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"All Persons Living and Dead are Purely Coincidental:" Unity, Dissolution, and the Humanist Wampeter of Kurt Vonnegut's Universe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for High Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Introduction

"'Being alive is a crock of shit'" (3) writes Kurt Vonnegut in the opening chapter of *Timequake (1997),* quoting "the old science fiction writer Kilgore Trout" (3). In this semi-autobiographical semi-novel, written at the tail end of his career, Vonnegut reappropriates the scraps of an unfinished narrative of time distortion and reshapes them to do a bit of time traveling of his own, as he reflects upon his life and career. At the center of this retrospective is Vonnegut's concern that "the most highly evolved Earthling creatures find being alive embarrassing or much worse" (1), citing the nihilistic attitudes expressed by such artistic geniuses as Mark Twain, Henry David Thoreau, Fats Weller, and Kilgore Trout. Yet Vonnegut also claims that the "plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit" (1). Throughout *Timequake*, Vonnegut struggles to reconcile the competing notions that the very artists who ought to illuminate the good in life are also apparently those who value it the least. Yet Trout is not a part of literary history the same as Twain and Thoreau; rather, he is an invention of Vonnegut's: his own self-professed alter ego. Vonnegut here divides himself. He posits Trout's statement as distinct from himself, and yet by expressing those ideas through Trout, he also implies that he shares these sentiments. Vonnegut places pragmatic intellectual cynicism in opposition with his idealistic sentiments about artistic duty; he places the artist in conflict with art itself. This tension is one that is not just prominent in his discussion in *Timequake*, but also pervades his entire body of work.

Writing from the late 1940s until his death the mid-2000s, Vonnegut occupies a peculiar place in literary history. His most acclaimed work occurs just on the cusp of transition between modern and postmodern literature. His status as an author lies somewhere in between high

literature and popular commercial fiction. He is at times classified as a black humorist, a postmodern satirist, and—much to his chagrin—a science fiction writer. Yet each of these attempts to classify his authorship is unsuccessful; he is none of these things and all of them at once. Just as his novels are characterized by a tension between scathing social critique and humanistic idealism, so too does that canon exist at the precise intersection of each of these movements and subgenres, comparing them, and uniting them. This unusual place in literary history he occupies has in part limited scholarly discussions of his work. For the first two decades of Vonnegut's career, the majority of critics merely debated whether his work merited serious consideration at all, while few made attempts at actual analysis. By the late sixties and early seventies his novels gained greater critical and commercial success, leading to an increase in serious scholarship on his works that continues today. Many existing studies of Vonnegut tend to lean towards biographical and historical approaches, as critics such as Kathryn Hume cite his experience in war, his training as an anthropologist, and other hardships he experienced early in life as the source of—and possibly an excuse for—his infamous pessimism ("Myths" 429-31). Others, such as Lawrence R. Broer, Jerome Klinkowitz, and Robert Scholes, focus on the social and political events of the moment that provide fodder for Vonnegut's humorous and scathing satirical critiques. Each of these approaches tends to propose a method of understanding Vonnegut from within one of the many varied, and often opposing, categories he occupies; yet Vonnegut's work is defined by these tensions, not divided by them, therefore, an alternative approach seems in order.

Though historical and biographical context are indeed essential to our understanding of Vonnegut's social commentary, most of these approaches tend to treat each novel individually as its own independent statement. However, Vonnegut's narratives do not occupy the space of a

single isolated text; rather, his characters, settings, and narrative devices appear again and again in multiple, non-sequential contexts, and in varying levels of centrality. Vonnegut does not just invent stories, but an entire functioning cosmos of interrelated people, organizations, species, and belief systems. Indeed, one cannot completely engage with a Vonnegut narrative by observing the customary boundaries of front and back covers; therefore, it is also unlikely that one can completely engage with Vonnegut's ideas under such limitations. Perhaps a holistic approach to interpretation may be more illuminating. As Vonnegut claims in an interview with the Paris Review, "it can be tremendously refreshing if a creator of literature has something on his mind other than the history of literature so far. Literature should not disappear up its own asshole, so to speak" (Hayman 20). Assuming, then, that in his own works Vonnegut chooses to disregard traditional[1] literary structures, we too should look beyond our own normative ways of engaging with literature when reading Vonnegut. To this end, I intend to approach Vonnegut's novels in context of one another rather than as independent statements. With attention to the textual overlaps created by Vonnegut's recurring characters, I propose to examine how, thematically and formally, the Vonnegut universe creates a conversation between otherwise isolated works, articulates a plea for humanist[2] consideration, and revises the role of the author.

