed pictures of spectacular accidents. Astronauts bored them. They liked pictures of Elizabeth Taylor because they hated her so much, felt superior to her" (p. 51).

The unexpected can occur quickly as when we learn of Sylvia's actions after she helps Eliot in Rosewater county: "Five years later, Sylvia suffered a nervous collapse, burned the firehouse down . . . Avondale laughed" (p. 41). Or when the half-wit salesgirl responds to a question with "Search me," Vonnegut writes, "It was an unappetizing invitation" (p. 105). The techniques can also develop more slowly, as when Eliot describes an eighteen-year-old boy in Rosewater: "He often carries birth-control devices in his pocket, which many people find alarming and disgusting. The same people find it alarming and disgusting that the boy's father did not use birth-control devices" (p. 35). Or sometimes there is a slow build-up with a quick reversal, as when Fred is reading about his family tree: "James was also a poet. So every Rosewater is in fact a Graham, and has the blood of Scotch nobility in him. James was hanged in 1650" (p. 142).

Once again in this Vonnegut novel the figurative language is so farfetched and bizarre that it reinforces the absurdity as well as providing humor. It may also be a burlesque of traditional description and use of imagery. Bunny Weeks is described as having "eyes that were standard equipment for rich American fairies--junk jewelry eyes, synthetic star sapphires with twinkling Christmas tree lights behind them" (pp. 124-25). Such description does little to characterize Bunny Weeks, but it does function to enhance the absurdity and humor of the novel. Perhaps a more functional characterization is the self-description of Diana Moon Glampers, the "sixty-eight-year-old virgin who, by almost anybody's standards, was too dumb to live." Miss Glampers describes herself as having a potato nose, hair like steel wool, and a voice like a bullfrog. Thermond McAllister is called "a sweet

old poop" (p. 9), Amanita Buntline at one point looks "like a witch with the rabies," and Norman Mushari has "an enormous ass, which was luminous when bare" (p. 9). The later, coming as it does at the culmination of a barrage of documentary evidence, mocks both periodic construction and the documentary form.

The Rosewater fortune was accumulated "by a humorless, constipated Christian farm boy turned speculator and briber during and after the Civil War" (p. 11), and the hero and heroine of an age and at least two major dramas are dismissed by Senator Rosewater as "those two sex maniacs, Antony and Cleopatra" (p. 25). The latter functions in another description of a fourteen-year-old in Rosewater--"a five-and-ten-cent-store Cleopatra, a four-letter word" (p. 35).

Some of Vonnegut's similes are also outlandish. "Every Avondale woman left the mansion stiffly, as though, as Eliot observed gleefully, she had a pickle up her ass" (p. 40). Eliot tells Sylvia that "carp as big as atomic submarines" are in "an open sewer called the Ohio" (p. 34). And Senator Rosewater says of lawyers' explanations, "From them it always sounds like the 1812 Overture played on a kazoo" (p. 186).

Descriptions of people in the novel are ridiculous as when we first encounter Fred Rosewater: "He was a portly man, aslop with coffee, gravid with Danish pastry. . . . He climbed aboard a stool, and his great behind made the cushion seem no larger than a marshmallow" (p. 96). Eliot is described at one point as being "swaddled in the elephant wrinkles of war-surplus long underwear" (p. 49), and his father says, "I've seen healthier complexions on rhubarb pies!" The Senator goes on to show not only what he thinks of Eliot, but also the

people he helps: "If Eliot's booze were shut off, his compassion for the maggots in the slime on the bottom of the human garbage pail would vanish" (p. 46). Describing Norman Mushari, Vonnegut writes, "His eyes were moist and soft and brown, compelling him to see the pages as he saw the world, as though through a quart of olive oil" (pp. 41-42).

Vonnegut's comic absurd imagery is not confined to people, but also describes animals and inanimate objects. In fact, this linking of inanimate objects with human characteristics contributes to the absurdity. At one point in the novel, "Thunder . . . caused a brindle dog to come scrambling out of the firehouse with psychosomatic rabies" (p. 54). Caroline Rosewater's Electrolux vacuum cleaner provides Vonnegut an occasion to use some of the best imagery for an inanimate object; it is described as looking "like a pet anteater with a penchant for sleeping in doorways or on the staircase, or on the hearth" (p. 114). Delbert Peach, the town drunk, is trying to reverse the pattern with "his efforts to stop being a human being and become a dog" (p. 147). Eliot trades a fireman his clothes for "a 1939 double-breasted blue chalk-stripe, with shoulders like Gibraltar, lapels like the wings of the Archangel Gabriel" (p. 23). The architecture of Rosewater is described at one point, including "the old Rosewater Opera House, a terrifyingly combustible frame wedding cake which had been converted to a firehouse. All else was shithouses, shacks, alcoholism, ignorance, idiocy and perversion" (p. 39). Even the bag that Norman Mushari carries is "a fat, cross-gartered, slack-jawed briefcase" (p. 145).

Vonnegut uses Lila Buntline's interest in pornography to provide two examples of farfetched language. Unlike Fred Rosewater, when she

is caught reading pornography, she continues unperturbed, "as though The Tropic of Cancer were Heidi." Later, her father is dumbfounded by the picture he finds in Lila's room. "It shows two fat, simpering whores, one of whom was attempting to have impossible sexual congress with a dignified, decent, unsmiling Shetland pony" (p. 140). The language seems grossly inappropriate for the subject matter, especially the adjectives describing the Shetland pony, which clash with those describing the two whores.

Some of Vonnegut's comparisons are as simple as when he describes "land as dark and rich as chocolate cake" (p. 11). And some are considerably more involved, as when he describes what happens when men get 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" (p. 13).

Vonnegut's invented terms are usually both humorous and absurd. Sylvia's psychiatrist names her disease "Samaritrophia," which he said meant "hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself" (p. 41). The lengthy description of the disease which follows is totally ridiculous and unscientific, but no more absurd than the actions which bring it about. Vonnegut uses Harry Pena and his sons to contribute another bit of ridiculous language. Realizing that they have become a sideshow for the restaurant owned by Bunny Weeks, and that his customers take great delight in watching them through the picture window, they make an adequate response: "Sometimes they would respond to their involuntary involvement with the restaurant by urinating off the boat. They called this ' . . . making cream of

leek soup for Bunny Weeks'" (p. 123).

Despite the comparative conventionality of the plot (no trips to Mars, etc.), Rosewater is just as absurd as Vonnegut's other novels. It is also humorous. The only change is the absence of science-fiction trappings to convey the absurdity, and these are present too in Kilgore Trout's stories. In both content and form, Vonnegut destroys predictability based on logical cause-and-effect relationships. Instead we find the illogical, totally unpredictable, often bizarre world of the absurd in which the past tells us absolutely nothing about the present or the future. Like Fred Rosewater, we never know where the tables will be next, and to avoid crying about his barked shins we must laugh at his clown-like attempts to avoid pain through logical predictions--predictions that we know are invalid precisely because they are founded on a belief in logic that is, itself, invalid.

FOOTNOTES

¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), p. 40. Subsequent quotations from this edition will be noted parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

²Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice, p. 20.

³Vonnegut's use of non-narrative material is more fully treated in Goldsmith, pp. 35 ff.

⁴"A peeled banana thrust through a pineapple ring, set in a nest of chilled, creamed tuna and curly coconut shreds." (p. 123)

⁵"It was pronounced 'Pawn-it' by those who loved it, and 'Piss-on-it' by those who didn't."

⁶Cf. "Tragedy and the Common Man," in which Miller argues that the common man is capable of becoming a tragic hero, and that attention must be paid to the common man.

CHAPTER VIII

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

According to both Vonnegut and his critics Slaughterhouse-Five is the novel he has been trying to write, indeed has tried five times before to write ever since World War II. The shadow of Dresden falls over all of Vonnegut's previous novels; as he states in the first chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five, "When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, . . . but not many words about Dresden came from my mind then--not enough of them to make a book, anyway."¹ It is not difficult, however, to trace his attempts to purge himself of the Dresden experience in his earlier novels. As Jerome Klinkowitz writes in The Vonnegut Statement:

Even a cursory examination of the six novels, from Player Piano through Slaughterhouse-Five, reveals his preoccupation with the Dresden firebombing. Vonnegut, obviously haunted by this abrupt and violent initiation into contemporary reality, attempted throughout his career as a novelist to arrest this experience artistically, and he finally succeeded in Slaughterhouse-Five. . . . The novels from 1952 to 1969 . . . dramatize the growth of Vonnegut's powerful and tormented imagination, his maturing grasp of the Dresden experience, and his technical innovations necessary for its artistic manifestation. . . . The matter of Dresden furnished the world picture for Player Piano, the psychological barrier for The Sirens of Titan, the backdrop for Mother Night, the informing principle for Cat's Cradle, the climax for God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, and finally the essence for Slaughterhouse-Five.²

It is not easy to outline the plot of Slaughterhouse-Five since it is not linear or chronological in development. The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, has become unstuck in time. He is constantly bouncing between his experiences in Germany during World War II, his post war years as a successful optometrist in Ilium, New York, and his boyhood. Furthermore, he is abducted by Tralfamadorians and imprisoned with a movie star sex queen in a zoo on their planet. Episodes from these four phases of Billy's life are presented in short flash-backs and flash-forwards. Billy has no control over where or when he will be next and is in a constant state of stage fright because he is thrust into new situations totally unprepared. He is captured in the Battle of the Bulge before he can even be issued boots and weapons. As a prisoner of war he is sent to Dresden on a work detail where he witnesses and survives the fire bombing which destroys the city.

After the war Billy marries the ugly and obese daughter of the very prosperous owner of the Ilium School of Optometry, is set up in business by his father-in-law, is himself a success, and is father of two children--a domineering daughter and a son who turns out to be a Green Beret. As he predicts, since he can see into the future, he is in a plane crash in which everyone but him and the co-pilot is killed. His hysterical wife wrecks her Cadillac on the way to visit him in the hospital and dies of carbon monoxide poisoning. Billy learns from his Tralfamadorian captors that time is not linear and that no one really dies. He attempts to enlighten his fellow men by getting on radio and television talk programs, but everyone thinks he is insane. Billy is killed, as he predicted, by a deranged sniper who holds a grudge from

the war thirty-one years ago. Billy does not stay dead, but time-trips back to life in World War II. And so on.

Slaughterhouse-Five is in some ways the least traditional, least linear of all Vonnegut's novels. Chronological time plays almost no part in the novel. Vonnegut states on the title page that it "is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore." He describes such tales in the novel as being laid out "in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars. Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams." His Tralfamadorian captor explains the structure of the tales for him:

There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message--describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time (p. 76).

Vonnegut uses Tralfamadorian time as a structuring principle in Slaughterhouse-Five in much the same way that Heller uses déjà vu in Catch-22.³ But the destruction of chronological time and linearity also serves to convey absurdity. Like the Dada movement in art four decades earlier, Vonnegut conveys "a sense of the merry-go-round of things, . . . /the/ conviction that life does not consist of logical and sequential events but a bewildering and disordered simultaneity."⁴ Furthermore, the Tralfamadorian concept of time provides the distance necessary for Vonnegut finally to deal directly with the Dresden fire bombing. It is this sense of time that allows Vonnegut to resign himself to all the horrors inherent in life and accept them with a phrase

like "So it goes." This semi-comic phrase dissociates both Vonnegut and the reader, gives us the aesthetic (Tralfamadorian) distance to respond with laughter rather than tears to the absurd confrontations with death. According to Tralfamadorians:

when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.

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" (p. 23).

According to Willis McNelly, "the phrase So it goes becomes incantatory; these are the magic words that exorcise, enchant, stoicise. . . . The words become a fatalistic chant, a dogmatic utterance, to permit Vonnegut himself to endure. . . . Vonnegut is suggesting that cyclic time or the eternal present will enable himself and mankind to accept the unacceptable."⁵

Some distancing device was necessary for this book since Vonnegut was totally incapable of handling the Dresden story in the realistic fictional mode. As noted earlier, in the first chapter he laments how difficult it was to find words to describe it and how useless the Dresden part of his memory was. He even gives an elaborate burlesque of logical, organized outlines for realistic novels, complete with colored crayons and wall paper:

As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations,

I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper.

I used my daughter's crayons, a different color for each main character. One end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle. And the blue line met the red line and then the yellow line, and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. The destruction of Dresden was represented by a vertical band of orange cross-hatching, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side (pp. 4-5).

This description is not only a plot outline but another cat's cradle.

Vonnegut gives other examples of the futility of realism in fiction.

"The ninth chapter, for example, recounts a television discussion of the death of the novel . . . in which critics make thinly veiled allusions to Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner as a rewrite of Uncle Tom's Cabin, and to Mailer's work as a script for his life, and speak of the novel's 'function' in pornography [¹To describe blow-jobs artistically²], social training [¹To teach wives of junior executives what to buy next and how to act in a French restaurant³], and architecture [¹To provide touches of color in rooms with all-white walls.⁴"]⁶ Even when Billy and Eliot Rosewater were using literature to reinvent themselves, "science fiction was a big help." And Eliot tells Billy that realism, represented by The Brothers Karamazov, "isn't enough any more" (p. 87). Furthermore, Vonnegut objectively discusses the traditional techniques of his trade in the first chapter as he says to Bernard V. O'Hare, "I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby. . . . 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 shot by a firing squad" (p. 4). Vonnegut also discusses Edgar Derby's becoming a character, even after he laments that there are almost no characters, as such, in the novel.

