

Postmodernist Literary Movement: A Comprehensive Study of Technique in Vonnegut's Novels

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Abstract— Kurt Vonnegut is an integral part of the postmodernist literary movement and a master of satire, gallows humor, and science fiction. The uniqueness of Vonnegut's works is that in addition to having excellent themes, the novels are also technically accomplished and colorful. Vonnegut refuses to confine himself to a single form of fiction, which is something that is certainly clear from a review of his books. In reality, modal diversity is demonstrated in each of his works. Vonnegut, a man of profound vision, tries to experiment with brilliant techniques in his novels, including science fiction, comic science fiction, black humor, dark humor, morbid humor, gallows humor, meta-fiction, satire, political satire, postmodernism, dark comedy, war novels, absurdist fiction, modes of absurdity, and semi-autobiographical writing. In his works, he deftly weaves these strategies around his theme. He draws attention to the numerous social defects, the atrocities of war, and the sorrows of modern man. He imagines a society free of societal ills, where people are not enslaved by technology. This essay aims to analyze the literary devices used by Vonnegut in his works.

Keywords— Science Fiction, Machines, Fantasy World, Black comedy

I. INTRODUCTION

Vonnegut dramatizes the role of a cosmic fool, a clown who laughs at the world's failings and sorrows. But he is never overwhelmed by them. His satirical commentaries on business, war, politics, machine technology, organized religion, and organizations in general expose the foibles and inhumanities of a society of which he is highly critical. His satire and cosmic pessimism are paradoxically countered by his humor, gentleness, and kindness as well as his belief in cosmic energy and optimism. Indeed, these are the essential qualities of his fictional art. Vonnegut uses the technique of science fiction to delineate human experience and broadens the theme to include within its scope modern technology which forms the staple of his experience. In this context, it may be pointed out that Vonnegut's science fiction may be viewed not as a

prediction of the future but as a hyperbolic description of the present. Therefore, it is wrong to approach Vonnegut as a philosopher with final answers to the meaning and nature of our world. Looking over his novels, we may be tempted to see them as answering more questions, explaining more of life, or rendering the world more knowable than they do. It is significant that the foundations for Vonnegut's conception of our world is laid in *Player Piano*, the framework is erected in the subsequent novels and *Slaughterhouse Five* tops off the whole structure. Vonnegut uses the world of technology, builds on established concepts, and returns to familiar themes, images, phrases, incidents, plots, and characters in his novels which present a comprehensive vision of his world.

II. OBJECTIVES

I wish to touch upon science fiction technique in *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Slapstick* and *Galapagos*. I wish to study black comedy in the novels of *The Sirens of Titan*, *Mother Night*, and *Slaughterhouse Five*; Semiautobiographical in *Time Quake*; satire in *Cat's Cradle*, *God Bless You*, *Mr Rosewater*, Metafiction in *Mother Night*, *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*; Postmodernism in *God Bless You*, *Mr Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*; theme of absurdist in *Slapstick*.

Analysis:

Vonnegut's first novel *Player Piano* is a brilliant piece of science fiction. It is one of the best science fiction novels ever written. It features a brilliant utopia of the future in which machines do all the work and mankind enjoys prosperous idleness. The frustration arising from a sense of absolute uselessness and the ills of an affluent society such as social climbing, personal hypocrisy, and desire to show off makes a dystopia. In the struggle between man MANIAC (the control computer's acronym) man loses simply because he has no unity of purpose. He depends on machines even for aesthetic enjoyment as the title of the novel emphasizes. The novel's structure consists of a series of intricate plots and subplots and then plunges into digression. Vonnegut consciously breaks the rules for a

conventionally structured novel to find a narrative mode more conducive to his story and his temperament. It may be aptly suggested that in *Player Piano* the object of Vonnegut's technique is to overthrow the accepted literary conventions of visual imagery, coherent plot, connected characterization and uniform point of view. It is significant that this technique is a major innovation in Vonnegut's novel. Vonnegut delineates caricatures rather than characters in *Player Piano* and through this mode he focuses the reader's attention on what the characters represent. Paul's boss Kroner represents the technocracy's simple-minded faith in the myth of progress through technology. Vonnegut portrays virtually all his characters as mechanical, lifeless, passive, while his machines become hideous parodies of humanity. This new fictional art is a faithful presentation of post-modern society and culture.

In his next novel, Vonnegut turns completely away from the world of machinery and creates a fantasy world that remains one of his most unique achievements. Since his novels usually are constructed around two diametrically opposed points of view, it not surprising that *Slaughterhouse Five* is built around the irreconcilable conflict between free will and determinism.