While many critics recognize the use of recurring characters as a feature characteristic of Vonnegut's work, it remains an element that is commonly acknowledged but seldom analyzed. Mark Leeds' *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia*, which lists each of Vonnegut's characters, places, and

[1] The notion of a "traditional" form of the novel is problematic in itself, given that the medium has been subject to progressive change over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet even in the most radically revisionary texts, such as those by Joyce and Woolf at the turn of the century, certain assumptions about the medium remain the same. Therefore, when I refer to a "traditional" novel or way of reading, I mean the Victorian standard under which we assume the narrative to have definitive boundaries that establish the text as a window into that autonomous world.
[2] Definitions of humanism vary, thus throughout this paper I refer to Vonnegut's own definition of humanism as articulated in *Timequake*: "Humanists try to behave decently and honorably without any expectation of rewards and punishments in an afterlife. The creator of the Universe has been to us unknowable so far. We serve as well as we can the highest abstraction of which we have some understanding, which is our community"(82).

common images with particular attention to those that span multiple works, has been a valuable resource. In the preface Leeds notes, "Vonnegut's characters, themes, phrasing, and imagery are forever reappearing. The readership has always been there, and you probably know from your own experience that conversations about his work are as much about the various reappearances of familiar friends and notions as they are about anything else" (xi). Still, Leeds makes no attempt to actually analyze those overlaps. Only a handful of critics recognize these reappearances as having critical potential, while even fewer attempt to pursue the interpretative possibilities therein. Kathryn Hume, a critic among the minority who engage with Vonnegut's fictional cosmos, argues that its variability can be alienating for many critics. She claims that because his recycled characters result in "interrelated disparates" (*Cosmos*, *Critical Essays* 222), many negative responses are triggered by a failure to see the value in such transformations.

Among those put off by the inconsistencies in Vonnegut's work, Peter S. Prescott claims that the author's writing is tainted by "unshakably smug pessimism," while, "the comfortable banalities advanced by [Vonnegut] in place of ideas are totally incompatible" (*Critical Essays* 39). Likewise, Roger Sale complains that the "interchangeable parts" out of which Vonnegut constructs his narratives encourage "semi-literacy" (*Times* 3). Rather than use these devices to produce insight, Sale claims "once Vonnegut finds what he takes to be a successful character, motif or phrase he can't bear to give it up and so he carries it around from novel to novel" (Times 3). Yet these accusations of careless over-simplicity are founded on the assumption that Vonnegut's "comfortable banalities" are in fact static. On the contrary, as Hume notes, these elements actually result in "endless transformations" (*Cosmos, Critical Essays* 222) that enrich Vonnegut's deceptively simple statements and pluralize seemingly one-dimensional themes.

Those few critics who recognize Vonnegut's universe as an important literary device and not just a stylistic idiosyncrasy tend to focus on its implications for his black humor and social criticism. Stanley Schatt notes that the interrelation of Vonnegut's texts contributes to a pluralized universe, particularly in the way he portrays the divisions between reality and fantasy as indistinct; yet Schatt discusses this plurality as common to multiple, individual texts rather than in terms of the intersection of those texts ("World" 65). Max Schulz views the multiplication of a single character as evidence that his stories are fragmented into multiple realities, rather than participating in a cohesive statement (15). In "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the Crime of His Times," Klinkowitz refers to Vonnegut's fictional cosmos as "a mod Yoknapatawpha" (28), yet Klinkowitz also considers the discrepancy in Vonnegut's recycled elements to be a manifestation of the schizophrenia he claims is an issue of continual concern in Vonnegut's work[3]. Though these critics demonstrate an attention to Vonnegut's cosmos as a device, their treatments primarily focus on its presence in the text as a reflection of separate biographical readings, while the actual content created by those overlaps in text remains largely unexplored.