John Somer compares the form of Slaughterhouse-Five to that of Tristram Shandy, noting that "Tristram's story follows no logical pattern, but jumps about at the mercy of an erratic memory. . . . It protests against the scientific assumption that the intellect is man's principal faculty and that his experiences of life are orderly and logical."⁷ But even in Sterne's novel, there is a psychological order, as is evident in Somer's statement. In Slaughterhouse-Five time switches abruptly between different periods in Billy Pilgrim's life with no transition whatever. There is not even a word or thought to motivate the time shifts. Somer is more perceptive later as he notes that "Billy's erratic movements through time and Slaughterhouse-Five are not instigated by his mental turbulence, but are instigated by an 'accident' in the physical world. . . . The structure of this novel--its erratic sequence of events--is not merely a symbol of Billy's inner state, but an objective fact."⁸

One must accept Billy's time-travels as objective fact, and not mistakenly assume that Vonnegut leaves their reality ambiguous. Leslie Fiedler states that Vonnegut "leaves suspended, not quite asked, much less answered, the question of whether he travels there through Outer Space or Inner, via madness or flying saucer."⁹ But despite the third paragraph of Billy's story which might reinforce Fiedler's view by undercutting the story with the phrase, "He says," Vonnegut carefully distinguishes between the hallucinations and the time-travel in the novel. For example, when Billy is unconscious for two days following

his plane crash, Vonnegut writes, "he dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time-travel" (p. 135). And when Billy is hallucinating that "he was wearing dry, warm, white sweatsocks, and he was skating on a ballroom floor," Vonnegut tells us, "This wasn't time-travel. It had never happened, never would happen. It was the craziness of a dying young man with his shoes full of snow" (p. 42). Similarly Billy's dreams about turning to steam painlessly (p. 42) and turning into a giraffe (pp. 85-86) are very different from his time-travels. As Somer notes, "Clearly Vonnegut denies us the right to translate Billy's bizarre experiences into terms that are rationally acceptable to us. . . . We must accept Billy's freedom in time as a fact within the fictional world of Slaughterhouse-Five, no matter how much it strains our willing suspension of disbelief."¹⁰

Vonnegut's frame is really more than a frame in this novel, as is suggested by his choosing not to call it Prologue and Epilogue, but rather Chapter One and Chapter Ten. Vonnegut also interjects himself into the novel at various points in both obvious and subtle ways. At one point, when describing an American who is throwing up his entire insides near Billy, Vonnegut states, "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (p. 109). And again when Billy first arrives in Dresden and a soldier behind him exclaims, "Oz," Vonnegut again tells us, "That was I. That was me" (p. 129). At other times Vonnegut's presence must be sensed, as when he tells of the robot with bad breath or when the drunk calls up Billy Pilgrim late at night and "Billy could almost smell his breath--mustard gas and roses" (p. 63). And later when the stink of decaying bodies is "like roses and mustard gas" (p. 185), we are reminded of Vonnegut's description of his own

drunken breath in the first chapter, and the second reference also reminds us of his habit of getting drunk and calling people up late at night. Vonnegut also writes at one point in the novel, "It would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim--and for me, too" (p. 105). These occurrences do little to move the story along, but they do keep Vonnegut as well as Billy present in our minds. The novel derives its strength, I think, from the constant tension between Vonnegut's involved compassion and horror and Billy's detached acceptance and resignation.

Vonnegut also, in eighteenth or nineteenth century style reminiscent of Fielding or Melville, stops to chat with the reader sometimes, as when he explains the epigraph of the book to us (p. 170) or when he discusses the use of the word, "Motherfucker" (p. 29). Finally, in the last chapter, Vonnegut's world and Billy Pilgrim's mesh.

Vonnegut's style is similar to Hemingway's and that of Camus in The Stranger in that "it confers an equality on everything, just as in an absurd world everything is of equal value. So the flatness of the style refuses to emphasize anything more or less than anything else."¹¹ It is not merely sentence structure that Vonnegut uses to convey this theory, but the structure of the novel itself. He equates the beginning and end of the novel by telling both before the story of Billy Pilgrim begins. Vonnegut writes in the first chapter:

It begins like this:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

It ends like this:

Poo-tee-weet? (p. 19).

Although Vonnegut assured us earlier that he is a trafficker in climaxes, thrills, characterization, wonderful dialogue, suspense, and confrontation, this novel is almost totally without any of them.

Nothing builds; so there cannot be a climax. Although Billy thinks there are some "stingingly exciting" things to see, such as "dragon's teeth, killing machines, corpses" (p. 56), etc., he is not so much thrilled as underwhelmed throughout the novel. Vonnegut tells us point-blank that "there are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations," and the dialogue is more banal and meaningless than wonderful. Even the confrontations between American soldiers and their German captors is underplayed, as is Billy's confrontation with his assassin. As for conversation, the following excerpt from a conversation between Billy and his wife, Valencia, is not atypical:

"Thank you."
 "You're welcome."
 "It was nice."
 "I'm glad."
 Then she began to cry.
 "What's the matter?"
 "I'm so happy."
 "Good."
 "I never thought anybody would marry me."
 "Um," said Billy Pilgrim (p. 103).

There are equally unexciting conversations between Billy and his mother, Billy's mother and Eliot Rosewater, and so on.

In addition, Vonnegut deliberately undercuts any possibilities for suspense by telling us what is going to happen next, and by relaying the fate of any character he introduces. When Billy is a prisoner of war, Vonnegut lets us know that the war will soon be over. About Billy, Vonnegut writes, "In case Billy died, which he didn't" (p. 79), and about a newly introduced character, "Billy would meet him by and by" (p. 96). Every mention of Edgar Derby is followed by a statement concerning his eventual fate. For example, "Derby's son would survive the war. Derby wouldn't. That good body of his would be filled with

holes by a firing squad in Dresden in sixty-eight days" (p. 72). Of Howard W. Campbell, we learn that "he would later hang himself while awaiting trial as a war criminal" (p. 111). And there is no suspense about Billy's marriage or his offspring: "He had already seen a lot of their marriage, thanks to time-travel, knew that it was going to be at least bearable all the way" (p. 104). We know of his son's fate even before he is born: "He /Billy/ had just emptied his seminal vesicles into Valencia, had contributed his share of the Green Beret" (p. 102). This lack of suspense helps to level everything and convey the absurdity of a world in which everything is of equal value.

Radical juxtaposition also helps to convey the chaos of the absurd world surrounding Billy Pilgrim. Vonnegut juxtaposes Billy's pathetic condition with a law of physics when Billy is a prisoner of war: "Billy coughed when the door was opened, and when he coughed he shit thin gruel. This was in accordance with the Third Law of Motion according to Sir Isaac Newton. This law tells us that for every action there is a reaction which is equal and opposite in direction." As if the yoking together of these two incongruities were not enough, Vonnegut follows the statement of the law with the following: "This can be very useful in rocketry" (p. 69). Kilgore Trout's books are full of radical juxtapositions; in one, "the flying saucer creatures who capture Trout's hero ask him about Darwin. They also ask him about golf" (p. 182). In another, Christ's condition after crucifixion is juxtaposed with his height: "The son of God was dead as a doornail. . . . Jesus was five feet and three and a half inches long" (p. 176). This kind of juxtaposition also levels the two things juxtaposed, thus making them

equal, and the substitution of "long" for "tall" in the last one humorously emphasizes that Christ was indeed dead.

There are many other juxtaposed incongruities in the novel. When Billy was captured by the Germans, "the most dangerous thing they found on his person was a two-inch pencil stub" (p. 46). When the naked American soldiers were being deloused, "their penises were shriveled and their balls were retracted." This behavior is logical enough, but Vonnegut follows it with a needless bit of information: "Reproduction was not the main business of the evening" (p. 73). The understated and unnecessary sentence tagged on at the end clashes with the preceding sentence and with our knowledge that they are prisoners of war. When they arrive at the prison camp, they find the English prisoners "dressed half for battle, half for croquet" (p. 82). When Billy is in the hospital, Valencia tells Rosewater about the diamond Billy got during the war. "'That's the attractive thing about war,' said Rosewater. 'Absolutely everybody gets a little something'" (p. 96). The irony here is obvious, too.

Vonnegut uses reversals which function on a deeper level to convey absurdity by destroying logical expectations. For example, Billy's mother "had caught pneumonia, and wasn't expected to live. She did live, though, for years after that" (p. 38). A similar example occurs when Billy is on the prison train. "On the eighth day, the forty-year-old hobo said to Billy, 'This ain't bad. I can be comfortable anywhere,' On the ninth day, the hobo died. So it goes. His last words were, 'You think this is bad? This ain't bad'" (p. 68). Such reversals remind the reader of the absurdity around Billy by showing a random, rather than a logical cause-and-effect series of events.

Actually, it is more illogical than random since there is a constant reversal of expectations. There is also a more extended example of the reversal of expectations when Billy was scared at the Lion's Club convention because he had to speak and knew that he had neither a good speaking voice nor anything to say. "Billy opened his mouth and out came a deep, resonant tone. His voice was a gorgeous instrument. It told jokes which brought down the house. It grew serious, told jokes again, and ended on a note of humility" (p. 43).

At some points in the novel there is an incongruity in Billy's actions; he responds inappropriately. He grins when he is mock-captured by the German guards, and when the German surgeon is chastising him in the street, Billy responds by holding up a diamond and a partial denture and smiling (p. 132). Vonnegut's descriptions of characters and objects are also incongruous; at Billy's party, Kilgore Trout is talking to Maggie White, "a dull person, but a sensational invitation to make babies" (p. 147). The unexpected can also be seen in Vonnegut's description of "a soft drink bottle on the windowsill. Its label boasted that it contained no nourishment whatever" (p. 63).

One of the juxtapositions equates food and excrement in a way reminiscent of the changing of the bottles for the soldier in white in Catch-22. Billy and his fellow prisoners on a German train are locked in a box car and can only get articles in and out through a ventilator. "In went water and loaves of blackbread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and piss and language" (p. 63). There is an added incongruity and leveling effect in the final phrase with the juxtaposition of language and excrement.

The confusion of fiction and reality, and the interchangeability of the two, lead to reader disorientation, a response which reflects the absurdity presented in the novel. There is thus confusion in the very structure of Slaughterhouse-Five, since Vonnegut encloses the fiction of Billy Pilgrim's experiences inside an autobiographical frame. But the structure cannot be dismissed that easily either, for Vonnegut's world is constantly intruding upon Pilgrim's.

There are numerous episodes in the novel where fiction and reality seem to clash. Billy reads a book called The Big Board, "about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extraterrestrials. They were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212." So fiction has become reality for Billy Pilgrim; substitute Tralfamadore for the planet's name and the plot of the novel is the same as that of Billy and Montana Wildhack. Since Billy remembers reading the novel long ago, there is also the possibility that the Tralfamadore episodes are all in Billy's head, growing from the seed planted there by Trout's novel and bursting into full bloom when Billy suffers a concussion in the plane crash. In Trout's novel, the captives have a telephone and a ticker tape and a million dollars to invest in the stock market. They get involved in the market; it causes them to "jump up and down and cheer, or gloat, or sulk, or tear their hair, to be scared shitless or to feel as contented as babies in their mothers' arms" (p. 174). What they don't know is that "the telephone and the ticker tape were all fakes, of course. They were simply stimulants to make the Earthlings perform vividly for the crowds at the zoo." In this situation, Vonnegut once again presents a world in which the only meaning to life turns out to be false. "And religion got mixed up in it,

too. The news ticker reminded them that the President of the United States had declared National Prayer Week, and that everybody should pray. The Earthlings had had a bad week on the market before that. They had lost a small fortune in olive oil futures. So they gave praying a whirl. It worked. Olive oil went up" (p. 174). In addition to negating any meaning in the couple's life, Vonnegut also works in a burlesque of religion, prayer, and the intervention of God in man's affairs. Furthermore, Vonnegut shows life to be an elaborate charade staged for the amusement of a group of controllers. We have seen this idea before in each of Vonnegut's novels, and we will encounter it again in Breakfast of Champions. Edgar Rice Burroughs Bagstrom and his family are performing in a controlled environment for the ambassador and the Shah of Bratapuhr in Player Piano. Earthlings perform for Rumfoord and ultimately for Tralfamadorians in The Sirens of Titan, and Mud as Man seems to be performing for God in Cat's Cradle. All of the misfits are performing for Eliot in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, and we have seen how Howard W. Campbell is playing a part both in his own play and in the one written by others. Perhaps little Newt had the only meaningful motivation for our actions on earth when he was discussing the ants in the jar; "They won't fight unless you keep shaking the jar" (Cat's Cradle, p. 19).

Kilgore Trout plays a joke on the people at Billy's party by telling them that everything he has written is true, that it had happened. "If I wrote something that hadn't really happened, and I tried to sell it, I could go to jail. That's fraud." Since his audience falls for the joke, Trout continues in the same vein by poking fun at traditional religious belief; when Maggie White says that she had better watch what

she says, Trout replies: "That's right. And I'm not the only one who's listening. God is listening, too. And on Judgment Day he's going to tell you all the things you said and did. If it turns out they're bad things instead of good things, that's too bad for you, because you'll burn forever and ever. The burning never stops hurting"

(p. 147). What is false for Kilgore Trout is true for Maggie White: "Poor Maggie turned gray. She believed that, too, and was petrified." As for Trout's opinion of his frightening story, he "laughed uproariously. A salmon egg flew out of his mouth and landed in Maggie's cleavage" (p. 148).