It is significant to note that *Slaughterhouse Five* with its non-linear time scheme and its complex interweaving of science fiction fantasy reveals the realities of World War II. The novel functions to reveal viewpoints in somewhat the same way that the theory of relativity broke through the concepts of absolute space and time. *Slaughterhouse Five*, indeed gains its structure from Vonnegut's essential aesthetic problem – how to describe a reality that is beyond human imagination. The method he chooses is outlined in the explanation given to Billy Pilgrim of the Tralfamadorian novel as he is being transported toward that whimsical planet. The Tralfamadorians allow him to look at some of their novels: they warn him that he cannot begin to understand them. The language in the book is impossible for Billy to understand. He can see that the novel consists of symbols with stars in between. Billy is told that the clumps function something like telegrams with each clump a message about a situation or scene. The clumps are not read sequentially as the chapters are in an earthling novel of the ordinary sort.

It is significant to mention here that in *Slaughterhouse Five* the chapters are divided into short sections, seldom more than a few paragraphs long. The time tripping both by Billy and the narrator, produces an effect somewhat like that achieved in the Tralfamadorian novel. It serves to eliminate suspense. We know not only of Billy's assassination long before the novel ends but also how the

universe will end. The Tralfamadorians blow it up experimenting with a new fuel for their flying saucers. Vonnegut's method accords well with the major changes in the conception of physical reality that have come out of contemporary science. Change, ambiguity and subjectivity become ways of defining human reality. His Tralfamadorian scheme enables him to overcome the problems of change, ambiguity and subjectivity involved in objectifying the events surrounding the fire-bombing of Dresden and the involvement of Billy Pilgrim and the author in them.

Vonnegut points out that the next major 'time window' for Billy is 1967. On the night of Barbara's wedding, he is taken on a flying saucer to Tralfamadore, where he is mated with the movie star Montana Wildhack in a Tralfamadore. In 1968 Billy survives an airplane crash in which everyone is killed. Valencia is killed in an automobile accident and dies of carbon-monoxide poisoning as she rushes towards him. And finally, on February 13, 1976, exactly twenty-one years after the Dresden bombing, Billy is shot and killed by a gunman hired by Paul Lazzaro. It may be stated here that in the last chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* there is a return to the voice of Vonnegut as author and the present tense of the novel. The novel ends with a return to Billy Pilgrim in the spring of 1945 outside of Dresden's. The war is over and the familiar bird of ironic awareness echoes and reaches in the expression: "Poo-tee-weet?"

It may be argued that though there is a strong moral tone in *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut has certainly abandoned most of the tools of slick and pop fiction. There is no beginning, middle or end to the novel – neither in terms of chronological time-scheme nor of plot development. The Tralfamadorians frequently tell Billy that men are 'machines' and 'bugs in amber' and that Earthlings are the universe's 'great explainers', who utter artificial answers to the question 'why' rather than accept the irrelevance of the question.

In his novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, man's quest for meaning in the universe and for the purpose in his existence undergoes a more direct exploration. In fact, the future provides the setting of the novel. The questions probed are cosmic. This novel follows the science fiction form more consistently than any of Vonnegut's other novels and it goes farthest into the future. There is very little emphasis on prediction. In fact, the novel remains less concerned with social commentary are it in the past, present, or future than with the timeless question of man's relationship to his Universe and to his own inner being. One of the strengths of this novel, which might well be considered Vonnegut's

best, is the extraordinary command with which the science fiction technique is employed.

Vonnegut makes use of a number of science fiction techniques in *The Sirens of Titan*, both satirically and seriously: space travel and fabulous voyages (to Mars, Mercury, and Titan), teleportation (Rumfoord materializes, dematerializes and rematerializes; Vonnegut characterizes materializations, like hangings as being ‘pornographically enhanced by morbid imagination’), man-machine relationships (Salo and his humanization), telepathy (Rumfoord reads minds), alien encounters (Salo; the harmoniums of Mercury which are the only known form of life there—“a more gracious creature would be hard to imagine”(184) and various science fantasy devices, such as Schliemann Breathing (“a technique that enables human beings to survive in a vacuum or in an inhospitable atmosphere without the use of helmets or other cumbersome respiratory gear” (148), the chrono-synclastic infundibula (“places ... where all the different kinds of truths fit together as nicely as the parts in your Daddy’s solar watch” (14)), and the Universal Will to Become (“UWTB is what makes universes out of nothingness – that make nothingness insist on becoming somethingness” (138).

It is significant to note that the events portrayed in *The Sirens of Titan* are scattered around the universe, reflecting the protagonist’s aimless wanderings. The narrative development of the story remains straightforward. This novel with its science fiction filled encounters, with its robots and near-robot humans and with its central characters is intentionally presented as cold-hearted but they generate more warmth. The topic which becomes central in *The Sirens of Titan* is the question of the meaning of existence.