Vonnegut is far from the first to create a fictional cosmos in his works, let alone the first to reuse characters from previous texts. Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff plays a major role in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, yet the text remains entirely distinct from the content of *Henry IV Parts I and 2,* in which he first appears, and *Henry V,* in which he is mentioned in passing. Some scholars have attributed the beloved character's reappearance to a request from the Queen, while

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[3] In "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. And the Crimes of his Times," Klinkowitz argues that "schizophrenia indeed seems the proper name for the madness devouring Vonnegut's world," a notion Klinkowitz reiterates persistently in multiple publications as characteristic of both Vonnegut's work and the modern era it reflects, a result of the "desire to maintain the integrity of self in the face of a too-chaotic world" (42-3). Lawrence Broer expands on these claims in *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, tracing ideas of fractured identity resulting from psychological trauma through each of Vonnegut's then published novels.

others suggest it is an attempt to make good on the promise at the end of *Part 2* for Falstaff to return. Still others complain that the two incarnations of Falstaff have only name in common, the use of which is merely an attempt to cash in on the character's popularity, an argument which seems applicable to all of the possible motivations for his recurrence (Weis 11-13). Hemingway's Nick Adams is generally considered an autobiographical stand-in for the author, analogous to the role Kilgore Trout plays in Vonnegut's works. As Broer writes in *Hemingway and Vonnegut: Writers at War*, "Hemingway and Vonnegut each invites us to follow the mythic journey of essentially one individual, the same person under different names, whose wounds, sins, and hopes for redemption…are nearly always those of the creator" (7). Yet while Nick appears in several of Hemingway's short stories originally published independently, in some cases, such as "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925), knowledge of Nick's background as enumerated in other texts is necessary to the reader's understanding of the story, whereas Vonnegut's novels, however intricately connected they may be, are always capable of standing alone.

The interconnected community of Yoknapatawpha County created by William Faulkner in non-sequential works is most similar to the methods later used by Vonnegut (Duvall 53). Faulkner's creation is often noted for its intricacy of detail, as the author not only features cameos of previous characters but also lays out family trees, local histories, and even geography (Aiken 6-13). Faulkner scholars praise the detail and consistency of his fictional county and have traced its inspiration to corresponding figures in Faulkner's own life. Though in many ways the proliferation of Faulkner's creation anticipates Vonnegut's interconnected cosmos, the latter author's efforts depart from those of his predecessors precisely because of the inconsistency of his creation (Moses 305). In Vonnegut's universe, a character such as Trout may be a wandering madman in one text, a Nobel-prize winner in another, and an unknown but otherwise sane

science-fiction author in another. The plot of one text may be deeply founded in historical realism and contemporary issues, while the plot of a related text relies on absurd and fantastical science fiction elements. Illium, New York; the fictional Midland City; and Indianapolis, Indiana are settings shared by numerous novels, yet the history and geography of those locations vary from text to text. We are given multiple and varied takes on the end of the world, or at least on the end of humanity as we know it. Vonnegut's texts may form a connected cosmos, but do not necessarily exist in the same reality in as far as they do not form a single unified story.

In "The Recurring Characters of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." William L. Godshalk argues, "Vonnegut's characters may have the same names, they may share certain characteristics, but they are different, often essentially different" (2), meaning their reappearances have little critical value. Though, as he claims, temporal and behavioral inconsistencies between incarnations seem to indicate that a shared name does not necessitate a shared identity, I would contend that even if the same name refers to separate individuals, the act of naming still draws an explicit comparison between the two figures and their respective narratives. While Vonnegut's texts persistently cross-reference one another, they do not form a singular linear narrative, nor would it be reasonable to assume they would, as it is unlikely he would have had nearly fifty years of social and historical commentary planned ahead of time. Instead, each novel exists independently as its own complete statement, while the textual overlaps place that statement in dialogue with the works that have come before. The Vonnegut universe is less a means to unify a narrative, and more a way of connecting ideas, revising previous arguments, and comparing related themes. As a result, Vonnegut's novels become something more like a conversation rather than a declaration.

