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## A Blend of Absurdism and Humanism: Defending Kurt Vonnegut's Place in the Secondary Setting

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## **A BLEND OF ABSURDISM AND HUMANISM: DEFENDING KURT VONNEGUT'S PLACE IN THE SECONDARY SETTING**

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MENTOR: PAUL ALLISON

Behind a glass case in the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library on Senate Avenue in downtown Indianapolis sits an unopened, yellowed envelope addressed to Kurt Vonnegut. The letter was written by Kurt Vonnegut, Sr., during World War II but was never delivered to his son, who at the time was a prisoner of war in Dresden, Germany. The words "Missing: 1-7-45" are written in large letters across the bottom. Eventually, the letter found its way to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., after the war, but he never opened it. Vonnegut later gave it to his son, claiming "I never opened this, and I'd appreciate if you didn't either" (Lafave).

I saw the letter on a sunny October afternoon when I visited the Memorial Library to interview the curator. Like many of Kurt Vonnegut's protagonists, I had set out to find the truth of an uncertainty, but unlike those characters, the truth I was searching for centered around their creator and not my own. As I stood above the letter, having attempted to read some words through the envelope and finding myself unsuccessful, I realized that the envelope was not simply a letter, but a metaphor for my research. The letter represented an unanswerable question that I desperately wanted to understand; it stood for everything I could not know. As I left the library that afternoon, I felt as though Vonnegut, like his writing, was asking me to be a kind person by respecting the mystery the letter represented.

Kurt Vonnegut's work tells tales of ridiculous people in bizarre places; yet in the midst of his fantastical stories, he proves that hope endures in the strangest of places. His brilliance remains in his ability to integrate absurd and humanist philosophies to create charismatic stories that encourage his readers to better the communities in which they exist. This unique postmodern outlook places Vonnegut as a prime candidate for the secondary English curriculum, as adolescents are developing the ability to process the philosophical questions that Vonnegut's characters explore throughout his novels. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are most often used, if at all, to introduce Vonnegut to American students, and these novels clearly embody this harmonization of absurdism and humanism that Vonnegut captures so vividly, urging his readers to first question and then improve their society.

To comprehend Kurt Vonnegut's interpretation of the absurd, one must first understand a brief history and a general explanation of the absurd philosophy. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* describes the internal impression of absurdity as "a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger... he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (6). From this definition, one can determine that the absurd hero suffers from the separation between his mind and the ideal of significant existence. Although physically present on Earth, his essence is alienated from the connection that holds meaning to his life.

Michael Y. Bennett, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd*, claims that absurd literature embodies three characteristics: It "discusses the senseless and meaningless of life," it is always existential, and it employs "ridiculous plots" (9). Bennett also explains the modern application of the absurd, declaring that the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust forced society to question the reality of God and the purpose of existence (9). Bennett's explanation of the absurd is directly applicable to Vonnegut's work, as the author was drafted and captured in World War II (Shields 61). Much of Vonnegut's work attempts to make sense of his personal encounter with war, and many of his characters are based on men he observed as a prisoner in Dresden, Germany (Shields 76). While not all of Vonnegut's novels explicitly relay his experiences in World War II, one must note that his confrontation with war serves as a foundation for his philosophy of absurdism and humanism.

In an interview with Robert Musil in 1980, Vonnegut expressed his view on the condition of life, a condition that strongly correlates with the idea of the absurd:

I think that at least half the people alive, and maybe nine-tenths of them, really do not like this ordeal at all. They pretend to like it some, to smile at strangers, and to get up each morning in order to survive, in order to somehow get through it. But life is, for most people, a very terrible ordeal. They would just as soon end it anytime. And I really think that is more of a problem really than greed or machismo or anything like that. I think that's the fundamental thing that's going on. (Musil 129)

With these words, Vonnegut poses the conflict of the absurd, a conflict with which nearly all of his characters will suffer. He reiterates that life has become meaningless for a great deal of people and that absurdity is a central issue in our society; his novels incorporate this same theme.