Time, with standard linear sense, is unimportant. One is in time (and on time) because one lives from moment to moment. As Salo says to Rumfoord, he “would rather see the wonderful colors at the far ends of the spectrum than either the past or the future”. Thus, fate and accidents are simply a part of the natural order. At one-point Rumfoord mollifies Bee by saying, “If I seem indifferent to your misfortunes, it is only because I know how well things are going to turn out in the end” (63). The way “things turn out” for Bee is that she and Malachi are “bred like farm animals” (27) on Titan and that “in the end”, like all of us, she will be dead. And what Malachi comes to recognize as a lieutenant-colonel on Mars (when he kills Stony), is, as Rumfoord says, “What most people never realize about themselves that he was not only a victim of outrageous fortune, but one of outrageous fortune’s cruelest agents as well”. Even “dumb-luck” (73) Noel Constant’s use of the

Bible as an investment counsellor) is really part of the system. Rumfoord defines luck as “the way the wind swirls and the dust settles cons after God has passed by” (252). Salo suggests that luck is the residue of design, in this case the design of the universe. Everything is simply the way it is, and man must give up his illusory sense of free will and accept the natural order.

In *The Sirens of Titan*, the bleaker and more negative aspects in the view of the Universe presented are associated with Rumfoord, while the total vision includes affirmative possibilities as well. Consequently, the novel’s emphasis falls not on asserting the absurdity of existence but upon the possibilities of giving life in an absurd universe some meaning, dignity and human warmth. Boaz finds a way to love and does benefit the harmoniums, even if the love becomes flawed and the benefit qualified.

It may be argued that the tone of the novel alternates between irony and sentimentality and frequently combines the two. The epigraph, for example, a quotation from Ransom K. Ferm (whom we later learn is a “philosophical mouse” (69) employed by Malachi, ironically suggests that the speed of the solar system (replacing the industrial technology of *Player Piano*) is equivalent to progress. Throughout the novel, man’s place in the physical universe is seen as basically insignificant. The bounties of space, of infinite outwardness are explained by the narrator as “Empty heroics, low comedy and pointless death” (8).

It is necessary to emphasize the fallible warmth of human emotions. Sentiment frequently emerges in Vonnegut where he contrasts the human with the machine or machine-like objects. This effect is seen in the portrayal of that persevering Tralfamadorian messenger, Salo, there is sentimentality in the depiction of this lovable tangerine of a Tralfamadorean but in this particular context of comic science fiction. It seems far more acceptable than that which surrounds the characterisation of Finnerty in the greater social-realism of *Player Piano*.

Vonnegut preserves the balance in the perspective of the narration by investing comedy with irony. At the level of the world within the fiction, some sentiment is what we hope to find in these cold recesses of time and space. Salo seems to have the right answer, when he tells Rumfoord that he lives “punctually” – that is one moment at a time. He would rather see the colours at the end of the spectrum than know the future. When he wishes Constant “Good Luck”, Constant tells him that the expression is no longer approved “down here” in the world of God the utterly indifferent, Salo winless and says, “I am not from down here” (317). In all of this Vonnegut comes close to the sentimentality he displays in his short story (“Epica”) of the computer suicide. Salo’s actions roughly parallel the

affirmative turn in Constant's life. It thus becomes part of the thematic assertion of the purpose and meaning in loving whatever is around to be loved.

In conclusion, it may be stated that *The Sirens of Titan* offers many of the attractions of Vonnegut, like social satire, comedy, disillusionment with middle class norms, a delight in the preposterous, and so on. Science fiction allows his inventiveness full rein with chrono synclastic infundibula, the Universal will to become, harmoniums, Tralfamadore and its government by "hypnotic anarchy", Martian invasion and antennae-controlled legions. Finally, *The Sirens of Titan* emphasizes the need to recognize the apparently indifferent, frequently adverse Universe as the shared environment of all men, and to perceive that this makes concern, comparison, and love imperatives. Man, and robot have both refused to be reduced to machines by a mechanical Universe. This does not imply optimism or hope. But it does mean that the novel provides a basis of moral purpose and affirms the possibility of a meaningful life. The science fiction serves not only as a source of interest, energy, and fancy in *The Sirens of Titan* but as an effective instrument of Vonnegut's moral and human concerns.

It may be aptly stated that Vonnegut tries to maintain a thematic linkage with the use of different narrative techniques in his novels. In the first two novels, *Player Piano*, and *The Sirens of Titan*, he uses a conventional narrative style and a third person point of view. Paul Proteus and Malachi Constant lack a three-dimensional quality because Vonnegut has always been more concerned with the ideas than with characterization – common with many of the science fiction writers. However, *Mother Night* is different. Here Vonnegut uses a first-person point of view in the portrayal of Campbell's character. A series of very short chapters build his novel around a series of jokes. To understand how these jokes function, it is necessary to consider black humor. In this context, I wish to define black humor and then highlight its treatment in *Mother Night*.