In order to trace this conversation Vonnegut creates within and between his novels, I will first explore the types of textual overlaps that exist within Vonnegut's works and how those connections may alter the way we perceive a character. I will then evaluate the sorts of thematic revisions and complications that these connections create. As the connections between novels grow more complicated, I will discuss how Vonnegut's intertextual machinations alter not just the arguments made by each text, but also our experience as readers. As our reading experience shifts, so too does our awareness of the author's involvement in the text. Therefore, I will also consider theoretical explanations in relation to how the universe as a device shapes the way both author and reader bring the text into production. Finally, I will return to Vonnegut's interest in the tension he feels between artistic insight and intellectual nihilism and assess how Vonnegut endeavors to reconcile these conflicting perceptions of literature in his own work.

When I claim that Vonnegut "revises the role of the author," I refer to the way in which he challenges the New-Critical notion of a self-contained text by placing multiple narratives in dialogue with one another, while, as creator of a fictive universe he also asserts his own involvement in the text, contextualizing himself as author, scriptor, and character all at once. The intertextual nature of Vonnegut's methods invites a comparison with the ideas proposed by Roland Barthes in "Death of the Author" and "From Work to Text." In the latter, he argues that "the Text does not stop at Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres. What constitutes the text is, on the contrary, its subversive force in respect of the old classifications" (879). While Vonnegut takes pains to upset the assumption that novels are self-contained, by connecting multiple narratives and pluralizing the meaning of each, in what is certainly a subversive activity, he also troubles Barthes' related claim that reading should be an "antitheological activity" ("Death" 877). In "Death of the Author," Barthes argues that "to

give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (877); therefore, authors should be treated as merely scriptors, while literature should instead be considered in terms of the reader, liberating interpretation. Though Vonnegut does extend his narratives beyond the limits of a single novel, the methods he uses to achieve this do not liberate the text from association with its inventor, rather they make Vonnegut an irrevocable part of his texts. Therefore, while the intertextual elements of the Vonnegut canon tempt a comparison with Barthes, the peculiarity of Vonnegut's constructions instead make Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological approach a more appropriate critical lens.

In "Why Write?" from *Literature and Existentialism*, Sartre argues, in contrast to Barthes, that "reading is directed creation" (45); while the author relies on the reader to produce the text, the author cannot be entirely separated, as the reader is entrusted with the responsibility of completing the task which the author has begun. Like Barthes, Sartre recognizes the freedom of the reader as a necessary part of engaging with literature; yet Barthes' notion of the reader's freedom involves the free play of signifiers deferring and multiplying meaning into infinity, while Sartre argues, "freedom is not experienced by its enjoying its free subjective functioning, but in a creative act required by an imperative" (48). Rather than seeking to liberate interpretation from the author's intentions, Sartre proposes a cooperative relationship in which the reader "does not play; [he or she] is called upon to recompose the beautiful object beyond the traces left by the artist" (47). Despite Vonnegut's status as a postmodernist and Sartre's associations with modernism, the relationship Vonnegut forms with his reader through the creation of a literary cosmos, is, as I will endeavor to show, analogous to that phenomenological partnership which Sartre describes. Even while Vonnegut may refuse to close on a signified, he suggests we should not be entirely indifferent to the artist's intentions, rather requires that we

engage with his ideas directly though they are difficult to pin down. Instead, precisely because the author's ideas are difficult to access, we should not just seek to discover but also go *beyond* what is available on the page to synthesize something greater.

Reading Cosmically

Vonnegut's characters assume a variety of shapes and forms when they reappear. At times the same name appears in multiple texts, however, due to irreconcilable plot lines, the name likely refers to two or more separate identities. If these figures' seeming reincarnation fails to continue the narrative established by a prior text, the repeated name likely revisits a theme instead. Norman Mushari's presence in both *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) and in *Slapstick* (1976) enacts this dynamic. As the former novel is set in contemporary times, while the latter takes place in an undefined semi-apocalyptic future, the events of these novels are not a part of the same reality, despite Mushari's presence in both texts. Instead, Mushari is used as a literal archetype; though the details of his existence may vary, in every appearance he is the stereotypical greedy lawyer, using his legal prowess for his own gain to the detriment of his clients. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Mushari is introduced as having "an enormous ass that was luminous when bare" (3) and a comparatively small conscience. He is the novel's main antagonist, as he attempts to have Eliot Rosewater committed to a mental institution for his excessive charity, while trying to secure a cut of the Rosewater fortune for himself. By contrast, in *Slapstick*, Mushari frees Eliza Swain from her wrongful detainment in a mental institution and offers to help sue her family for neglect. Eliza tauntingly introduces him to her family saying, "'here's who knows how to help people'" (138), yet later Mushari admits that "he had been wholly motivated by self-interest when he set Eliza free," claiming, "'I was a bounty