At the same time, however, Vonnegut's novels surpass absurdism and transcend to a hopeful stage of humanity, making Vonnegut's work genuinely distinct. Vonnegut's unique characteristic, the one trait that sets him apart from his postmodern contemporaries, remains in his response to the absurd. Vonnegut presents broad philosophical questions about religion, war, time, money, life, and death; however, he does not abandon the reader at the end of this presentation. Instead, Vonnegut blends a unique humanist stance into the absurd, urging his readers to confront it with a kindness and human decency that his characters find rare. Todd F. Davis claims that Vonnegut "offers a hopeful solution to the postmodern condition. In his novels, speeches, and essays, he presents the potential for reassociations, for creation, for a world beyond fragmentation" (31). While Vonnegut posits unanswerable questions, he also encourages hope for the human race in the spaces of his words.

Vonnegut offers a personal definition of humanism in his autobiographical essay collection *A Man Without A Country*: "We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife... We serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community" (80). It is with these humanist attributes that Vonnegut creates the charismatic draw of readers to his ridiculous plots and fantastical characters. His unparalleled blending of humanism and absurdism establish his genius as both author and societal critic in a demoralized world.

Vonnegut reveals humanist themes in three ways throughout *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*: through the direct words of a character, through the invitation to view imminent fate humorously, and through the absurd situations of his characters. His humanism asks readers to consider the society in which they live and ponder the methods in which they can better it. His unique narration forces readers to see the ingrained value of human worth, through the depictions of a ridiculous humanity.

One of Vonnegut's recurring characters, Eliot Rosewater, serves as the absurdist hero in the novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Vonnegut's commentary on money, greed, charity, and the American monopoly are central foci in the novel. Rosewater, an extremely wealthy man with a missionary-esque attitude settles in Rosewater County, Indiana, to aid its citizens with anything they could need. Rosewater's absurdity exists in the alienation from his life as the wealthy heir of the Rosewater Foundation. His separation from his familial life and existence as a charitable benefactor in Rosewater County forces him to question his purpose.

Rosewater's absurd question comes from the voice of Kilgore Trout at the end of the novel: "It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time...The problem is this: How to love people who have no use?" (332). Rosewater's attempt to find meaning through the people of Rosewater County in spite of the absurd in which he lives is ultimately the cause of his mental collapse. However, the effectiveness of his "experiment" to study and help the people of Rosewater County is put into question at the end of the novel when the women of the county claim their children as Eliot's biological offspring, thus furthering Eliot's question of meaning and purpose (336).

The humanism in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* exists in a passage that serves as a moral for the novel. The quote comes from Eliot as he plans what to say at a baptism for a set of twins: "Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies --: 'God damn it, you've got to be kind'" (260). Although this phrase comes from Eliot Rosewater, Vonnegut seems to be explicitly addressing his readers in this call to kindness, using his characters as vehicles in his exodus toward a better humanity.

In an interview toward the end of his life, Vonnegut claimed "while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free" (Shields 351). This declaration correlates directly with the humanistic theme he employs in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Eliot Rosewater lives by the same notion in his attempt to help those of Rosewater County. Brian McCammack makes a note of this theme in his article on socialism in *Rosewater*, claiming that the novel explores the question of "what happens when you give poor people money" and that through the novel, Vonnegut "decides that it is not money the poor need, but love" (161). This theme reflects Vonnegut's definition of humanism, as Eliot embraces the community of Rosewater County and encourages others to behave decently as well. Ultimately, Vonnegut blends humanism into the absurdity of Eliot's alienation through his determination to unconditionally love the people of Rosewater County.

While Vonnegut presents an explicit moral message to combat the absurdity of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, his exploration of absurdism and humanism in *Cat's Cradle* relies on different devices. Jonah of *Cat's Cradle* becomes an absurd hero through his attempt to understand morality in spite of the depravity of science. Due to Jonah's quest, *Cat's Cradle* becomes what John R. May calls "a novel of the discovery of purpose" (31). Through Jonah's retrospective narrative, the reader

travels with the protagonist on his expedition to understand Dr. Felix Hoenikker's creation of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945 and the events that transpire as a result of his journey.