Black comedy/humor, also known as dark comedy, morbid humor, or gallows humor, is a style of [comedy](#) that makes light of subject matter that is generally considered [taboo](#), particularly subjects that are normally considered serious or painful to discuss. Writers and comedians often use it as a tool for exploring vulgar issues by provoking discomfort, serious thought, and amusement for their audience. Thus, in [fiction](#), for example, the term black comedy can also refer to a genre in which dark humor is a core component. Popular themes of the genre include death, crime, poverty, war, violence,

terrorism, discrimination, disease, racism, sexism, and human sexuality.

Black comedy differs from both [blue comedy](#)—which focuses more on crude topics such as nudity, sex, and [body fluids](#)—and from straightforward [obscenity](#). Whereas the term *black comedy* is a relatively broad term covering humor relating to many serious subjects, *gallows humor* tends to be used more specifically in relation to death, or situations that are reminiscent of dying. Black humor can occasionally be related to the [grotesque](#) genre. Literary critics have associated black comedy and black humor with authors as early as the ancient Greeks with [Aristophanes](#).

Etymologically, the term black humour (from the French humour noir) was coined by the [Surrealist](#) theorist [André Breton](#) in 1935 while interpreting the writings of [Jonathan Swift](#). Breton's preference was to identify some of Swift's writings as a subgenre of [comedy](#) and [satire](#) in which laughter arises from [cynicism](#) and scepticism, often relying on topics such as death.

Breton coined the term for his 1940 book [Anthology of Black Humor](#) (Anthologies de l'humour noir), in which he credited [Jonathan Swift](#) as the originator of black humor and gallows humor (particularly in his pieces [Directions to Servants](#) (1731), [A Modest Proposal](#) (1729), [Meditation Upon a Broomstick](#) (1710), and in a few [aphorisms](#)). In his book, Breton also included excerpts from 45 other writers, including both examples in which the wit arises from a victim with which the audience empathizes, as is more typical in the tradition of gallows humor, and examples in which the comedy is used to mock the victim. In the last cases, the victim's suffering is trivialized, which leads to sympathizing with the victimizer, as analogously found in the social commentary and social criticism of the writings of (for instance) [Sade](#).

Historically speaking, among the first American writers who employed black comedy in their works were [Nathanael West](#) and [Vladimir Nabokov](#), although at the time the genre was not widely known in the US. The concept of black humor first came to nationwide attention after the publication of a 1965 mass-market [paperback](#) titled *Black Humor*, edited by [Bruce Jay Friedman](#). The paperback was one of the first American anthologies devoted to the concept of black humor as a literary genre. With the paperback, Friedman labelled as "black humorists" a variety of authors, such as [J. P. Donleavy](#), [Edward Albee](#), [Joseph Heller](#), [Thomas Pynchon](#), [John Barth](#), Vladimir Nabokov, [Bruce Jay Friedman](#) himself, and [Louis-Ferdinand Céline](#). Among the recent writers suggested as black humorists by

journalists and literary critics are [Roald Dahl](#), [Kurt Vonnegut](#), [Warren Zevon](#), [Christopher Durang](#), [Philip Roth](#), and [Veikko Huovinen](#). The motive for applying the label black humorist to the writers cited above is that they have written novels, poems, stories, plays, and songs in which profound or horrific events were portrayed in a comic manner. Comedians like [Lenny Bruce](#), who since the late 1950s have been labelled for using "[sick comedy](#)" by mainstream journalists, have also been labelled with "black comedy".

The term "Black Humor" gained currency in the twentieth century. The presence of intellectual comedy, violence and experimentation are characteristic traits of black humour fiction. The black humour writers like to satirise human foibles, follies and dislocation of norms of life since the point is to sustain an illusion of living in the face of an impersonal absurd universe. They share existentialist belief as well as there is no God or higher authority to make sense of the human condition. With such an outlook of life and universe man is abandoned as an alien to his own fate. To face up to meaninglessness of human existence man has three strategies for survival. The *first* is to accept and exploit like a cynic the state of loss of values with no absolute values left to guide the course of destiny. The *second* is to stage withdrawal in despair and develop nihilistic view of life. The *third* is to assume a stance of defiant laughter, the ultimate human response to the apparent absurdity of existence – i.e. to mock at absurd situations in life scornfully with an explicit gesture of defiance. Therefore, it is significant that in the face of holocausts of war and the collapse of culture and civilization, the western intellectuals looked at the elements of black humor as the only psychic remonstrance against nuclear devastation, the onslaught of political bossism and bureaucratization of institutions on the minds of helpless people.