The fact that life and death can be arbitrarily assigned in this novel adds to the absurdity. If he is sure of nothing else, one should be aware of whether or not he is alive or dead; it is the basic act of self-verification. In Slaughterhouse-Five, however, as in 1984, Kafka, and Catch-22, things do not define themselves; rather they are defined by others. Thus one's life (and his death) is not his own but rather what someone else says it will be. During Billy Pilgrim's basic training, there are umpires everywhere to tell who was winning and losing the theoretical battle. "The umpire had comical news. The congregation had been theoretically spotted from the air by a theoretical enemy. They were all theoretically dead now. The theoretical corpses laughed and ate a hearty noontime meal" (p. 27). Billy is later "struck by what a Tralfamadorian adventure with death that had been, to be dead and to eat at the same time" (p. 27). One is reminded of the absurd world of Catch-22 where Doc Daneeka is officially alive though blown to bits. This kind of absurdity is echoed later when Billy and the other prisoners "came to a shed where a corporal with

only one arm and one eye wrote the name and serial number of each prisoner in a big, red ledger. Everybody was legally alive now. Before they got their names and numbers in that book, they were missing in action and probably dead" (p. 78).

All of Billy's time behind enemy lines is presented as surreal, dreamlike, nightmarish. Billy sleepwalks through it with no realization of the danger or horror around him. Through Billy's apathy, Vonnegut equates or levels everything--even life and death. Wandering behind enemy lines, "Billy wouldn't do anything to save himself. Billy wanted to quit. He was cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent. He could scarcely distinguish between sleep and wakefulness now, on the third day, found no important differences, either, between walking and standing still" (p. 29). He often escapes reality by dreaming, as when he dreams that he is a giraffe or when he thinks he is turning to steam painlessly and floating among the treetops. Even Roland Weary, the force that always drags Billy back to reality, is living his own fiction. Inside all his clothes, Weary "was so snug in there that he was able to pretend that he was safe at home, having survived the war, and that he was telling his parents and his sister a true war story--whereas the true war story was still going on" (p. 36). This is similar to, but still different from Billy's time-tripping. Ironically, Weary never gets home to live his fiction after the war, but dies in a German boxcar. He tries to live another fiction in Germany, pretending that he is one of The Three Musketeers, but the two other musketeers--two army scouts--want no part of the fiction or Weary and abandon him and Billy Pilgrim.

There is also a confusion in the novel of art and pornography: Andre Le Fevre pleads that his picture of the girl and the shetland pony is not pornographic, but art--that he is trying to make Greek mythology come alive again. He is sentenced to prison for six months and dies there of pneumonia. The judges had obviously never read about Centaurs or Leda and the Swan.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways of conveying absurdity is by the destruction or distortion of time, by showing the arbitrary nature of one of our concepts considered most logical. Vonnegut accomplishes this somewhat by his non-chronological plot, but there are specific instances of time distortion in the novel, too. When Vonnegut became a "non-person in the Boston fog" and was sent to a motel with other non-persons to spend a non-night, he complains about time:

The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind, too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again.

There was nothing I could do about it. As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said--and calendars (p. 18).

Vonnegut's complaint is echoed in Billy Pilgrim's ride on the prison train; he shows the arbitrary nature of time and at the same time superimposes his world on that of Billy Pilgrim. According to Billy, "the car never seemed to go any faster than that. It was a long time between clicks, between joints in the track. There would be a click, and then a year would go by, and then there would be another click" (p. 67). Even Montana Wildhack comments on the arbitrary nature of time: "'They're playing with the clocks again,' said Montana, rising,

preparing to put the baby into its crib. She meant that their keepers were making the electric clocks in the dome go fast, then slow, then fast again, and watching the little Earthling family through peepholes" (p. 179). In little Newt's terms the Tralfamadorians are shaking the jar.

Vonnegut's passages on time are very similar to, indeed possibly influenced by, a passage in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest in which Kesey uses the perception of his deranged narrator, Bromden, to establish the artibrariness and relative nature of time. A similar distortion can also be found in Catch-22 in which Dunbar is spending his time with people he can't stand, doing things he hates because this makes the time go slower and thus lets him live longer.¹²

Vonnegut not only reverses chronology, but also history, when he describes Billy Pilgrim's watching television. Billy came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards. . . . Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

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. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to

the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn't in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed (pp. 63-65).

In this simple, but brilliantly conceived passage, Vonnegut asserts absurdity by reversing chronology and history. If man's past defines his meaning, Vonnegut's portrayal denies logical, meaningful interpretations. He deliberately uses irony to reverse meaningful conclusions from history, as when he has the women "touchingly" dismantling bombs. This view clashes with our knowledge that women actually made many of the materials for war. That Vonnegut's description of the movie makes a compassionate, humanistic, almost sentimental statement that the opposite of war is healing only adds to the absurdity.

The characters who fight the war are absurd in this novel. Both the German guards and their American prisoners are laughable. Billy, with his goofy smile, ridiculous fur coat, and "Blue Fairy Godmother" combat boots is not that atypical. The Dresden soldiers assigned to guard the Americans "knew what sick and foolish soldiers they themselves appeared to be. One of them actually had an artificial leg, and carried not only a loaded rifle but a cane." They are understandably apprehensive about earning obedience and respect from combat-hardened veterans.

And then they saw bearded Billy Pilgrim in his blue toga and silver shoes, with his hands in a muff. He looked at least sixty years old. Next to Billy was little Paul Lazzaro with a broken arm. He was fizzing with rabies.

Next to Lazzaro was the poor old high school teacher, Edgar Derby, mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom. And so on.

The eight ridiculous Dresdeners ascertained that these hundred ridiculous creatures really were American fighting men fresh from the front. They smiled, and then they laughed. Their terror evaporated. There was nothing to be afraid of. Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera (pp. 129-30).

Billy and his companions are so ludicrous that they can only be compared to an art form which entertains the whole city of Dresden, whose inhabitants are themselves ridiculous.

The British prisoners, too, think the Americans are absurd. And Billy's capture is so absurd that it baffles his German captors. When Roland Weary is beating him, "Billy was involuntarily making convulsive sounds that were a lot like laughter." The Germans interrupt the sadistic beating before Weary can break Billy's back, and "the soldiers' blue eyes were filled with a bleary civilian curiosity as to why one American would try to murder another one so far from home. And why the victim should laugh" (p. 44). This scene resembles Theatre of the Absurd more than World War II. The juxtaposition of horror and laughter is designed to evoke in the reader a response to the absurd. Weary is also responsible for another blow to logical expectations which jars the reader into an acknowledgement of absurdity. Weary, who hated for people to reject him, "would find somebody who was even more unpopular than himself, and he would horse around with that person for a while, pretending to be friendly. And then he would find some pretext for beating the shit out of him" (p. 30). Such irrational behavior does little to affirm a stable universe.

As in earlier novels, Vonnegut again negates cosmic purpose. When Billy asks the Tralfamadorians, "Why me?," they reply, "Who you? Why

us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simple is" (p. 66). In an absurd world in which one alternative is as good as another and in which there are no causal relationships, "Why not?" is a more appropriate response, and in fact turns up in the novels of Heller, Pynchon, Barth, and other contemporary novelists of the absurd. The inevitability of events gives the feeling of fatalism without suggesting that there must be a divine power to preordain things. Pope wrote in the eighteenth century, "Whatever is, is right." In the twentieth century Billy Pilgrim says that whatever is, is all right. Pope was describing his universe, and his belief in the perfect order of that universe which operated logically and with mathematical precision. Billy, too, is describing his universe, a universe so chaotic that it is futile to try to understand it; one can only adopt a stoic resignation and acceptance or laugh.

Beatrice Rumfoord, upon finding out about her husband's gift for seeing into the future, complained to him that he should do something to prevent the terrible catastrophes he sees in the future. But Rumfoord explains that, like Billy Pilgrim, he could do nothing. He compares life to a roller coaster and tells Beatrice that knowing what is going to happen next doesn't help any. "Because you'd still have to take the roller-caster ride. I didn't design the roller coaster, I don't own it, and I don't say who rides and who doesn't. I just know what it's shaped like."¹³ This futility of trying to change anything can also be seen in the juxtaposition of the prayer on Billy's office wall and the comment on practicing it which follows. The prayer reads: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the

difference." Vonnegut follows the prayer with this statement: "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (p. 52). Perhaps the Dresden taxi driver has the keenest appreciation of the absurd as he writes, "If the accident will" (p. 2). Instead of the expected cause and effect relationship between events in this novel, Vonnegut opts for "The orchestration of the moment was this" (p. 24), or "the moment was so structured that . . ."

The world makes little sense to the characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and their attempts to find meaning are not very successful. Billy's mother is a case in point: "Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (p. 33). Eliot Rosewater and Billy are dealing with similar crises in similar ways. "They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. . . . So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help" (p. 87). When the Tralfamadorians ask Billy if he is happy on Tralfamadore, he replies, "About as happy as I was on Earth," and the narrator assures us that this is true. It is not surprising, since Billy's life on Tralfamadore has at least as much meaning as his life on Earth. In fact, there is little difference. His Tralfamadorian zoo contains a simulated Earthling habitat "stolen from the Sears & Roebuck warehouse in Iowa City, Iowa. . . . There was a picture painted on the door of the refrigerator. The refrigerator had come that way. It was a picture of a Gay Nineties couple on a bicycle built for two" (p. 97). Reality is just as absurd as the Tralfamadorian idea of earth, even a middle-America reality stolen from a store which

caters to the middle class. The picture also represents a perpetually fixed moment in an otherwise fluid time, very appropriate for a Tralfamadorian version of earth.

The Tralfamadorian explanation of sex in the fourth dimension does not make sense on a rational level. As they tell Billy:

there could be no earthling babies without male homosexuals. There could be babies without female homosexuals. There couldn't be babies without women over sixty-five years old. There could be babies without men over sixty-five. There couldn't be babies without other babies who had lived an hour or less after birth. And so on.

It was gibberish to Billy (p. 99).

It is equally gibberish to us. It is intended as gibberish to destroy communication and thus give a feeling of the absurd. Equally absurd is Kilgore Trout's theory that insanity has its roots in the fourth dimension, and Earthling doctors cannot cure it since they can see only three dimensions. This is similar to Havermeyer's plight in Catch-22; he has flies in his eyes, but he can't see them because he has flies in his eyes. Trout's description of insanity may contain a subtle irony; if the fourth dimension is time and Billy is thought to be insane because he travels in time, perhaps Trout's theory makes more sense in the novel than we are at first willing to admit.

Much of what Billy encounters in the course of the novel is so bizarre that it suggests the surreal, the grotesque, the absurd. For example, Howard W. Campbell's uniform is totally ludicrous:

Campbell was an ordinary-looking man, but he was extravagantly costumed in a uniform of his own design. He wore a white ten-gallon hat and black cowboy boots decorated with swastikas and stars. He was sheathed in a blue body stocking which had yellow stripes running from his armpits to his ankles. His shoulder patch was a silhouette of Abraham Lincoln's profile on a field of pale green. He had a broad armband which was red, with a blue swastika in a circle of white (p. 139).

A confrontation with so ridiculous a figure and with such a mixture of symbols is mind-boggling. It should also be noted that Campbell's costume is an invention purely for Slaughterhouse-Five; it does not turn up in Mother Night, where Campbell is protagonist. Such a ludicrous outfit would not be in keeping with the tone of the earlier novel.

Billy confronts the surreal during the rescue following his plane crash; as he is being transported to the bottom of the ski slope on a toboggan, "Billy looked up at all the young people in bright elastic clothing and enormous boots and goggles, bombed out of their skulls with snow, swinging through the sky in yellow chairs. He supposed that they were part of an amazing new phase of World War Two. It was all right with him. Everything was pretty much all right with Billy" (p. 135). Billy seems capable of facing any kind of absurdity throughout the novel.

The world of television and fantasy makes no more sense than the chaos of real life. On evening television, all the shows were about silliness or murder" (p. 172), and the news "was about power and sports and anger and death" (p. 173). Television, then, mirrors the absurdity of real life. Even Valencia's fantasy while making love is so chronologically and geographically distorted that it is absurd: "She was being Queen Elizabeth the First of England, and Billy was supposedly Christopher Columbus" (p. 102).

Parody, burlesque, and comic allusion play at least a minor part in Slaughterhouse-Five. As in earlier novels, Vonnegut burlesques the the author's disclaimer: "All this happened, more or less." This burlesque is more easily appreciated when one looks back at the disclaimers

in The Sirens of Titan ("All persons, places, and events in this book are real . . .") and Cat's Cradle ("Nothing in this book is true . . ."). But there is inherent irony, too, because like Bromden says, "it's the truth even if it didn't happen."¹⁴ Picasso once described art as a lie that makes us realize the truth. In Slaughterhouse-Five, truth and lie, autobiography and fiction become indistinguishable. But the fusion of the two give us vision.

There is a possible allusion to the hand of God, as "an unseen hand had turned the water off" (p. 77) in the delousing shower in a German prison camp. There is an obvious parody of the New Testament as Kilgore Trout revises Christianity to get rid of "slip-shod storytelling" (pp. 94-95). And there is a burlesque of science fiction and of criticism of that genre as Eliot Rosewater says, "'Jeses--if Kilgore Trout could only write!' He had a point: Kilgore Trout's unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good" (p. 95). This is a thinly veiled slap at science fiction and at the critics who spurn it from a writer who has often complained about being called a science fiction writer. Perhaps vox humana, a stop on Billy Pilgrim's organ, is also a comic allusion for Vonnegut buffs since it reminds us of the doctor by the same name in Cat's Cradle.