Absurdity exists in several facets in *Cat's Cradle*, first appearing in the institution of Bokononism, a religion created, spawned, and then outlawed by the leaders of San Lorenzo in an attempt to inspire hope in the indigenous people of the island through the secret practice of religion. Bokonon's poem on the creation of religion expresses this in a more euphonious manner: "So I said good-bye to government, / And I gave my reason: / That a really good religion / Is a form of treason" (115). Bokonon's invented religion has many absurd qualities; one story in the Books of Bokonon greatly exemplifies the absurd: "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" (174). This deistic view of God and religion is something all of the characters of *Cat's Cradle* attempt to process throughout their time in San Lorenzo. While all of the characters understand the ploy of Bokononism and accept Bokonon's claim that the entire religion is *foma*, or "lies," they convert to the outlawed religion regardless. The absurd exists in this situation through man's innate need to find meaning, to find the connection between himself and his "alien universe" despite his knowledge of its fabrication.

The second facet of absurdity in *Cat's Cradle* lies in the literal end of the world. On what Jonah terms "The Day the World Ended," the title of the novel he writes in his post-apocalyptic survival, ice-nine covered the planet Earth, turning everything to ice and killing nearly all of its inhabitants. Thus, Jonah's "discovery of purpose" becomes insignificant with the end of the world. Absurdism is evident in the immediate spread of ice-nine which establishes an actual separation between man and his universe. Ice-nine becomes the tangible symbol of the absurd condition.

*Cat's Cradle* is arguably one of Vonnegut's most humorous novels, but this humor does not exist without the absurdity he employs. Vonnegut asks his readers to "laugh at the inevitable" by embracing the humanistic quality of goodness despite the absurd separation of man and the universe (May 26). Vonnegut once claimed that "joking is [his] response to misery that [he] can't do anything about" (Klinkowitz 67). This phrase embodies the humor of *Cat's Cradle* by implying that if man cannot find amusement in his fate, he will not be able to cope with the absurdity that surrounds him.

Vonnegut's purpose in writing *Cat's Cradle* was to make a statement about both science and religion, and in doing so, he created a satirical and comedic tragedy that forces readers to think about the morality of their choices. In my interview, Chris Lafave, curator of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, spoke of the therapeutic nature of Vonnegut's humor: "When you read Vonnegut's work, you're either going to have the sense of humor that thinks that's sick and say 'I don't like that. I'm depressed now.' Or you're going to burst out laughing. That laugh for me is therapeutic." This therapy Vonnegut provides amidst his description of the end of the world is yet another humanist quality.

The second humanist aspect of *Cat's Cradle* is apparent through the overarching moral of the novel. Jonah's study on Felix Henniker comes to the conclusion that scientists should not be allowed unrestricted power without any moral consideration. Vonnegut's message insinuates that if man does not care about the consequences of his actions, the world will come to an end. Although this is a literal end for the characters of *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut is urging his readers to realize that they must consider their decisions before society devolves into chaos.

Lastly, I arrive at *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's most complex and passionate novel, alternately taught and banned in numerous schools across the country. The protagonist of this novel is Billy Pilgrim, second in fame only to Vonnegut's Kilgore Trout; the narration of this science-fiction, anti-war novel follows Pilgrim as he becomes unstuck in time throughout the decades of his life. A unique study, Pilgrim will be in bed with his wife in his forties, and the next minute, he will be present in his twenty-year-old body as a prisoner in Dresden, Germany. Billy's time-jumping represents the power that war has on the mind and how that power consume soldiers' lives after they return home. Billy only becomes unstuck in time with the aid of the Tralfamadorians, the aliens who capture him and place him on display in a zoo on their home planet, Tralfamador, for several years.

The Tralfamadorians ultimately serve as the catalyst that provokes Billy's absurdist epiphany through their description of the end of the world:

"We know how the Universe ends—" said the guide, "and Earth has nothing to do with it, except that it gets wiped out, too."

"How-how does the Universe end?" said Billy.

"We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears." So it goes.

“If You know this,” said Billy, “isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?”

“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.”