Before we proceed further it is important to analyze the writing of the fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century when there emerged a group of writers who reflected in their writings a 'sick vision of life'. They were the progenitors of black humor fiction. A good number of critics have put forward their respective viewpoints regarding the perceptions that fired their imagination and enlivened the philosophical foundations of black humor. A close study of Heller, Barth, Pynchon, and Vonnegut reflects that black humor fiction came to into existence as a response of the artist to face up a meaningless universe, made absurd by the 'new logic' of modern science, technological control of life, social and political madness and a general loss of self. Much of the despair that we come across in post-war American fiction results from disillusionment with the war and from disgust with the

depression of the period. Thus, post war experimental fiction provided the writers an opportunity to deal with the theme of violence, alienation, fragmentation, meaninglessness, satire, and absurdity.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. projects a very pessimistic vision of life in his novel, according to which all human efforts to save mankind from the ravages of time are futile; the dream of socio-economic renaissance for improving the lot of humanity is rendered meaningless. Vonnegut wants to suggest that man is unable to make any improvement in his predicament or to change it. Passivity, acceptance, resignation, and denial are offered as solutions in Vonnegut's novels in the face of helplessness situation. History bears testimony to the fact that man has been struggling for his existence for a better life and thus he has been trying to discover the inimical forces to crush them. He must face various defeats at the hands of the cruel forces of history, yet he has never accepted the defeat. But like a typical black humorist, Vonnegut is skeptical about the heroic character of man. On the contrary, man is impotent in the face of uncontrollable and intractable circumstances. Thus, in Vonnegut's world there can be no transition from suffering to action, from victim to fighter.

It is significant to mention that *Player Piano* is an excellent example of social satire. Vonnegut shows the horrors that could result from overvaluing technology and efficiency and from undervaluing people. By satirizing what is wrong with the present American society, Vonnegut hopes to prevent the events in his novel from actually taking place. By examining outsiders like Adolph Eichmann and Howard W. Campbell, Jr., Vonnegut probes the question of why men commit atrocities and how they are able to live with their own consciences. *Mother Night* ends with Campbell's decision to commit suicide. The novel while comic certainly does not represent Northrop Frye's 'New Comedy' which would include a mythic victory of spring over winter and life over death.

Vonnegut often softens the feeling of hopelessness by focusing his novel on Howard W. Campbell, a man who observes hilarious incidents but is incapable of understanding the jokes. Two typical Vonnegut joke sequences illustrate how this technique works in *Mother Night*. Campbell's diary of his life with Helga is discovered by a Russian writer named Bodovskov has been arrested and execute; his crime has not been plagiarism but originality. When he ran out of Campbell's material, Bodovskov wrote a two-thousand page satire n the Red Army, written in a style "distinctly un-Bodovskovian" (157). In another joke sequence, Resi North throws away a noose that the American man named Szombathy finds it in the next morning and hangs himself. Szombathy kills

himself because he is not permitted to practice veterinary medicine. Finally, Vonnegut reveals that reason the garbage man is despondent is that he has a cure for cancer that the world has ignored.

Vonnegut aptly states that the Nazis in *Mother Night* are comic rather than frightening and this effect is heightened by Campbell's detached narration. At one point, for example, Paul Joseph Goebbels asks Campbell to write a pageant honoring the German soldiers who died during the Warsaw uprising by the Jews. When Campbell responds by translating Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address into German, Goebbels is so impressed by such a "very fine piece of propaganda" that he gives it to Hitler to read. He does so with a certain amount of apprehension that Lincoln might have been Jewish. Hitler responds by writing that "Some parts of this almost made me weep. All northern peoples are one in their deep feelings for soldiers. It is perhaps our greatest bond" (16). Campbell does not seem to see the ironic contrast between Lincoln's effort to free slaves and Hitler's effort to eliminate the Jews. Also, he can't see the similarity between Hitler's use of Lincoln's speech and Bodovskov's use of Campbell's own material. The 'greatest bond' of which Hitler speaks that holds all Northern peoples together it to a great extent responsible for the war raging in Europe at the time.

It is significant that black humorists usually view the world as so complex and so fragmented that any answer can only be tentative. The best answer offered to the readers is how to smile through their tears at the absurdities of the world. Vonnegut uses this technique of black humor to enable him to deal with subjects too painful to handle in any other way. Thus, Vonnegut believes that laughter acts as an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential sorrow, pain and anguish.

Thematically and technically, *Slapstick* functions as a coda to Vonnegut's fiction. It is significant that this novel is concerned with harmony and loneliness. Vonnegut's inspiration is his sister Alice Vonnegut, who gives his fiction its harmony and direction. The thrust of Vonnegut's fiction has moved from detached ironic observation to impassioned participation. His early works, *Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan*, were concerned with the external environment like the dangers of technology and the glorification of the machine. In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut began to concern himself more with internal state of consciousness and the problem of schizophrenia, as well as the epistemological question of what can be perceived as real and as simple illusory.

I wish to point out the salient features of the technique of comedy in *Slapstick* to reveal Vonnegut's disenchantment with the lack of supportive culture in America, particularly

the disenfranchisement brought by the breaking down of regionalism. *Slapstick* is explicit with Vonnegut's search for a philosophy of life that would explain its cruelties and injustices.