Chance, a major ally to absurdity, is present in various parts of Slaughterhouse-Five. In The Children's Crusade described in the first chapter, "Most of the children were shipped out of Marseilles, and about half of them drowned in shipwrecks. The other half got to North Africa where they were sold" (p. 14). Life, death, and freedom are here decided by chance. The same is true for Billy's father, who is accidentally "shot dead by a friend while they were hunting deer"

(p. 27). It was purely chance that allowed the two scouts with Billy and Weary to run off and leave them, and then promptly get killed; meanwhile, Billy and Weary do everything wrong and only get captured. When Billy is in Dresden, American planes not only bomb, but also strafe the people on the ground. "The planes sprayed them with machine-gun bullets, but the bullets missed. They then saw some other people moving down by the riverside and they shot at them. They hit some of them" (p. 155). It is chance that lets Billy live and the other people die.

When Billy and Montana are thrust together on Tralfamadore, we learn that "Montana was naked, and so was Billy, of course. He had a tremendous wang, incidentally. You never know who'll get one" (p. 115). This bit of information not only shows chance at work, but also destroys our logical expectations since there is absolutely nothing else about Billy Pilgrim that suggests virility. Chance is also reinforced by coincidence in the novel. Billy's guard in the slaughterhouse "was tall and weak like Billy, might have been a younger brother of his. They were, in fact, distant cousins, something they never found out" (p. 136). A similar coincidence occurs when Billy goes to New York City to get on a talk show. "He by chance was given a room which had once been the home of George Jean Nathan, the critic and editor" (p. 172). This information has nothing to do with the story; it merely points up the overabundance of coincidence.

Irony is very evident throughout the novel. Billy is successful and rich, but totally apathetic. Everything is pretty much all right with Billy, even the corpse mines which cause a fellow worker to get so sick that he dies of the dry heaves. But Billy cries when he sees

the mistreated horses in Dresden. "He hadn't cried about anything else in the war" (p. 170). Perhaps he cries here because he thinks that this is suffering that could have been prevented, that he has contributed to. "Billy's son, Robert, had a lot of trouble in high school, but then he joined the famous Green Berets. He straightened out, became a fine young man, and he fought in Vietnam" (p. 21). This knowledge points up how relative our value system is. Robert can all of a sudden be a success by joining an organization of notorious killers; the irony here arises from our suspicion that neither Billy nor Vonnegut shares the values of the society that has made the Green Berets "famous."

There is dramatic irony in Edgar Derby's letter to his wife. In it he writes, "Dear Margaret--We are leaving for Dresden today. Don't worry. It will never be bombed. It is an open city" (p. 128). Furthermore, during the bombing that Edgar assures Margaret won't happen, he is shot by a firing squad for stealing a teapot. Irony can also be seen in Billy's "prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls" (p. 25), and in his reasons for keeping his knowledge of Tralfamadore a secret; when asked why he didn't tell about it earlier, he replies, "I didn't think the time was ripe" (p. 26). The irony and humor of the last statement comes from what we know of time through the Tralfamadorians, and Billy's time-tripping. The stay on Tralfamadore, itself, suggests irony since the inhabitants are symbols of both life and death. They give Billy a new life, but they also breathe cyanide and destroy the universe. One of the test pilots pushes a button and blows up the entire universe. When Billy asks them why they don't stop him, the reply is, "He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment

is structured that way" (p. 101). Like Winston Niles Rumfoord, they can only see and not change the roller coaster of existence.

As in Player Piano and all of Vonnegut's subsequent novels, there is an interchanging of the mechanical and the human in this novel. Such a technique suggests a world in which machines have usurped the meaning from man and in which man has become so mechanized that he has lost what meaning there was. It is also a technique of humor since, as Bergson say, "we laugh every time a person gives the impression of being a thing."¹⁵ Billy and his fellow prisoners are described in fluid terms. "They were moving like water, downhill all the time, and they flowed at last to a main highway on a valley's floor. Through the valley flowed a Mississippi of humiliated Americans" (p.5). This metaphor is extended as we learn that Billy's guards understand their human freight very well. "They knew that it was essentially a liquid which could be induced to flow slowly toward cooing and light. . . . And the liquid began to flow. Gobs of it built up in the doorway, plopped to the ground" (p. 69). But the dead hobo "wasn't liquid any more. He was stone" (p. 70).

Billy is described in non-human terms in the novel. One of the English prisoners looks at Billy and exclaims, "This isn't a man. It's a broken kite" (p. 84). He is also described as having "a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches" (p. 28). "He looked like a filthy flamingo" (p. 29). He is also "shaped like a bottle of Coca Cola" (p. 20), and "his lungs rattled like greasy paper bags" (p. 57). Rumfoord, who is disgusted by Billy, says, "That's not a human being anymore. Doctors are for human beings. They should turn him over to a veterinarian or a tree surgeon" (p. 164). Billy's family is also

dehumanized, mechanized. Vonnegut writes of his wife, "In a tiny cavity in her great body she was assembling the materials for a Green Beret" (p. 105), and of his daughter, "she had legs like an Edwardian grand paino" (p. 25).

Not only are humans mechanized, but non-human things are also personified. Early in the novel we encounter pneumatic tubes which eat velvet cartridges, and later when Rosewater goes to bed, his "bedsprings talked a lot about that" (p. 88). Trout's story, The Gutless Wonder, "was about a robot who had bad breath. . . . And nobody held it against him that he dropped jellied gasoline on people. But they found his halitosis unforgivable" (p. 144). One of the many things that die in a novel is a glass of water, and Vonnegut personifies the air molecules in the water. "The water was dead. So it goes. Air was trying to get out of that dead water. Bubbles were clinging to the walls of the glass, too weak to climb out" (p. 88). This seemingly innocent passage in a way is an allusion to all of Vonnegut's protagonists, since all are faced with imprisonment and death. Proteus is imprisoned, and so is Malachi Constant first on Mercury, then on Titan. Jonah is trapped on San Lorenzo, and Eliot Rosewater is committed to an asylum. Both Howard Campbell and Billy Pilgrim are war criminals, Campbell spending time in an Israeli jail and Billy in a German prison of war camp. Billy is also imprisoned on Tralfamadore. And each is playing a part in a drama from which he is powerless to escape. There is always the threat of death, too.

Vonnegut uses strange and often ludicrous figurative language to reinforce the absurdity he describes and the humor inherent in it. The Germans found Billy "screamingly funny" (p. 78). His coat "had

apparently been made for an impresario about as big as an organ-grinder's monkey" (p. 78). As in earlier Vonnegut novels, there are carp as big as atomic submarines (p. 10) and a dog which has a voice like a big bronze gong (p. 42). The hinged clogs which the Germans give Roland Weary after they take his combat boots "were transforming his feet into blood puddings" (p. 55), and the blood of the dying scouts was "turning the snow to the color of raspberry sherbet" (pp. 46-47). Billy imagines Weary's face as "a toad in a fishbowl" (p. 41), and when the Germans rip his coat open, "Brass buttons flew like popcorn" (p. 47). The old German soldiers are described as "droolers as toothless as carp" (p. 45), and Billy's "voice box was a little whistle cut from a willow switch."

The firing of an anti-tank gun "made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty" (p. 30). Such far-fetched language does little to describe, but is very effective in conveying absurd humor. The ludicrous can also be seen in Billy's companions' attempts to escape from behind enemy lines. "The Americans had no choice but to leave trails in the snow as unambiguous as diagrams in a book on ballroom dancing--step, slide, rest--step, slide, rest" (p. 34). And Vonnegut labels part of the war maneuvers as "post-coital satisfaction. It is, in the imagination of combat's fans, the divinely listless loveplay that follows the orgasm of Victory. It is called 'mopping up'" (p. 45).

Sometimes Vonnegut's language suggests the grotesque, as when the crippled magazine salesman comes to Billy's door. "Convulsions made the man dance flappingly all the time, made him change his expressions, too, as though he were trying to imitate various famous movie stars"

(p. 54). The descriptions of Billy's prisoner of war episode often show the same kind of grotesqueness. When the prisoners are packed into the boxcar, "the legs of those who stood were like fence posts driven into warm, squirming, farting, sighing earth. The queer earth was a mosaic of sleepers who nestled like spoons" (p. 61). Some of the German soldiers who pass the prisoners have "teeth like piano keys" (p. 55), and one of them spits at them. "The spit hit Roland Weary's shoulder, gave Weary a fourragère of snot and blutwurst and tobacco juice and Schnapps" (p. 56). After Dresden is bombed, Vonnegut describes the city as looking like the moon. "Absolutely everybody in the city was supposed to be dead, regardless of what they were, and . . . anybody that moved in it represented a flaw in the design. There were to be no moon men at all" (p. 155). The grotesqueness of the destroyed city combines with the totally dispassionate prose to suggest the absurd. The same technique and effect can be seen in Vonnegut's description of the excavation for bodies as "the first corpse mine in Dresden" (p. 185), and in his description of Lazzaro: "If he had been a dog in a city, a policeman would have shot him and sent his head to a laboratory, to see if he had rabies" (p. 125).

At other times Vonnegut's language suggests comic absurdity by presenting absurd happenings in totally laughable terms, as when he writes that Eliot Rosewater's books smell "like flannel pajamas that hadn't been changed for a month, or like Irish stew" (p. 87). All of the female members of Billy's family contribute something to comic absurdity. His mother "was a perfectly nice, standard-issue, brown-haired, white woman with a high school education" (p. 88), and his daughter, who was taking care of Billy, "set the control of the blanket

at the highest notch, which soon made Billy's bed hot enough to bake bread in" (p. 114). Perhaps the funniest description in the novel occurs when Billy's wife wrecks her car during her frenzied dash for the hospital. The car that hit her from behind lost only a headlight. "But the rear end of the Cadillac was a body-and-fender man's wet dream. The trunk and fenders were collapsed. The gaping trunk looked like the mouth of a village idiot who was explaining that he didn't know anything about anything. The fenders shrugged. The bumper was at a high port arms. 'Reagan for President!' a sticker on the bumper said. The back window was veined with cracks. The exhaust system rested on the pavement" (p. 157).

Although the events in Slaughterhouse-Five are in themselves absurd, Vonnegut is not content to stop there; instead, he uses bizarre language and eccentric metaphors to reinforce the absurdity he presents and to provoke a comic response to it. His juxtaposition of fantasy and reality serves the same purpose. "Time travel and other science-fiction motifs as well, have become in Vonnegut's work a sign of the absurd universe . . . which Vonnegut is determined to call to his readers' attention."¹⁶ Vonnegut uses the absurdity of time-travel to reflect the absurdity of the universe in which Billy Pilgrim is bouncing around.

Vonnegut negates almost everything that we believe gives meaning to existence, even death and the end of the universe. Billy's new conception of time negates cause and effect; since he sees the past, present, and future simultaneously, any meaning we attach to sequential events is destroyed. And to try to change anything is futile, since the moment is structured in such a way that what is to happen will

happen. The Tralfamadorians know that they will destroy the universe, are in fact destroying it at this very moment, but they must continue anyway. In a world in which wars are as easy to stop as glaciers, "and even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death" (p. 3), Vonnegut suggests that we resign ourselves to the absurdity and anesthetize ourselves through laughter. As he remarked upon witnessing another incident of human slaughter, "'Joking is my response to misery that I can't do anything about.'"17

FOOTNOTES

¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Slaughterhouse-Five (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), p. 2. Subsequent references to this source will be given parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

²"Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: The Canary in a Cathouse," p. 16. Goldsmith also makes this point in the introduction to Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice, ix-x.

³C. W. E. Bigsby, Dada and Surrealism, p. 28.

⁴See especially James L. McDonald, "I See Everything Twice! The Structure of Joseph Heller's Catch-22" and James M. Mellard, "Catch-22: Déjà vu and the Labyrinth of Memory," A Catch-22 Casebook (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973).

⁵"Science Fiction--The Modern Mythology," America (September 5, 1970), 126.

⁶Glenn Meeter, "Vonnegut's Formal and Moral Otherworldliness: Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 210.

⁷"Geodesic Vonnegut; Or, If Buckminster Fuller Wrote Novels," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 232.

⁸"Geodesic Vonnegut," pp. 242-43.

⁹"The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut," Esquire, 74 (September 1970), 204.

¹⁰"Geodesic Vonnegut," p. 244.

¹¹Arnold P. Hinchliffe, The Absurd (London: Methuen & Company, Ltd., 1969), p. 39.

¹²pp. 39-40.

¹³Sirens of Titan, p. 58.

¹⁴Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, p. 13.

¹⁵"Laughter," Comedy, p. 90.

¹⁶Karen and Charles Wood, "The Vonnegut Effect: Science Fiction and Beyond," The Vonnegut Statement, p. 154.

¹⁷"Biafra," McCall's (April 1970), 135.

CHAPTER IX

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

In the first chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five Vonnegut wrote, "I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun." And so it is. Breakfast of Champions is a fun book and a funny one, too. It is also a controversial book, as attested by the widely differing review it received. One reviewer in Harper's called it "Kurt Vonnegut's best so far,"¹ and a New Yorker review stated: "This is a highly moral book, written as if it were going to be found under the rubble of a destroyed civilization. It is Mr. Vonnegut's most serious and impressive work to date."² But not all reviewers were so kind. A Newsweek reviewer accused Vonnegut of providing "childlike drawings to match his Dick-and-Jane prose," and complained that the plot was "reduced so small you could stuff it in an earthworm's ear. It serves only as an armature," he continued, "for Vonnegut's specialty: gratuitous digressions."³ This reviewer continues by calling the novel "pretentious, hypocritical manure," and concludes, "I hate this book. Mostly I hate it for its reductiveness." What particularly upset him was Vonnegut's leveling process, the ultimate in egalitarianism summed up by "And so on" and "ETC."