“So,” said Billy gropingly, “I suppose that the idea of, preventing war on Earth is stupid, too.” (423)

In this conversation, Billy confronts the absurd as he accepts the inevitability of war and the nonexistence of free will. The Tralfamadorians claim that all men are “trapped in the amber of the moment,” implying that all moments exist separately from man’s chronological construct of time (396). Life becomes endless in these moments that exist eternally. Billy’s recognition of determinism forces him into an absurd state where he fails to perceive meaning in a world in which he has no control. Camus’ definition of the absurd claims that “man feels an alien” in an absurd world, and in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy is disconnected from meaning by a literal alien.

Vonnegut connects the absurdism of Billy Pilgrim to Eliot Rosewater, stating:

They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the firebombing of Dresden. So it goes. (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 412)

In this, Vonnegut indicates the origination of the absurd as a direct result of war. The overarching topic of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, war, becomes the root of absurdism and the rationale for humanism.

The humanism Vonnegut employs in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, is not so simple to express. Vonnegut’s genuine portrayal of the absurd grittiness of war both captivates and repulses readers, while at the same time asks them to reconsider the society in which they exist. One quote or a simple moral cannot embody Vonnegut’s complex hunger for a better humanity in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Rather, the novel as a whole becomes the work of art that ignites the reader into the humanist passion Vonnegut conceives. The unique quality of the novel remains in Vonnegut’s indifferent portrayal of the world he describes, as his satirical narration



presents atrocities to the reader without attempting to manipulate them into morality.

Vonnegut establishes multiple characteristics that contribute to the humanist capacity of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The reader is first introduced to the narrator of the novel, which one immediately assumes is Vonnegut himself. In this first chapter introduction, Vonnegut refrains from his satirical humor and speaks plainly to the reader. This voice embodies the *real*; it distinguishes this novel from Vonnegut's others in a way that tells the reader this book will be different, that this book is not a joke about existence, but a novel exploring the painful truth of it.

Even through Vonnegut's description of the cruelties of war, the narrator maintains a forgiving tone that promotes the redemption of humanity. In the first chapter, the narrator recalls a story from Genesis 19 about the destruction of the cities Sodom and Gomorrah: "And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. She was turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes" (359). In this passage, Vonnegut seems to say that while humans are the cause of their own destruction, they are not villains, but ignorant in their fatal decisions. Lafave commented on this merciful tone: "His satire had an oddly forgiving sense. His father used to critique him, saying 'you [Vonnegut] never write a story with a villain in it.' He tried to be forgiving of his characters even when he was making them look like buffoons." Vonnegut's forgiveness contributes to the unique sense of hope to which he alludes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

This unique quality of Vonnegut's can somewhat be related to postmodern humanist value of the human life. Davis clarifies the difference between the modernist and postmodernist goals for humanity: "Unlike the modernist, the postmodernist does not believe in the perfectibility of humanity or a final, static position such as utopia; rather the postmodern humanist concentrates on daily, local activity that may improve human life" (32). All of Vonnegut's works prove this statement of postmodern humanists to be true. Vonnegut values the human life, even if the indifferent tone of *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to suggest otherwise.

Vonnegut employs this indifferent tone as he describes every death in the novel with a particular phrase. After every sentence featuring death, one can expect to find the words "so it goes." Billy explains the origin of the phrase in a letter, claiming that the Tralfamadorians use it to describe the dead (362). Billy explains in the letter that the aliens see time differently than humans: "The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies, he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his

funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist” (362). Therefore, the words “so it goes” change meaning with the different constructs of time.

Humans do not have the capability to see all moments and are restricted to the cruelty of chronology; thus the phrase “so it goes” implies the idea that life moves regardless of death. Vonnegut’s repetition of the words, told in the unsympathetic tone of the narrator, suggests the insignificance of death. This is *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s humanism. The indifferent tone of the author nearly forces the reader to react, to say that deaths matter, and that to move on immediately in the face of death is an inhumane atrocity. With these three, small words, Vonnegut convinces the reader to question the justification of war.

Perhaps the most significant “so it goes” is the one that follows Edgar Derby’s death: “Somewhere in there the poor old high school teacher, Edgar Derby, was caught with a teapot he had taken from the catacombs. He was arrested for plundering. He was tried and shot. So it goes” (490). This scene’s significance remains in the complete insignificance of the teapot. Derby’s death is the final “so it goes” in the novel and is the breaking point for the reader. The character, Edgar Derby, was based on a fellow prisoner Vonnegut knew in Germany, a man named Michael Palaia, who was shot for taking a jar of string beans when the men were gathering the pieces of Dresden (Shields 82). Vonnegut saw the absurdity of the “so it goes” notion in person, and in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he portrays the inhumanity with the same insensitive manner he witnessed as a prisoner.