By the time Vonnegut began writing *Slapstick*, his perception of life had changed to that of *Slapstick* comedy in which he again and again confides that he and his sister never achieved successful harmonious living. The resonance of the *Slapstick* comedy is that life is based on the Bokonist "fundamental joke". Although Laurel and Hardy did their best with every test and never failed to bargain in good faith with their destinies, they constantly made mistakes and failed because they were not "really very good at life". This comment closes a circle began with Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, in which the "Ghost-shirt society" pleaded with the 'Organization' to see the virtues in imperfection, frailty, inefficiency, and a brilliance followed by stupidity. The 'Organization' is now an indifferent cosmos rather than an industrial bureaucracy. It still creates situations, according to Vonnegut, in which we are losers.

Indeed, at the beginning of *Slapstick*, Vonnegut likens his attitude toward love to that found in the films of Laurel and Hardy:

There was very little love in their films. There was often the situational poetry of marriage, which was something else again. It was yet another test – with comical possibilities, provided that everybody submitted to it in good faith.

Love was never at issue. And, perhaps because I was so perpetually intoxicated and instructed by Laurel and Hardy during my childhood in the Great Depression. I find it naturally to discuss life without

ever mentioning
love.

It does not seem
important to me.

What does seem
important?

Bargaining in good
fate with destiny.
(2)

It is significant that the story of the novel is narrated by Dr. Wilbur Daffodil – II Swain, the 100 year – old man who was the final president of the United States. It begins with him, sitting in a small clearing in the jungle which once was Manhattan, writing his autobiography. Wilbur tells the story of himself and his twin sister Eliza. They were born into a family which brought together much of the wealth of America. Though mistaken at birth for ‘mongoloid idiots’, they are in fact actually ‘neanderthaloids’, a new type of human being. Wilbur is an intellectual Eliza can’t read or write but she possesses an uncanny intuitive ability which when combined with Wilbur’s knowledge highlight their creative genius. In other words they are specialized halves of a single brain. They are truncated when separated yet “born with the capacity and determination to be utterly happy all the time” when they are together.

It may further be stated that Vonnegut enlightens the ‘delightful asteroid’ in which their parents have them ‘entombed’ into a ‘paradise’. Their archangel Michael is the psychologist Dr. Cordelia Swain Cordiner, who destroys the paradise of their “nation of two” and says: “this is the United States of America, where nobody has a right to rely on anybody else – where everybody learns to make his or her own way”. Thus Wilbur and Eliza become aware that life is a tragedy as well as a comedy. After their separation, Eliza is locked away for many years against her will in an institution for the feeble mind. Wilbur is sent to Harvard Medical School, becomes a rural pediatrician in Vermont then a Senator and finally the last President of the United States. He is elected President on a platform of “Lonesome No More!” a spectacular utopian plan for universal happiness. To Vonnegut the underlying cause of loneliness is the American melting pot that destroys cultural and regional differences and that creates homogenized Americans that look alike, dress alike, and even think alike. All forms of loneliness and isolation are eliminated by arbitrarily assigning everyone thousands of relatives by computer thereby making them part of larger families.

The irony in this is that Wilbur is unable to have real intimacy, just as he is unable to share love. In the preface

Vonnegut has rightly pointed out to the failure of love as a redeeming and unifying force in the world. “I find it natural to discuss life without even mentioning love”, he says, and “I cannot distinguish between the love I have for people and the love I have for dogs” (2). Indeed, love “can often be poisonous” and Vonnegut wants it replaced by “common decency”. When Wilbur and Eliza attempt a reconciliation of these strands the result is an incredible intense, traumatic, and pathetic orgy which lasts for “five whole nights and days” and which terrifies them both.

In *Slapstick*, the Chinese communist scientists observe that America and its allies produced their greatest weapon, the atomic bomb, by cooperating with each other. By following this example of cooperation, the Chinese miniaturize themselves and join together psychically to form the most powerful cosmic force in the universe. The result is the destabilization of the Earth’s gravity and the destruction of the entire Western World by “Green Death” which is the result of microscopic Chinese microorganisms that caused death when inhaled or ingested. Vonnegut argues that it is appropriately ironic that America’s greatest scientific achievement, the atomic bomb ultimately leads to its destruction by microscopic Chinese who are as small as the atoms American scientists had unleashed.

It may be concluded that the strong eschatological thread runs through Vonnegut’s fiction. It is closely linked to his continued preoccupation over the question of man’s ability to control his own destiny. The autobiography which he writes in *Slapstick* is simply his acceptance of the impossibility ever discovering life’s inherent meaning and his realization that the key to humanity’s survival and happiness is its acceptance of life with the good-natured earnestness and sincerity of Laurel and Hardy. In *Slapstick* Vonnegut fashions a new medium of fantasy juxtaposed with very sincere, confessional journalism. In this new element, Vonnegut, like Swain, appears to be ‘quite at home and unafraid’.