To my mind, both critical camps err by over-reacting. Breakfast of Champions is neither Vonnegut's best book, nor is it worthy of such excess as is expressed in the last review. Perhaps some of the hostile

reviews were precipitated by the reviewers' inability to see that Vonnegut was putting them on. Or perhaps they could see this and resented it. It is possible also that those who overpraised it did so out of a sense of guilt for ignoring Vonnegut's earlier works or out of a desire to praise a part of the pop culture.

Breakfast of Champions is a flawed novel, flawed most obviously by a sophomoric wit and obvious irony. For instance, Vonnegut writes of Thomas Jefferson High School that it "was named after a slave owner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty."⁴ Such blatant irony seems considerably below Vonnegut's earlier inventiveness. The novel is also less satisfying because the tension of Dresden does not shape it as it did Vonnegut's earlier novels. The Dresden holocaust which helped to keep his earlier novels sharply focused and tight-knit is absent here. The tension of an artist trying to gain the aesthetic distance to present the central event of his life is missing.

But Breakfast of Champions is not without redeeming features. In fact, it is a very interesting book and in some ways a logical progression in Vonnegut's development. Some critics still cling to a belief that a work cannot be both popular and good, and some fail to see that what they call weaknesses in technique are actually Vonnegut's strengths. J. D. O'Hara, in a review for New Republic complained, "the more you remember the more self contradictory his ideas and values become. There are no underlying meanings, no ironies waiting to trip you up; he who reads may run without breaking stride; he is an excellent popularizer; the ideas and writing techniques are instantly digestible."⁵ Despite what critics such as Mr. O'Hara write, I would suggest

that Vonnegut's latest novel is the most ironic since Mother Night and that contradictions may be an asset rather than a liability in a book which attempts to portray absurdity, to bring chaos out of order. The critic's problem with dealing with a pop artist was noted as early as 1970 by Leslie Fiedler, who recognized Vonnegut as "a test case for the critics." Fiedler explained:

When I was young, literary critics thought they knew for sure that it was their function to educate taste: to rescue a mass audience, largely middle-aged, from an addiction to outworn sentimentality and escapism, to prepare them to read what was newest and most difficult. Suddenly it is the mass audience which leads the critics who are middle-aged, the big audience that is young; rescuing them from an addiction to outworn irony and teaching them to read for the sake of a joy deeper than that of mere culture-climbing. Understandably enough, many survivors of the old critical regime find it difficult to persuade themselves that if recently, they have come to esteem Vonnegut, it is not because they have been converted to the side of Pop, but because--though they did not at first realize it--he has all along belonged to the other side of High Art.⁶

Although Vonnegut's place in High Art might be contested, Fiedler nevertheless accurately expresses the changing relationship between critic and artist.

Breakfast of Champions does fit very comfortably into the Vonnegut canon, and it uses the same techniques for conveying comic absurdity as the earlier novels, even if in a more exaggerated version. As Richard Todd stated in an unsympathetic review of Breakfast of Champions, "the various themes and mannerisms that have animated the earlier novels are seen here in a grotesque, cartoon version of themselves."⁷ Todd goes on to compare Vonnegut's sensibility to that of "an autistic grown-up." Both of these seemingly derogatory descriptions can be seen as not only accurate, but as praise in a way never intended by the reviewer. Vonnegut is well aware of the grotesque, cartoon quality of his

presentation of ideas in this novel; his illustrations and explanation for them leave little doubt of this. Vonnegut writes in the preface, "I am programmed at fifty to perform childishly. . . . To give an idea of the maturity of my illustrations for this book, here is my picture of an asshole:" The drawing resembles an asterick about an inch across. And if by "autistic" Todd is suggesting a rejection of objective reality in favor of fantasy, again he hits the bull's-eye. If the novel can be said to be about anything, it is about Vonnegut's rejection of objective reality. Vonnegut intertwines reality and fantasy until we cannot tell which is which, or even if there is a difference.

As if reality were not confused enough in Vonnegut's other novels, in this one he intrudes throughout the novel to remind us that none of it is real, that he made it all up: "And I sat there in the new Holiday Inn, and made it disappear, then appear again, then disappear, then appear again. Actually, there was nothing but a big open field there. A farmer had put it into rye" (p. 234). But if the Holiday Inn doesn't exist, how can he be sitting in it as the first sentence states? When asked by the waitress in the Holiday Inn that doesn't exist if he can see in the dark with his sunglasses on, Vonnegut replies, "The big show is inside my head" (p. 201). But so is the show that uses the waitress for a bit part, since it is imagined by Vonnegut' too. Indeed, we cannot even be certain that the first-person intrusions are by Vonnegut, since he signed the preface Philboyd Studge.

To confuse reality even more, the world of fiction keeps intruding on the world of reality, and vice versa. Vonnegut gets his watch crystal and toe broken by fiction, by characters whom he has created

and supposedly controls. And he tells us that fiction is true: "This book is made up, of course, but the story I had Bonnie tell actually happened in real life--in the death house of a penitentiary in Arkansas" (p. 216). As a finale Vonnegut dematerializes from his fictive world at the end of the novel.

Vonnegut's characters are just as confused about what is real as the reader. "Trout considered himself not only harmless but invisible. The world had paid so little attention to him that he supposed he was dead" (p. 14). Dwayne Hoover accepts science-fiction as reality, and his son, Bunny, uses Transcendental Meditation to change his reality. "When Bunny played the piano bar at the Holiday Inn, he had many secrets. One of them was this: he wasn't really there" (p. 177). Trout further confuses truth and fiction, suggesting that it is impossible to tell them apart: "After Trout became famous, of course, one of the biggest mysteries about him was whether he was kidding or not. He told one persistent questioner that he always crossed his fingers when he was kidding. 'And please note,' he went on, 'that when I gave you that priceless piece of information, my fingers were crossed'" (p. 86). Vonnegut as creator and author is playing the same trick on us.

Vonnegut totally eschews credibility in the novel by objectively discussing the plausibility of his creative endeavor: "Let's see: I have already explained Dwayne's uncharacteristic ability to read so fast. Kilgore Trout probably couldn't have made his trip from New York City in the time I allotted, but it's too late to bugger around with that. Let it stand, let it stand!" (p. 249). Vonnegut's frequent intrusions into the novel make it impossible for the reader to achieve a willing suspension of disbelief. For example, when Eliot Rosewater

arrives in Midland City, Vonnegut reminds us:

I had made him up, of course--and his pilot, too. I put Colonel Looseleaf Harper,⁸ the man who had dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, Japan, at the controls.

I made Rosewater an alcoholic in another book. I now had him reasonably well sobered up, with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous. I had him use his new-found sobriety, to explore, among other things, the supposed spiritual and physical benefits of sexual orgies with strangers in New York City. He was only confused so far.

I could have killed him, and his pilot, too, but I let them live on. So their plane touched down uneventfully (p. 269).

Vonnegut also rejects realism in fiction; at one point in the novel, he tells us, "I could go on and on with the intimate details about the various lives of people on the super-ambulance, but what good is more information? I agree with Kilgore Trout about realistic novels and their accumulations of nit-picking details" (p. 278). But even Trout is unprepared for the kind of unrealism Vonnegut shows him. Upon being told by Vonnegut that he (Trout) is Vonnegut's creation, he asks if Vonnegut is crazy. The reply is negative, and Vonnegut shatters Trout's power to doubt his creator by transporting "him to the Taj Mahal and then to Venice and then to Dar es Salaam and then to the surface of the Sun, where the flames could not consume him--and then back to Midland City again" (p. 292).

The only objective reality in the novel is gravity. When Trout is wandering through the hospital, he encounters many injured people. "Many of the people there had been flung to the earth by the force of gravity, which never relaxed for a second" (p. 282). Nothing else in the novel is that constant. "The Temptation of St. Anthony," a painting by Rabo Karabekian, the minimal painter, is first exposed as a hoax since Rabo doesn't even know who St. Anthony was and since the painting was no more than a strip of reflecting tape on a piece of

canvas. But later it turns out to be a legitimate work of art, and Karabekian's defense of it gives Vonnegut a new lease on life and sanity.

There are so many author intrusions in this book that they become as important to the structure of it as the main plot. In fact, one could make a good case for Vonnegut's intrusions' being the main narrative action. He is certainly one of the main characters. Todd says, and rightly, "in retrospect, it seems that the Vonnegut figure was struggling from the start to escape from behind the sketchily rendered characters that populated the early books."⁹ Vonnegut first appeared in the 1966 edition introduction to Mother Night, was more instrumental in Slaughterhouse-Five, and dominates Breakfast of Champions. Vonnegut may, indeed, be the protagonist of the novel. He is certainly a major character, and a dynamic one at that. According to him he even provides the climax of the novel: "And now comes the spiritual climax of this book, for it is at this point that I, the author, am suddenly transformed by what I have done so far. This is why I had gone to Midland City: to be born again. And Chaos announced that it was about to give birth to a new me by putting these words in the mouth of Rabo Karabekian" (p. 218). Thus Vonnegut not only provides the spiritual climax, but also the rebirth of himself as a major character. The only other character in the novel who changes is Dwayne Hoover, and he changes into a psychopathic maniac.

Vonnegut's intrusions in the novel begin innocently enough, at first merely establishing a relationship between the author and his characters, as when he writes, "When Dwayne was a boy, when Kilgore Trout was a boy, when I was a boy . . ." (p. 24), or "Trout had a mental

defect which I, too, used to suffer from" (p. 104). Vonnegut associates himself with both Trout and Dwayne Hoover; he tells us of Dwayne's mother, "Celia Hoover was crazy as a bedbug. My mother was, too" (p. 181). And Trout is created in Vonnegut's father's image, complete with shins which "were rococo with varicose veins and scars" and feet which were "azure" and "artistic" (p. 223).

Some of the author intrusions serve to keep Vonnegut as a character in the mind of the reader. Some do little to further the story at all. For example, he intrudes to tell us of a geological theory, "I only found out about it yesterday" (p. 143). Later there is a complete non-sequitur that has nothing to do with Midland City or Vonnegut's characters: "My doorbell has just run in my New York apartment" (p. 225). Perhaps the most interesting intrusion occurs when Vonnegut as author walks into the Holiday Inn bar and begins to participate in the same world as his creations. With the statement, "That drink was for me" (p. 192), Vonnegut announces his physical presence in his fictive world. Wearing sunglasses with mirrored lenses, he uses Kilgore Trout's theory about mirrors being leaks into another universe to explain his simultaneous presence in the real and fictive universes: "Where other people in the cocktail lounge had eyes, I had two holes into another universe. I had leaks" (p. 193).

Many of the intrusions by Vonnegut serve to remind us of his role as creator. For instance, "I do know who invented Kilgore Trout. I did" (p. 32). "I had given him a life not worth living, but I had also given him an iron will to live" (p. 72). Vonnegut reminds us throughout the novel not only of his role of creator, but also manipulator of his creations, as when he tells us of Wayne Hoobler, "Here was what was

going to happen to Wayne in about four days--because I wanted it to happen to him" (p. 205). Such passages also destroy suspense and help accomplish the leveling effect prominent in Vonnegut's fiction.

Vonnegut uses a different kind of author/audience relationship than is common in novels, one in which the author discusses the conventions of his trade and lets the readers in on his creative process. Since Vonnegut is an artist, he is entitled to invent and dispose of things at will. Furthermore, his characters are characters in a script and know that they are characters in a script. They know that they are being manipulated by some sort of cosmic stage manager, but like Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they go ahead and muddle through the script anyway, hoping that meaningful instructions will come.

Vonnegut is an author and knows he is an author and therefore takes all the license that the position affords. He is the cosmic stage manager and gets his artistic kicks by wildly manipulating all the elements under his control. All of his characters exist in his mind and he is very much aware of this. This puts a strain on our conventional concepts of reality, fiction, truth, fact, etc. It is similar to Humpty-Dumpty's telling Alice that when he uses a word, it means whatever he wants it to mean.

Vonnegut negates suspense more effectively in Breakfast of Champions than in any other novel. Very early in the story, we learn that Kilgore Trout "was a nobody at the time, and he supposed his life was over. He was mistaken. As a consequence of the meeting, he became one of the most beloved and respected human beings in history. . . . Dwayne Hoover was on the brink of going insane" (p. 7). Trout then "learned

from his encounter with Dwayne that he was alive enough to give a fellow human being ideas which would turn him into a monster" (p. 14).

"And, after Dwayne was carted off to a lunatic asylum in a canvas camisole . . ." (p. 15). All this information about the future is given in the first fifteen pages of the novel. In fact, all the rest of Dwayne's future is given before its actual occurrence in the novel. "Later on, of course, Dwayne would assault all sorts of people, even three strangers from Erie, Pennsylvania" (p. 43). When Dwayne meets a waitress at his Burger Chef, we learn that "she would get up enough nerve that night to call him on the telephone, but Dwayne wouldn't be home to answer. He would be in a padded cell in the County Hospital by then" (p. 146). Dwayne's future also contains elements of the future of other characters who come in contact with him. "Very soon, Bunny Hoover would be seriously injured by Dwayne, would soon share an ambulance with Kilgore Trout" (p. 176). Francine's and Wayne Hoobler's fortunes also are relayed through this process. "Dwayne would beat her up very soon. . . . Dwayne would try to beat him up, too, but Wayne was a genius at dodging blows" (p. 188).