Vonnegut’s humanism in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is unlike his other novels, as Vonnegut offers it to his readers with a peaceful outstretched hand, pleading with them to realize that war invites absurdism to destroy the soul. Vonnegut’s writing encourages a better humanity, one that accepts the existence of the absurd but relies on human decency to find meaning. His humanism in all three novels begs readers to resist the absurd by recognizing that hope exists in the innocence of kindness and decency. This unique blend of humanism and absurdism makes Vonnegut a prime candidate for the secondary curriculum, as his characters’ journeys correlate thematically with the growth and process of postmodern adolescents and encourage moral responsibility without sentimental manipulation.

Vonnegut has continued to fascinate adolescents for decades; perhaps his unapologetic irreverence or his bizarre plot structures contain a certain teenage magnetism. The author once posed a theory on his charismatic draw for youth: “Maybe it’s because I deal with sophomoric questions that full adults regard as settled. I talk about what is God like, what could He want, is there a heaven, and, if

there is, what would it be like?" (Davis 7). Vonnegut's hypothesis on these abstract questions directly correlates with many psychologists' theories regarding adolescent development.

For instance, Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist often studied in the education field, is known for his theory of cognitive development. In the Formal Operations stage, an individual at typically eleven to fifteen years old transitions from concrete thought to processing abstract ideas and hypothetical concepts (Wadsworth 111). Adolescents in this stage begin to open their minds to the unknown and unseen, asking questions that Vonnegut's characters also implicitly ask. Secondly, in Erik Erikson's eight general stages of life, adolescents age eleven to eighteen enter the stage "Identity vs. Confusion." In this stage, adolescents are in a "state of suspended morality as they begin to formulate personal ideologies based upon values that differ from their parents'" (Berzoff 111). At the secondary level, students begin to process values and ideas that create meaning for them, an attempt that can often result in the absurd.

Michael Nakkula, a professor of psychology and human development at University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, expands on the adolescent's inherent need to process this unknown:

Reality, for many adolescents, becomes a subset of possibility. This new mode of cognition carries with it the potential for an expansion of ethical decision making, empathy, considerations of justice, and comprehensions of ultimate meaning, but it also ushers in waves of doubt, threats of meaninglessness, and struggles with the multiplicity of religious expression and meaning. It is easy to see, then why so many adolescents are so eager to engage in conversations about truth, reality, and the nature of life itself. (Nakkula 205)

From Nakkula's description of the adolescents' thought processes, one can see the connection between adolescence and the absurd. While the absurd is characterized by life's meaninglessness and Nakkula claims that adolescence can merely ponder it, the two states are incredibly similar, particularly in Vonnegut's writing.

Nakkula's description of adolescence is comparable to Vonnegut's characterization of the absurd heroes in his novels. Eliot Rosewater's absurd alienation forces him to reconsider ethics as he cares for the people in Rosewater County without the approval of his father. Jonah's absurd journey, ultimately leading to the apocalypse, reevaluates how societal justice works in conjunction to science. Billy Pilgrim's absurd life forces him, and the reader, to consider the

meaning of life and how war fits into human purpose. Much like these characters, the adolescent embarks on an absurdist quest to find ethics, justice, and meaning while attempting to piece together discoveries to create a personal identity.

Furthermore, Kurt Vonnegut's work connects to youth even today, more than twenty years after the publication of his last novel, through the relevance of his topics. Robin Roberson's "Helping Students Find Relevance" reiterates that relevance is a determining factor in content retention for students in the classroom. Students often ask, "How will I use this in *real life*?" Their inherent need to connect to the real world is a crucial factor teachers must consider in choosing curriculum material. Vonnegut's writing remains culturally relevant because his novels address continuous problems in our society. At some point in their lives, students are going to face some of the issues Vonnegut questions in his work, whether that is war, political injustice, monetary greed, scientific immorality, or so on. Vonnegut's novels address the same big questions adolescents are beginning to process, therefore making his work personally relevant for secondary students.