Moreover, the best of *Slapstick* comedians may be said to have turned low humor into high art. Wilbur and Eliza Swain’s effort to please their parents by suddenly transforming themselves into intelligent teenagers in laudable and their puzzled reaction to their parents’ guilt feeling for having treated them as idiots for fifteen years is perfectly human and very appropriate. What perfectly captures the slapstick quality of Laurel and Hardy at their best is the native decision by the brother and the sister to make everyone once again happy by reverting to their idiotic behavior and by beginning to throw food while drooling. Their motivation is laudable. It is certainly an attempt to bargain in good faith with their destiny, but it is also ludicrous and hilarious.

Vonnegut emerged as the most prominent American novelist in the 1960s. He introduced the theories of language and discourse to demonstrate the invalidity of value reference and meaning of the twentieth-century American life. Vonnegut, however, struck a balance between nihilistic despair and humanist affirmation. Recognizing the limits of stylistic self-indulgence, Vonnegut devoted his artistic energies to defining the cultural malaise. Always a moralist, even at his expressions of black humor, Vonnegut identifies the moral malaise with isolation, which he prefers to call by the homelier and starker name of loneliness.

In my brief analysis of *Jailbird* I intend to reflect on this aspect of loneliness. Vonnegut categorically identifies family, community, and culture as the collective antidote of loneliness. Fantasy sequences depict heaven as a place of ultimate familial harmony. It is the mode of fantasy which reflects heaven as a place where one-vicious Nazis and innocent little girls live together happily.

It may be stated that in *Jailbird* Vonnegut sets out to record the history of the twentieth-century American life. It is the history of those who in Vonnegut's view, promote the values of a collective standard of social welfare and advocate the notion of treating all citizens as family members. It is typical of Vonnegut, that he tempers his vision of familial utopia by setting it against an imagined collapse of American civilization. The novel culminates in revelations about many Kathleen O'Looney, a bag lady who happens to own a corporation – RAMJAC – a mythic proportion.

Moreover, the prologue to *Jailbird* is also autobiographical. Vonnegut talks about his father as a failed architect and his mother prone to suicidal tendencies. The family relationships are set against the background of the Cuyahoga Massacre and the references to Sacco and Vanzetti. In this way, Vonnegut uses history to support the personal narrative which, in turn, reinforces the fiction. The narrator of *Jailbird* feels guilty of crimes which history and circumstances have forced him to inherit. His life has been a nightmare for longer than he can remember (98). RAMJAC, incredibly, is the opposite of every corporate cliché. It functions as the arm of Mary O'Looney's charity. It is another extended family.

However, in this novel the extended family cannot survive in its original character after the passing of the matriarch. It proves subject to economic, cultural, and social laws that subvert enlightened efforts to consolidate fraternal relations within the family of human beings. *Jailbird* is also Vonnegut's reflection to twentieth century American political and economic history. A recurrent motif in this novel is "the Harvard Man" usually invoked

at the expense of this entity. Harvard has always had a reputation for its liberalism. It furnishes a remarkable number of tarnished angels to the halls of corrupt power. The novel focuses on Watergate, the infamous scandal. The theme of the novel can be best expressed by the judge who summons Starbuck and gives him a dressing-down for his folly in giving the reactionary Right ammunition to use against "pity and brains". Starbuck, says the judge, has "set humanitarianism back a full century". To set back humanitarianism is to set back prospects for returning society to familial standards of decency. It is to postpone the millennial "folk society".

Indeed, early in the novel Starbuck thinks of his wife Ruth, a concentration camp survivor who believed:

... that all human beings were evil by nature, whether tormentors or victims, or idle slanders-by. They could only create, meaningless tragedies, she said, since they were not nearly intelligent enough to accomplish all the good they meant to do. We were a disease, she said, which had evolved on one tiny cinder in the universe, but could spread and spread" (23).

Late in the novel Starbuck reflects bitterly on the absurdity of human aspirations in the face of an indifferent universe. "We are here for no purpose, unless we can invent one. Of that I am sure. "No matter what he had done with his life, he thinks, "the human condition in an exploding universe would not have been altered on iota" (236).

In the conclusion of *Jailbird*, it may be stated that Vonnegut remains committed to the ideals enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount. Starbuck invokes the most hopeful of New Testament texts early on, along with a composite myth (the Cuyahoga massacre) of labor exploited, oppressed and resistant. Thus, he invokes Sacco and Vanzetti throughout, from the epigraph (xxxix) to the closing passages. Vonnegut defines anarchists here as "persons who believe with all their hearts that governments are enemies of their own people" (175) (PS, 122). Though

Jailbird ends with the RAMJAC family subverted, the novel's liberal passion delivers it from negativism. Indeed, this is a major achievement of Vonnegut.