Vonnegut tells the waitress at the Holiday Inn bar that he could tell her fortune; he doesn't tell her, but he does tell us all the trivial details of her life: "As for the fortune I might have told for the waitress, this was it: 'You will be swindled by termite exterminators and not even know it. You will buy steel-belted radial tires for the front wheels of your car. Your cat will be killed by a motorcyclist named Headley Thomas, and you will get another cat. Arthur, your brother in Atlanta, will find eleven dollars in a taxicab'" (p. 204). One cannot help but feel that these are the kind of meaningless details

Vonnegut and Trout object to in realistic novels. Vonnegut finally performs the ultimate in the negation of suspense by telling us exactly how the novel will end: "I knew how this book would end. Dwayne would hurt a lot of people. He would bite off one joint of the right index finger of Kilgore Trout. And then Trout, with his wound dressed, would walk out into the unfamiliar city. He would meet his Creator, who would explain everything" (p. 234).

Despite Vonnegut's claims to be on an equal with the Creator of the Universe, he can neither totally control nor understand the universe, even the microcosmic universe created by him. In a burlesque of religious explanations, Vonnegut shows the futility of understanding or even expressing the universe in finite terms:

I was on a par with the Creator of the Universe there in the dark in the cocktail lounge. I shrunk the Universe to a ball exactly one light-year in diameter. I had it explode. I had it disperse itself again.

Ask me a question, any question. How old is the Universe? It is one half-second old, but that half-second has lasted one quintillion years so far. Who created it? Nobody created it. It has always been here.

What is time? It is a serpent which eats its tail. . . .

This is the snake which uncoiled itself long enough to offer Eve the apple. . . .

What was the apple which Eve and Adam ate? It was the Creator of the Universe (pp. 200-01).

In Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut presents a novel in which it is impossible to take the characters seriously, a universe which is so absurd that even the creator of it can neither understand or control it.

The world of Breakfast of Champions is, indeed, absurd. Even animals lead an absurd existence in the novel. Dwayne's dog, Sparky, "could not wag his tail--because of an automobile accident many years ago, so he had no way of telling other dogs how friendly he was. He had to fight all the time. His ears were in tatters. He was lumpy

with scars: (p. 17). If the life of a friendly dog which has to fight constantly is not absurd enough, we also have in the novel a greyhound which lives in a one-room apartment on the sixth floor in a city. "His entire life was devoted to unloading his excrement at the proper time and place, . . . in the gutter outside the door seventy-two steps below, with the traffic whizzing by, or in a roasting pan his mistress kept in front of the Westinghouse refrigerator. Lancer had a very small brain, but he must have suspected from time to time, just as Wayne Hoobler did, that some kind of terrible mistake had been made" (p. 198). There can be no doubt that Vonnegut is using the dog's absurd life to reflect the same kind of absurdity in man's life, especially since he associates Lancer with Wayne Hoobler.

Trout's novels and short stories contribute to the sense of absurdity in the novel, too. Trout's novels are published as hard-core pornography although they "usually didn't even have women in them" (p. 20). The discrepancy between the covers and contents or between the original and revised titles is reminiscent of Salo's statues and their names in The Sirens of Titan. Trout's Plague on Wheels was covered "with a lurid banner which made this promise: WIDE OPEN BEAVERS INSIDE." And his story, "Pan Gallactic Straw-boss" became "Mouth Crazy" (pp. 21-22). In another Trout novel, a character named Delmore Skag "found a way to reproduce himself in chicken soup," to try "to force his country into making laws against excessively large families. . . . They passed stern laws instead against the possession by unmarried persons of chicken soup" (p. 21). The illustrations for the book are just as absurd since they have nothing to do with the

story. They "were murky photographs of several white women giving blow jobs to the same black man, who, for some reason, wore a Mexican sombrero" (p. 22).

In Trout's "This Means You," in which a few people own all of the land and tell everyone else to get off it, the government's solution is not to reapportion the land, but to give "a big balloon full of helium to every man, woman, and child who didn't own property." In another of Trout's stories, a space traveler from "Margo, a planet where the natives conversed by means of farts and tap-dancing," tries to warn an Earthling family that their home is burning and is clubbed to death with a golfclub because of his bad manners.

Trout also contributes to the sense of absurdity through his relationship with the Creator of the Universe. He wants to answer the question posed in graffiti, "What is the purpose of life?," but he has no pen. His answer would have been: "To be the eyes and ears and conscience of the Creator of the Universe, you fool" (p. 67). Trout is supposedly in telepathic communication with the Creator of the Universe, sending messages to Him "wherever He was" (p. 67). Trout reports such trivial things as the condition of the men's room, the carpet, and forty-second street. The Creator's omniscience is questioned in Trout's last question to Him, "How much do you already know about forty-second street?" (p. 69). Absurdity can also be seen in Trout's nonchalant explanation about his attackers. "For all I know," said Trout, "that car may have been occupied by an intelligent gas from Pluto" (p. 76). This statement launches a scare campaign against a nonexistent Pluto gang. Then a gang adopts the name, and fiction becomes reality.

Trout finds absurdity not only in his fiction, but also in the real world. He questions God's actions and the Divine order of things, especially when he discusses conservation and ecology with a truck driver: "'I realized,' said Trout, 'that God wasn't any conservationist, so for anyone else to be one was sacrilegious and a waste of time.'" Trout then cites such examples of God's non-conservation measures as volcanoes, tornadoes, tidal waves, Ice Ages, and Dutch Elm disease, and concludes: "That's God, not man. Just about the time we got our rivers cleaned up, he'd probably have the whole galaxy go up like a celluloid collar. That's what the Star of Bethlehem was, you know, . . . A whole galaxy going up like a celluloid collar" (p. 85). Attributing one of Christianity's major symbols to the destruction of an entire galaxy undercuts both religion and the idea of a well-ordered universe controlled by an omniscient and omnipotent God. The irony is further increased by Trout's reply to the truck driver's discovery that there isn't anything about conservation in the Bible: "'Unless you want to count the story about the flood,' said Trout" (p. 85).

Trout has learned to live with absurdity: "His head no longer sheltered ideas of how things could be and should be on the planet, as opposed to how they really were. There was only one way for the Earth to be, he thought: the way it was." Thus Trout rejects Sartre's and Samus' vision of absurdity arising from the discrepancy between the way the world is and the way man thinks it should be. Instead, he embraces Billy Bilgrim's resignation to cope with the absurdity around him. But his list of trivial things that "have to be," such as "a bathtub toy, a little rubber duck," dismisses any serious divine purpose for the world.

In one of Trout's stories, even the Creator of the Universe doesn't know what's happening, even with his own creation. After creating man, "the Creator never knew what he was going to yell, since the Creator had no control over him. . . . After a dip one day, for instance, The Man yelled this: 'Cheese!' Another time he yelled, 'Wouldn't you really rather drive a Buick?'" (p. 174). The Creator, who is a robot, sends an angel, also a robot, to find out why The Man yells what he does, but even the angel is totally unsuccessful. "He would ask, for instance, 'Why did you yell, 'Cheese'? And The Man would tell him mockingly, 'Because I felt like it, you stupid machine'" (p. 174). Thus the Creator of the Universe seems to have the same trouble with his characters that Vonnegut does with his. As Vonnegut explains about his characters, "I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals. There was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as though I was connected to them by stale rubberbands" (p. 202).

Dwayne reads in one of Trout's books that World War II "was staged by robots so that Dwayne Hoover could give a free-willed reaction to such a holocaust. The war was such an extravaganza that there was scarcely a robot anywhere who didn't have a part to play. Harold Newcomb Wilbur got his medals for killing Japanese, who were yellow robots. They were fueled by rice" (p. 202). Trout reduces one of the most significant events in modern history to the same kind of meaninglessness that Stonehenge and the Great Wall of China assumed in The Sirens of Titan. Trout continues in the novel to explain to Dwayne why he is so tired and demoralized: "Why wouldn't you be? Of course

it is exhausting, having to reason all the time in a universe which wasn't meant to be reasonable" (p. 253).

Madness helps to convey absurdity in this novel, too. At one point in the novel, Dwayne Hoover "saw eleven moons in the sky" and "he saw a huge duck directing traffic" (p. 39). And one of Dwayne's employees "was having trouble at home. His wife, Mary, . . . believed that Vernon was trying to turn her brains into plutonium" (p. 42). Even for insane persons, these illusions are somewhat absurd. There is also the absurd metamorphosis of Fred T. Barry, who turns into a Chinaman (p. 33). Such a transformation suggests a more subtle version of the absurdity in Ionesco's The Rhinoceros.

When life loses its meaning, it becomes absurd. The people in Midland City, then, are constantly on the brink of discovering their absurdity. They all harbor the fear "that their lives might be ridiculous. Now the worst had happened: Mary Alice Miller, the one thing about their city which they had supposed was ridicule-proof had just been lazily ridiculed by a man from out-of-town" (p. 219). When Rabo Karabekian ridicules Mary Alice, what concrete meaning the people's lives have is threatened, and they panic. They turn on Karabekian and berate his painting. He retorts, "The picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out." The painting, a sixteen feet by twenty feet canvas painted with avacado house paint with a single piece of day'glo tape running the length of it, would suggest that Vonnegut is being highly ironic. Like little Newt's painting, there is no damn cat and no damn cradle. In fact, Karabekian may well be putting the people on as his last words to them suggest: "Citizens of Midland City, I salute you," he said. "You

have given a home to a masterpiece" (p. 221). But Karabekian's words at least save Vonnegut, if not the whole town of Midland City. The author stated it this way:

And my own pre-earthquake condition must be taken into consideration, too, since I was the one who was being reborn. Nobody else in the cocktail lounge was reborn, as far as I know. The rest got their minds changed, some of them, about the value of modern art.

As for myself: I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide. For want of anything better to do, we became fans of collisions. Sometimes I wrote well about collisions, which meant I was a writing machine in good repair. Sometimes I wrote badly, which meant I was a writing machine in bad repair. I no more harbored sacredness than did a Pontiac, a mousetrap, or a South Bend Lathe.

I did not expect Rabo Karabekian to rescue me. I had created him, and he was in my opinion a vain and weak and trashy man, no artist at all. But it is Rabo Karabekian who made me the serene Earthling which I am this day (pp. 219-20).

Of course, Vonnegut could, himself, be using irony here, which would only add one more twist to the meaninglessness of life. He could, on the other hand, be suggesting that there is a discovery process that accompanies artistic creation.

In the Holiday Inn Cocktail Lounge, Vonnegut objectively discusses the way everyone there, including himself, is "softening his brain with alcohol. This was a substance produced by a tiny creature called yeast. Yeast organisms ate sugar and excreted alcohol. They killed themselves by destroying their own environment with yeast shit" (p. 208). A more absurd existence could hardly be found, and the obvious analogy to man is hard to miss. This bit of information is followed by the outline of a Kilgore Trout story in the form of a dialogue between two pieces of yeast. "They were discussing the possible purposes of life as they ate sugar and suffocated in their own excrement. Because of their

limited intelligence, they never came close to guessing that they were making champagne" (pp. 208-09). This story suggests that even if there were a grand purpose to life, man with his finite mind would be too stupid to guess what it was. We are left again with a granfalloon.

Chance and coincidence also reinforce the absurdity of Breakfast of Champions by opposing logical cause and effect and predictability. The manager of a pornographic movie theatre tells Trout about "a miraculous insulating material, which had been used on rocket ships to the Moon. This was, in fact, the same material which gave the aluminum siding of Dwayne Hoover's dream house in Midland City its miraculous insulating qualities" (p. 74). Except for conveying a sense of isolation and alienation, this information is superfluous; it does little for plot, characterization, etc. It merely points up the coincidence in a chance universe. The same kind of coincidence can be seen when the truck driver with whom Trout caught a ride told him about sitting in jail reading his toilet paper, which turned out to be a story by Trout describing a planet where the value of works of art was determined by spinning a wheel of chance. In this case the coincidence and the wheel of chance both contribute to the absurdity.

Vonnegut uses chance to describe Dwayne Hoover in much the same way that he did Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse-Five. Vonnegut tells us that "Dwayne Hoover, incidentally, had an unusually large penis, and didn't even know it." Vonnegut is aware of his incredible coincidences in this novel and even points them out to the reader in places. For instance, when Kilgore Trout gets beat up and notices that there is dog shit on his jacket, Vonnegut points out to us: "By an unbelievable coincidence, that shit came from the wretched greyhound belonging to

a girl I knew" (p. 198). It is the same greyhound who must have thought that the Creator of the Universe had made a terrible mistake about his existence. Another implausible coincidence occurs when Dwayne is going crazy. "Just as motherless Dwayne Hoover was berating motherless Wayne Hoobler in the used car lot, a man who had actually killed his mother was preparing to land in a chartered plane. . . . This was Eliot Rosewater, Kilgore Trout's patron" (p. 268).

There are obvious ironies in Breakfast of Champions, such as the tongue-in-cheek disclaimer for General Mills and the fact that Dwayne Hoover's best Pontiac salesman is named Harry LeSabre. There is also a sign in Dwayne's office which says: "You don't have to be crazy to work here, But it sure helps!" (p. 114). This tired old cliché is revived by the irony derived from our knowledge that Dwayne is insane, Harry LeSabre is a transvestite, and a mechanic's wife thinks he is trying to turn her brains into plutonium.

Two other very ironic situations occur in the novel. The most decorated veteran in Midland City "had a penis eight hundred miles long and two hundred and ten miles in diameter, but practically all of it was in the fourth dimension. . . . He had now also committed the lowest crime which an American could commit, which was to kill his own child" (p. 204). The hero who represents his culture's virtues thus violates the prime virtue, and killing, which made him a hero, also makes him a villain. The big war provides another irony; the brain for the Robo-magic automatic washer "was installed on heavy bombers and it did the actual dropping of bombs after the bombardier pressed his bright red 'bombs away' button" (p. 246). One of the bombs even has the company slogan written on it, which was "Goodbye Blue Monday." There is irony

in the sure-fire way of eliminating blue Monday for the people the bomb kills, and also in the fact that a laborsaving device to make life easier also makes death easier.