Despite Vonnegut's draw for young readers, relatable characters, and genuine relevance to adolescents, his work continues to be censored in secondary schools across the country. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is listed on the American Library Association's 100 Most Frequently Challenged Books from the 1990-1999 list and the 2000-2009 list. Additionally, both *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are listed on Radcliffe Publishing Course Top 100 Banned Novels of the 20th Century for their references to "religious matters, explicit sexual scenes, violence, obscene language, depictions of torture, ethnic slurs, and negative portrayals of women."

So, why then, should Kurt Vonnegut be an integral component of the secondary English curriculum? The reasons for the censorship of Vonnegut's work are not false accusations; his novels do address uncomfortable topics. However, these descriptions of his novels do not include the holistic nature of Vonnegut's work. Those in favor of banning Vonnegut's stories do not recognize his humanist nature, which kindles kindness and asks readers to do the same.

Vonnegut himself was not ignorant of the censorship of his work. In 1973, Vonnegut wrote a letter to the chairman of the Drake School Board in North Dakota in response to the burning of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the school furnace, a letter he later included in his collection of essays *Palm Sunday*. After calmly explaining his situation and credible character, Vonnegut expresses the purpose of his novels:

If you were to bother to read my books, to behave as educated persons would, you would learn that they are not sexy, and do not

argue in favor of wildness of any kind. They beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are. It is true that some of the characters speak coarsely. That is because people speak coarsely in real life. Especially soldiers and hardworking men speak coarsely, and even our most sheltered children know that. And we all know, too, that those words really don't damage children much. They didn't damage us when we were young. It was evil deeds and lying that hurt us...Perhaps you will learn from this that books are sacred to free men for very good reasons, and that wars have been fought against nations which hate books and burn them. If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own...You should acknowledge that it was a rotten lesson you taught young people in a free society when you denounced and then burned books—books you hadn't even read. You should also resolve to expose your children to all sorts of opinions and information, in order that they will be better equipped to make decisions and to survive. (Vonnegut, "The First" 4)

As Vonnegut claims in his letter, his novels urge his readers to better humanity and ask that people be kind; the humanist aspects of his novels teach readers to be good individuals. His works do not, however, trick them into doing so; students must wade through the thick layer of satire before they can thoroughly understand Vonnegut's values.

From my observations of adolescents in the classroom, I have discovered that students often rise to the expectations set for them. If teachers expect students to be wise, critical thinkers and show them how to do so correctly, they should have no reason to believe that Vonnegut's work will create vulgar-speaking, violent teens. By shielding students from ideas, censors are not protecting them from the problems of the world, but hiding them in naiveté. Adolescents are very clever beings; they know about the problems of the world, and acting as if those obstacles do not exist can be detrimental once they arrive at adulthood.

Teaching Vonnegut's novels gives students the opportunity think critically about the society in which they exist and to engage in conversations about relevant problems in a safe, educational setting. Kurt Vonnegut responds to the absurd through kindness despite the unknown, and by integrating his work into the secondary curriculum, teachers can encourage their students to be humane and compassionate beings as they begin to process deep, philosophical questions. Erikson claims that students must be supported in their search for identity, and

when teachers give students material that encourages their abstract thought process and the guidance to direct those processes, they provide the foundation adolescents need to forge their own thoughts and values (Berzoff 113).

As long as entities such as war, science, religion, money, or any of Vonnegut's topics prevail in our society, Kurt Vonnegut's writing will remain a relevant call to action. While Vonnegut retains the postmodern stance that despair does exist in our world, he transcends this absurd notion by reminding his readers that the kindness of humans can redeem hope in humanity. Despite their absurd plotlines, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* prove that one man can instill optimism in the minds of readers. Vonnegut will continue to excite curiosity, hope, and kindness in those fortunate enough to encounter him. Adolescents deserve the opportunity to ponder the possibilities Vonnegut provokes in a setting that encourages them to foster individual ideas. If we embrace Vonnegut in our classrooms, perhaps his call to kindness and notions of human decency will exist outside of them.

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