His last science fiction, *Galapagos* is hailed as one of the finest works in which Vonnegut expresses the futility of human life and distrust of scientific ideologies. Scientific observation is taken over by a familiar blend of social commentary and science fiction. The evolution of humanity is predicted for the next million years. In this apocalyptic satire of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Vonnegut argues that humankind is doomed to evolutionary failure. Because of the freakishly large human brain, an evolutionary mistake causes an immense variety of afflictions, threatening the future of the human race as well as other species and the planet itself. The novel centers on a group of tourists marooned on the Galapagos Islands by a nuclear war and a worldwide economic collapse. Descendants of the tourists eventually attain a more peaceful existence by developing fins, beaks, and smaller, less dangerous brains. *Galapagos* is both a harrowing litany of big-brain abuses against life and good order and a semi paean to the joys of devolution.

Significantly, the setting, the characters and the narrative strategy are all closely related to the theme of evolution. Indeed, the interdependence of all elements to the central vision of the novel is what makes *Galapagos* more coherent and satisfying than its immediate predecessors. It may be argued that *Galapagos* takes the reader back into the familiar territory. The subject is the end of the world. The objects of lamentation are man's cruelty to man, contemporary society, modern technology, and the horrors of war – World War II AND Vietnam. Though there are no sing-song refrains like "hip pity-hop", "hi ho" or "so it goes", the narrative voice still has the quality of a verbal shrug-flip, careless and willfully casual. The voyage from the mainland of South America to the most remote of the Galapagos Islands is the symbolic turning point in evolution from the present to the start of a bizarre future.

Moreover, the narrator of *Galapagos* is none other than the headless ghost of Kilgore Trout's son Leon Trotsky Trout. He waits a million years before joining his father by entering "the blue tunnel to the afterlife". Vonnegut has boldly experimented with the narrative strategy in this novel. Kilgore Trout is a familiar alter-ego, a very prolific and unappreciated author of science fiction. The idea of Tralfamadore comes from a Kilgore Trout book that Billy Pilgrim read in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The hero of the novel, Leon Trotsky Trout does not have a normal life. His mother was a red-headed, left-handed woman who walked out on the family when Leon was a child. Leon feels abandoned by his parents and later betrayed by his government. He

walks away from the mistake of Vietnam like his mother attempting to leave behind a bad marriage.

Vonnegut aptly states that given the oddity of his genetic inheritance and the horrors of his experience; Trout can be expected to narrate a story about evolution from his unusual perspective. The details of the narrator's sad life and early death are scattered in *Galapagos*. Ironic symmetries occur throughout the novel, along with an intricately woven time-space development that ranges back and forth and up and down from 1935, when the Galapagos Islands were first discovered. It is a million years into the future – to eternity itself where Kilgore Trout addresses from the 'blue tunnel leading to the afterlife'. Events range widely in time and space. They are knitted together by the web of ironic and accidental interdependencies. The exposure to war gives the narrator a haunted memory of violence in much the same way that Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. The shooting of the old woman is followed by the massacre of the whole village. The future narrator is supplied with a vision of destruction that is both common in Vonnegut's fiction and crucial to the theme of evolution in *Galapagos*.

Indeed, Vonnegut's bold experimentation with the headless ghost haunts the Bahia de Darwin and its survivors throughout the novel. Vonnegut's style combines the first person and omniscient narrative. The most important scene for understanding the significance of the narrator may be late in the novel when he has a conversation with his dead father. Kilgore Trout chides his son for lingering on earth as a headless spirit. He encourages him to move at once into the afterlife. The cynical advice from Kilgore Trout gives his son a chance to explain why he wants to remain on earth a little longer: "I had chosen to be a ghost because the job carried out with it, as a fringe benefit, license to read minds, to learn the truth of people's pasts, to see through walls, to be at many places all at once, to learn in depth how this or that situation had come to be structured as it was and to have access to all human knowledge" (253).

It may be pointed out that Vonnegut's success with *Galapagos* owes much to this winsome and paradoxical mixture of curiosity, wry cynicism, and tragic hopefulness. The narrator of *Galapagos* tells the story of evolution from a human point of view is wise beyond its year, high spirited and doomed.

III. CONCLUSION

In sum, it may be argued that the wealth of Vonnegut's techniques – science fiction, humor, satire, and absurdity stand firmly in the American tradition, even though it is contemporary social satire particularly fitted to the tenor of

the times. Again, Vonnegut's pessimism is redeemed by humor: the joke of man's pride in how well he designed a machine to replace him, the grim humor of a frozen POW trying to don a coat ten sizes too small, the absurdity of a doomed Martian invasion. Thus, Vonnegut has put the traditional American novel in matrix of the contemporary scenario. Some critics point out that the contemporary techniques are slick and superficial and the substance a thin caricature of the tradition. But a perceptive study of Vonnegut's fiction shows that his techniques revitalize old forms and make possible a return of tradition lost or observed earlier in the country.

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