Mechanization plays a larger part in this novel than in any previous Vonnegut novel, with the possible exception of Player Piano. Vonnegut explains early in the novel that his "suspicion that human beings are robots, are machines" is based partially on his seeing men suffering from locomotor ataxia, the last stages of syphilis. "The syphilitics seemed tremendously dignified--erect, eyes straight ahead." Thus appearance and reality clash, and there is obvious irony. But Vonnegut's description of a man suffering from this malfunction, although grotesque, is nevertheless humorous, in fact almost a classic example of Bergson's mechanical man:

He shuddered gently, as though he had a small motor which was idling inside. Here was his problem: his brains, where the instructions to his legs originated, were being eaten alive by corkscrews. The wires which had to carry the instructions weren't insulated anymore, or were eaten clear through. Switches along the way were welded open or shut.

. . . He thought and thought. And then he kicked two times like a chorus girl.

He certainly looked like a machine to me when I was a boy (p. 3).

The humor may be grim and overshadowed by the grotesqueness, but it is nevertheless present. Vonnegut follows this description with the following statement: "I tend to think of human beings as huge, rubbery test tubes, too, with chemical reactions seething inside." And later, "So it is a big temptation to me, when I create a character for a novel, to say that he is what he is because of faulty wiring, or because of microscopic amounts of chemicals which he ate or failed to eat on that particular day" (p. 4).

There are numerous other examples of the mechanization of people. "Francine was pure machinery at the moment, a machine made of meat--a typing machine, a filing machine" (p. 188). And Mary Alice Miller, the Olympic swimming champion at fifteen, has been turned into an outboard motor by her father (p. 218). According to Vonnegut, slave owners "used human beings for machinery," and even after abolition "they and their descendants continued to think of ordinary human beings as machines" (p. 11). "The white farmers down there weren't using machines made out of meat anymore, though, because machines made out of metal were cheaper and more reliable, and required simpler homes." One should note that it is not benevolence, compassion, nor humaneness, but economic expedience which precipitates the change from slavery to machinery. This kind of reasoning is reminiscent again of Catch-22 when Lt. Schiesskopf fails to bolt the men together and anchor their arms to their sides to make them march better; he decides against it only because the fittings were hard to get during the war. The replacement of man by machine because of the latter's increasing efficiency has been present in Vonnegut's fiction since Player Piano.

Vonnegut's oversimplified description of how the pirates were able to take over everything shows man as machine, too:

Here is how the pirates were able to take whatever they wanted from anybody else: they had the best boats in the world, and they were meaner than anybody else, and they had gunpowder, which was a mixture of potassium nitrate, charcoal, and sulphur. They touched this seemingly listless powder with fire, and it turned violently to gas. This gas blew projectiles out of metal tubes at terrific velocities. The projectiles cut through meat and bone very easily, so the pirates could wreck the wiring or the belows or the plumbing of a stubborn human being, even when he was far, far away (p. 12).

And of course the ultimate in mechanization occurs in Trout's novel which makes Dwayne believe that "Everybody on Earth was a robot, with one exception--Dwayne Hoover. . . . Everybody else was a fully automatic machine, whose purpose was to stimulate Dwayne. Dwayne was a new type of creature being tested by the Creator of the Universe" (pp. 14-15). Vonnegut elaborates on Dwayne's belief throughout the novel, and this belief that everyone else is a robot causes most of the action in the novel.

Even sex is seen as mechanical in this novel, as Dwayne is offered a "penis-extender" and "a lifelike rubber vagina for when he was lonesome" (p. 147). Dwayne's real mother was seduced by an itinerant typesetter and died giving birth to Dwayne. "The printer disappeared. He was a disappearing machine" (p. 46). There is a loop of paper around the toilet seat at Dwayne's Holiday Inn which "guaranteed Dwayne that he need have no fear that corkscrew-shaped little animals would crawl up his asshole and eat up his wiring" (p. 79). So even Dwayne, the only character who is not a robot, is also seen in mechanical terms.

In a passage reminiscent of the prisoner of war section of Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut describes the bums on Skid Row as objects rather than human beings. "They were as easy to move, usually, as toy balloons. And they would drift hither and yon, like balloons filled with some gas slightly heavier than air" (p. 183). In another section which parodies Darwin's *Origin and Development of the Species*, Fred T. Barry is willing to donate half a million dollars to a proposed museum on the condition that the first Robo-Magic be put on display. "And he wanted the exhibit to show, too, how machines evolved just as animals did, but with much greater speed" (p. 287). It would seem that if

there is no meaning to life, man--like the Tralfamadorians in The Sirens of Titan--would be better off to let the machines live it. They are much more efficient, and they evolve faster.

As in his earlier novels, Vonnegut uses parody, burlesque, radical juxtaposition, and bizarre language to reinforce the absurd humor in Breakfast of Champions. He burlesques the automobile/pollution problem with Trout's story about Lingo-three, "whose inhabitants resembled American automobiles. . . . They weren't manufactured, though. They reproduced. They laid eggs containing baby automobiles, and the babies matured in pools of oil drained from adult crankcases." The creatures were becoming extinct because they had destroyed their planet's resources. Kago, a space traveler only an inch high, visits them and promises to tell everyone in the universe how wonderful the automobile creatures were, since he can do nothing to help them. He tells "all those rusting junkers who were out of gas: 'You will be gone, but not forgotten'" (p. 27). This turns out to be only too true since Kago's knowledge, when imparted to Earth, felled human beings as easily as cholera or the bubonic plague.

Little Kago provides one of the best examples of absurd humor in the novel when he tries to remedy the sickness he has brought to Earth. "Little Kago himself died long before the planet did. He was attempting to lecture on the evils of the automobile in a bar in Detroit. But he was so tiny that nobody paid any attention to him. He lay down to rest for a moment, and a drunk automobile worker mistook him for a kitchen match. He felled Kago by trying to strike him repeatedly on the underside of the bar" (p. 29). This mixture of absurdity and humor shows Vonnegut's inventiveness at its best.

Vonnegut burlesques the writing trade at various places in the novel. Of Kilgore Trout, he tells us, "Like most science-fiction writers, he knew almost nothing about science" (p. 238). But if Trout is ignorant of science, that ignorance certainly doesn't make him any less prolific as a writer. At one point in the novel we read that "he had written one hundred and seventeen novels and two thousand short stories" (p. 20). At another, Vonnegut refers to Trout's "two-hundred-and-ninth novel." He also takes a back-handed slap at scientific intelligence in a passage which begs for a Twain-like or Jack Benny-like pause at the end: "Earthling scientists were monotonously radioing that number $\overline{\pi}$ into outer space. The idea was to show other inhabited planets, in case they were listening, how intelligent we were." The dead-pan seriousness here is obviously facetious.

There are two comic allusions to Thomas Wolfe's works; the first occurs when Beatrice Keedsler says, "Of course you can go home again, and as often as you please. It's just a motel" (p. 196). Vonnegut also rejects Wolfe's unifying theme, a hero's search for a father. He suggests that a search for a mother would be much better, since mothers are much more useful (p. 268). Vonnegut also objects to the way Beatrice Keedsler in particular and most writers in general write fiction: "I thought Beatrice Keedsler had joined hands with other old-fashioned storytellers to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end" (p. 209). Vonnegut attributes much of the abominable behavior of people to their attempts to live up to so-called realistic fiction, which is not like real life at all. Instead

of realism Vonnegut suggests an absurd fiction which levels everything: "I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead" (p. 210). This is a good self-description of Vonnegut's theory of fiction, and he follows it with advice on how to cope with the absurdity of our existence: "If all writers would do that, then perhaps citizens not in the literary trades will understand that there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead. It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that: It can be done" (p. 210).

Vonnegut also explains his use of "And so on" and "ETC."

The proper ending for any story about people it seems to me, since life is now a polymer in which the Earth is wrapped so tightly, should be that same abbreviation, which I now write large because I feel like it, which is this one:

ETC.

And it is in order to acknowledge the continuity of this polymer that I begin so many sentences with "And" and "So," and end so many paragraphs with ". . . and so on."

And so on.

"It's all like an ocean!" cried Dostoevski. I say it's all like cellophane (p. 228).

Like Eliot Rosewater, Vonnegut updates Dostoevski; The Brothers Karamazov just isn't enough anymore. What Vonnegut means by cellophane is that its molecular structure has no end. It can only be approximated by writing the first part of the formula and then concluding with ETC. The same is true of pi. And, according to Vonnegut, the same is true of human life. And so on. This phrase also accomplishes Vonnegut's levelling effect and the sense of futility since it makes one event as

significant as another. It says, in effect, "I could go on with this list, but everything else is just like what I have already given, so what's the use?"

Trout makes up an elaborate parody of pornography while sitting in a movie. In Trout's version of pornography, it is food rather than sex that is dirty. People go to movies and watch actors eat, and whores offer eggs and oranges and milk and butter and peanuts and so on (pp. 59-60). The plot of Now it Can Be Told, Trout's novel which causes Dwayne to run amok, can be seen as a parody of Genesis. But the most elaborate parody concerns Dwayne's life as a parody of Job. The head-note to the novel is a quote from Job: "When he hath tried me,/ I shall come forth as gold." Trout's novel suggests that Dwayne is being tested by the Creator of the Universe, and Dwayne, himself, arrives at the same conclusion when he visits the Destructive Testing division of the Pontiac plant. Dwayne tells Francine, "I couldn't help wondering if that was what God put me on Earth for--to find out how much a man could take without breaking." If that was the Creator's plan, it worked, because Dwayne does indeed break. Unlike Job, Dwayne does not come forth as gold; his brain doesn't even turn to plutonium; he merely goes berserk. Pynchon's SHROUD or SHOCK might have come through all right, but not a human being.

The absurd universe of Breakfast of Champions abounds with juxtaposed incongruities, false climaxes, instant reversals, non-sequiturs, and irrelevant information. It is a universe in which the unexpected usually happens. Trout is beaten, robbed, and left bleeding with his trousers and underpants around his ankles; the police pick him up. "The police supposed they had caught him committing some public

nuisance, had caught him working with an old man's limited palette of excrement and alcohol" (p. 75). The truck driver with whom Trout catches a ride keeps wanting to describe Trout's life as linked to his fellow men who "get to know each other pretty well." "I work alone," Trout tells him (p. 104). Trout certainly encounters the unexpected when he arrives in Midland City, too. He has taken pains to look disreputable and arrives at the desk of the Holiday Inn with blood on his face, dog shit on his clothes, and plastic on his bare feet:

"The Abominable Snowman has arrived," he said to Milo. "If I'm not as clean as most abominable snowmen are, it is because I was kidnapped as a child from the slopes of Mount Everest, and taken as a slave to a bordello in Rio de Janeiro, where I have been cleaning the unspeakably filthy toilets for the past fifty years. A visitor to our whipping room there screamed in a transport of agony and ecstasy that there was to be an arts festival in Midland City. I escaped down a rope of sheets taken from a reeking hamper. I have come to Midland City to have myself acknowledged, before I die, as the great artist I believe myself to be" (p. 229).

The effect of Trout's speech and his certain obscurity is shattered when Milo greets him with luminous adoration. "'Mr. Trout,' he said in rapture, 'I'd know you anywhere. Welcome to Midland City. We need you so!'" (p. 230). Trout was deflated to find out that someone actually knew who he was.

When Trout goes into a porno shop to buy a copy of his book, the cashier says, "'I hope you enjoy it.' He meant that he hoped Trout would find some pictures he could masturbate to, since that was the only point of all the books and magazines. 'It's for an arts festival,' said Trout" (p. 58). A still further example of this kind of reversal and false climax occurs when Dwayne and Francine decide that what Dwayne needs to do is to talk to some artists at the art festival. "'The festival could give me a brand new viewpoint on life!' he said.

'That's what it's for,' said Francine. 'Use it!' 'I will,' said Dwayne. This was a bad mistake." Vonnegut builds up the reader's expectations only to destroy them with the last sentence. Furthermore, we know that talking to Trout, an artist, is the final blow that drives Dwayne berserk. And Vonnegut has already told us of Trout's book: "It was a tour de force. It was a jeu d' esprit. But it was mind poison to Dwayne" (p. 15).

Dwayne never talked to the maid whom he liked, but he "reserved most of his conversation for his dog." This conversation is both one-sided and meaningless, as is Trout's conversation with his parakeet, Bill. Both examples show the breakdown of language which mirrors the breakdown of logic and order. But Trout's conversations with his parakeet are more bitter. Showing Vonnegut's "Canary in a coalmine" theory,¹⁰ "Trout supposed that when the atmosphere became poisonous, Bill would keel over a few minutes before Trout did. He would kid Bill about that. 'How's the old respiration, Bill?' he'd say, or, 'Seems like you've got a touch of the old emphysema, Bill,' or, 'We never discussed what kind of funeral you want, Bill. You never even told me what your religion is.' And so on." Thus Trout's conversation with his pet is a perverted echo of Dwayne's "How's my old buddy," "You and me, Spark," and so on. The breakdown of communication can also be seen in Wayne Hoobler's conversations with the traffic on the Interstate and with the sun.

Logical expectations do little toward determining what is going to happen next in this novel. Dwayne's attack on Harry LeSabre is totally unexpected, as is his attack on everyone else. In fact, "Dwayne seemed to be getting happier and happier all the time during the month before

Dwayne went public as a maniac" (p. 40). Vonnegut's narration does nothing to reinforce logical expectations either. He interrupts the story of a woman's death to give her measurements and the size of her husband's penis (p. 266). In the middle of the story about the Bermuda Erns, he interjects, "Here is what the flag of Kilgore Trout's native island looked like," followed by an illustration of the flag. And the school-boy poem, "I see England,/ I see France . . .," is nonchalantly followed by the statement that "it mentioned two nations which no longer exist as such." This information is never explained.

Vonnegut also juxtaposes and equates very dissimilar items, as when he discusses the madness about "wide-open beavers," and about "a soft, weak metal . . . which was gold" (p. 24). There is also an equation of Jesus and a pimp. The pimp "was splendid and cruel. He was a god to them. He took their free will away from them, which was perfectly all right. They didn't want it anyway. It was as though they had surrendered themselves to Jesus, for instance, so they could live unselfishly and trustingly--except that they had surrendered to a pimp instead" (p. 73). And after an automobile wreck on the Interstate, we read, "The Chevy's passenger was bleeding blood as he lay dead in Sugar Creek. The milk truck was bleeding milk" (p. 199). The events are made to appear equal.

The unexpected can also be seen when Trout is asked if he fears the future, and replies, "It is the past which scares the bejesus out of me" (p. 187). The unexpectedness of this reply is magnified by our knowledge that Trout is a writer of science fiction.

The bizarre imagery and language sprinkled throughout the book mirror the absurdity and humor in the situations. People with goiters

"seemed to have zucchini squash growing from their throats" (p. 4), and the beacon of freedom "was sort of an ice-cream cone on fire" (p. 11). Vonnegut calls the Star Spangled Banner "gibberish sprinkled with question marks" (p. 8), and uses recurring words like "doodley-squat," "oodles," and "fabulously well to do" like recurring jokes on Laugh-In. The characters in the novel are sometimes described in bizarre terms, too. Dwayne Hoover "sat like a lump of nose putty" (p. 236), and Mary Alice's eyes were permanently inflamed. "They looked like maraschino cherries" (p. 255). Trout sees a truck "so enormous that it made him feel that his head was about the size of a piece of beebee shot" (p. 84), and when Dwayne's wife swallowed Drano, she "became a small volcano."

The explanation of words, themselves, are sometimes both humorous and absurd. The sound and appearance of the word, schizophrenia, fascinated Vonnegut for years; "it sounded and looked like a human being sneezing in a blizzard of soap flakes" (p. 193). When Wayne Hoobler saw a Hertz truck, he thought "that the truck was in agony" (p. 205), and Vonnegut defines coal for us as "a highly compressed mixture of rotten trees and flowers and bushes and grasses and so on, and dinosaur excrement" (p. 123).

Vonnegut's simple syntax and straight-forward delivery sometimes provide humor, as when he writes, "Dwayne was a Pontiac dealer who was going insane" (p. 13). This statement reminds me of Mark Twain's story about a man who told his doctor that he was a sailor, and the doctor treated him for that. The occupation and the illness are equated. Vonnegut follows the first declaration with this statement: "But Dwayne, like all novice lunatics, needed some bad ideas, too, so that

his craziness could have shape and direction" (p. 14). His overuse of slang to repeat the same idea is also a technique of humor; describing Dwayne's condition, Vonnegut writes, "He had bats in his bell tower. He was off his rocker. He wasn't playing with a full deck of cards" (p. 222).

At the end of the novel, "the Midland City Festival of the Arts was postponed because of madness" (p. 284). The wrenched cliché conveys humor, and the substitution of an unexpected word at the end of it thwarts logical expectations again, thus suggesting the absurd. The last examples of bizarre imagery and language occur when Vonnegut learns that "a volcanic dog was just about to erupt behind" him, and then launches into a scientific description of his bodily processes when stimulated by fear: "My mind sent a message to my hypothalamus, told it to release the hormone CRF into the short vessels connecting my hypothalamus and my pituitary gland" (p. 288). And so on.

Breakfast of Champions is at the same time a continuation of earlier techniques and themes, a move in a different direction, and perhaps a farewell to novel-writing for Vonnegut. He continues to use the same techniques of comic absurdity, but the Dresden center is missing. And he has now freed his characters (p. 293) and emptied his mind of the junk left over from other novels. In Vonnegut's words, "I'm not going to put on any more puppet shows" (p. 5).

FOOTNOTES

¹(May 1973), 86.

²(May 12, 1973), 146.

³(May 14, 1973), 114.

⁴(New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), p. 34. Subsequent references to this source will be given parenthetically in the text of this chapter.

⁵"Instantly Digestible," 168 (May 12, 1973), 26-28.

⁶"The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," Esquire, 74 (September 1970), 196.

⁷"Breakfast of Champions: This Novel Contains More Than Twice Your Minimum Daily Requirements of Irony," Atlantic Monthly (May 1973), 105-06.

⁸Vonnegut is keeping his promise to clear his head of characters from earlier books (p. 5); not only does he use Rosewater, but the Colonel is a refugee from Happy Birthday, Wanda June.

⁹Todd, 108.

¹⁰Vonnegut once compared artists to canaries in coalmines. They are more sensitive and die first, thus warning everyone else.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

If one is willing to look back at all of Vonnegut's novels and risk the danger of turning into a pillar of salt, he can see a discernible pattern and a growth of the artist's powers. Because Vonnegut reworks the same themes and techniques and relies on the same concepts in all of his novels, a study of his complete novels shows several different ways in which Vonnegut attempts to convey his absurd world view.

Player Piano is the most conventional novel and the weakest since Vonnegut was still trying to use conventional methods to convey absurdity. With The Sirens of Titan, he found in science-fiction and fantasy a way of presenting absurdity in cosmic proportions. In Mother Night, he switches from telescope to microscope to explore the absurdity of one person's life. In Cat's Cradle, he takes a look at the ultimate absurdity--the end of life on earth. God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, too, treats absurdity and amplifies Boaz's and Malachi Constant's proposal of uncritical love. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut found a way to face the absurdity--total resignation and acceptance. In Breakfast of Champions especially and in his other novels to a lesser extent, he abandons the standard novelistic conventions and uses the artist-creator role to show the absurdity of all his characters, including himself. Vonnegut seems to have always had the absurd

vision, and the novels represent a search for the best way to present it.

In a general way, Vonnegut is an existential writer since existence precedes essence in his novels. There is no a priori meaning in the world described by Vonnegut. In fact, Vonnegut's belief in a purposeless universe constitutes his main theme. If man expects meaning in a meaningless universe, he is frustrated by the confrontation with absurdity. To counter this, Vonnegut suggests that man stop demanding reasons and logical answers and instead resign himself to the chaos around him. Billy Pilgrim and Kilgore Trout, in Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions respectively, have mastered the technique. Only by laughter and/or resignation can Vonnegut's characters cope with their chaotic surroundings. Vonnegut moves from passive resistance (Proteus and Unk) to seeing the universe as a joke (Boaz and Jonah) to total resignation (Billy Pilgrim and Kilgore Trout). The absurdity is presented in humorous form because laughter allows detachment which paradoxically leads to love or compassion (Malachi Constant and Eliot Rosewater). Since the universe represents cold indifference, man must work toward human warmth and compassion.

Vonnegut's characters constantly raise questions about the nature of the universe and the meaning of life, but we get no ready-made answers. From the Shah of Bratapuhr who stumps EPICAC by asking, "What are people for?" in Player Piano to the Tralfamadorians' futile quest for the purpose of life in Slaughterhouse-Five, there are no answers--only questions.

But although Vonnegut presents no solutions, he does suggest some ways of coping with it. Since we can't change the world without--the

indifferent universe, Vonnegut suggests we turn inward. We give our life meaning by how we live it, and he simply suggests that we live it with love and compassion for our fellow sufferers. As Malachi Constant says, the purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved. But first we must make Howard W. Campbell's discovery that it is our world rather than ourselves that is diseased. We can reduce our feelings of the absurdity by ceasing to have logical expectations for a well-ordered universe which doesn't exist.

The reader can gain some insight into Vonnegut's world view by noting that Vonnegut's characters are all trapped, imprisoned, and most are in some way mad. Proteus is captured and imprisoned by the society in power in Player Piano; Unk is a prisoner first on Mars, then Mercury, then Earth, and finally on Titan in The Sirens of Titan, and Beatrice and Chrono are similarly imprisoned. Howard Campbell spends his last days in an Israeli prison in Mother Night, and Jonah is confined to the island of San Lorenzo in Cat's Cradle. Eliot Rosewater is committed to an asylum in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, and Billy Pilgrim is a prisoner in a German concentration camp, in a zoo on Tralfamadore, in a hospital, and in his own home since his daughter totally controls him there. Dwayne Hoover is institutionalized in Breakfast of Champions, and Wayne Hoobler spent a large part of his life in the prison at Shepherdstown. Vonnegut's time as a prisoner of war possibly had a great deal to do with his world view.

Vonnegut's use of madness sometimes helps to convey absurdity (as when Dwayne sees eleven moons and a duck directing traffic), but perhaps he presents madness, like laughter and resignation, as a means of

escaping absurdity. Insanity is really an extreme combination of laughter and resignation. Hysteria allows total detachment, and all things become humorous. When things get so bad, Vonnegut's characters "flip out." Both Eliot and Sylvia Rosewater obviously fit this pattern, and Howard Campbell uses schizophrenia to go on living in his world. Dwayne Hoover takes all he can on God's Destructive Testing Ground and then promptly goes berserk. And Billy Pilgrim has himself committed, possibly after experiencing various hallucinations. Vonnegut believes that there are some problems so big that man cannot solve them; he must learn to accept this fact or else go mad.

Vonnegut's characters are also actors in various scripts. They assume roles and play parts in a Theatre of the Absurd production. Proteus becomes Messiah of The Ghost Shirt Society; he knows little about his role of leader, but bungles through as best he can. Malachi and the rest of the characters in The Sirens of Titan are actors in a script written by Winston Niles Rumfoord, who is in turn programmed by Tralfamadorians. Howard Campbell acts in his own drama, and in the Nazis' and Wirtenen's. Jonah acts in the production of his karass and eventually stars in Bokonon's drama of human stupidity. Eliot Rosewater plays a role in Rosewater County and imitates Hamlet in his travels. Billy Pilgrim plays so many roles and the scene shifts are so rapid that he is in a constant state of stage fright. And all of the characters in Breakfast of Champions are consciously controlled by their playwright, Vonnegut. All of Vonnegut's characters then resemble Beckett's two bums in Waiting for Godot or Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; they must go through the actions--play their parts even

though none of it seems to make sense. They question and hope, but Godot never comes.

Vonnegut uses various techniques to convey absurdity: chance, coincidence, space and time travel, the destruction of time and communication, verbal wit, and anything else that is applicable. He borrows from pop culture anything that will be effective in his books. He does not write conventional prose. His writing, in true twentieth century form, is more like film or television or comic strips than like earlier fiction. He uses an extremely fast pace (short sentences, short paragraphs, short books), caricature instead of characterization, fast shifts in action (like jump-cuts in film), violence (from pop culture--television and movies), and a constant humorous irony which undercuts almost everything. He uses the methods of satire found in Mad Magazine, fairy tale motifs, devices of Romance novels, science fiction mechanism, and techniques borrowed from Theatre of the Absurd. He burlesques conventional novelistic techniques and establishes a new kind of author/audience relationship in which the author joins his characters and reserves the right to make the story up as they go along. He uses the conventions of fiction while burlesquing them simultaneously, and he even discusses them with the reader.

Vonnegut is also a very American writer. In no way can his books be seen as comedies in the British sense. He is not concerned with the comedy of manners which explores man's place in relation to his society and tries to integrate the hero into that society. Instead, in the American tradition, Vonnegut's characters confront the universe. "Call me Jonah" is not so farfetched after all since Vonnegut's

characters, like Melville's, embark on voyages and adventures which allow them to meet the universe head on.

One should not let the fact that Vonnegut is both funny and popular detract from his stature as an important twentieth century novelist. Such criteria would have damned Shakespeare and Dickens to critical obscurity, too. Vonnegut is a writer of humor, and his popularity keeps increasing every day. But he does have some important things to say about twentieth century existence, and he has found the form and style to say them extremely well. Each of his novels represents a different way of presenting his comic absurd vision, and like Faulkner's works, they are good either individually or taken as a group.

Finally, Vonnegut is a compassionate writer despite his "So it goes" and other distancing devices. It is impossible to read his works without remembering some key phrases that could make man's plight on Earth less painful. As Eliot Rosewater says in the Christening speech, "God damn it, you've got to be kind." If we could all practice this golden rule, Vonnegut seems to say, then his epitaph for Billy Pilgrim and himself might be appropriate: "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt."

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VITA

William Gary Shaw

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: COMIC ABSURDITY AND THE NOVELS OF KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Paul's Valley, Oklahoma, August 11, 1941,
the son of Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Shaw.

Education: Graduated from Sapulpa High School, Sapulpa, Oklahoma,
in May, 1959; received Bachelor of Arts degree in Radio and
Television from Oklahoma State University in 1963; received
Master of Science degree in Education from Oklahoma State
University in 1968; attended National Endowment for the
Humanities summer institute at Ohio State University in
1973; completed requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree at Oklahoma State University in July, 1975.

Professional Experience: Television production work, KOTV, Tulsa,
1964-65; radio production work, KRAV and KFMJ, Tulsa, 1966;
graduate teaching assistant, Department of English, Oklahoma
State University, 1968-72; extension instructor for National
College of Education, Evanston, Illinois, summer, 1970; En-
glish Instructor and Chairman of Communication and the Arts,
Labette Community Junior College, Parsons, Kansas, 1972-1975.