hunter…finding rich people in mental hospitals who didn't belong there—and setting them free. I left the poor to rot in their dungeons" (152). Not only does *Slapstick*-Mushari take advantage of the rich once again by providing self-serving legal council, he does so by performing the reverse of his actions in *Rosewater*; he frees a sane person from a mental institution rather than having one committed.

Mushari's dual appearance, therefore, not only emphasizes greed and self-interest as a fixture of society, but also develops the character's amorality in a way that could not be completely expressed by a single novel. While *Slapstick* may not be a continuation of the events of *Rosewater*, Mushari serves a comparable role in each text. The difference in his characterization is primarily due to the shift in the narrator's perspective. The omniscient narrator of *Rosewater* makes his distasteful opinion of Mushari palpable, while the narrator of *Slapstick*, Wilbur Swain, is initially ignorant of Mushari's true intentions. The overlap between novels, therefore, reverses the ironies in *Slapstick.* Rather than believing the humanitarian guise we are initially presented with, then having that image upset later, knowledge of Mushari's standard role instead creates a dramatic irony by providing the reader with more information than the narrator, making us skeptical of the narrator's naïveté.

In *The Vonnegut Effect,* Klinkowitz argues that rather than fleshing out complex, realistic individuals, Vonnegut reduces characters to archetypes of good and evil so drastically, they begin to resemble figures in a medieval morality play (71). Indeed, Mushari's purpose in both texts is primarily functional; he is reduced to a type, representative of a basic idea or motivation, rather than an approximation of a complete human being. And yet, rather than make the novel more simplistic, this device complicates our understanding of the text, as the reader is encouraged to question the narrator, aligning our attention to the text with the author rather than

the speaker. Many of Vonnegut's supporting characters fit into this scheme. Francine Pefko is the name of a clueless secretary in both *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Breakfast of Champions* (1973); GEFFCo and the General Forge and Foundry Company are corporate entities that linger in the background of several novels; and the Rumfoord family appears frequently as a fixture of wealth and social elitism in the vein of the Rockefellers or Kennedys. Rather than simply invent new names for stock characters, Vonnegut reuses them, calling attention to the fact that these archetypes are constants in our society, even when the portrayal of that society varies from novel to novel. In *Timequake,* Vonnegut discusses Kilgore Trout's similar tendency to create "*caricatures* rather than characters," noting that it can be said of his own works: "If I'd wasted my time creating characters…I would never have gotten around to calling attention to the things that really matter: irresistible forces in nature, and cruel intentions, and cockamamie ideals and governments and economies that make heroes and heroines alike feel like something the cat dragged in" (72). Vonnegut's repetition of names allows more information to be communicated in less space, as information is carried over from previous texts, while new information is added with each subsequent appearance, in much the same way Barthes argues a text "accomplishes the very plural of meaning" ("Text*"* 879) through the play of signifiers in the reader.

Though no particular reading order is essential to the interpretation of Vonnegut's novels, as they do not form a linear or cohesive series, I have read his novels in order of publication, so as not to miss any recurring features. The effects of each textual overlap become apparent only when the character appears for a second time, while my perception of their first appearance is then revised retrospectively. Though I will frequently use this reverse ordering in presenting my readings of Vonnegut's work, as my thoughts on these overlaps are best explained by following the logic by which they were developed, the order in which one reads and compares these texts

has no bearing on the way these overlaps are interpreted. Any one of Vonnegut's novels may act as both source and sequel to several others; the connections between two or more novels established by a single character cause each of those novels to reshape the other without privileging chronology.

The Rumfoord Estate, introduced in *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), appears in only a few paragraphs of *Cat's Cradle*. While its presence in the latter novel is easily overlooked, its mutual presence invites further comparisons between the two texts. Lionel Boyd Johnson, who would later become the leader and founder of Bokononism, is briefly mentioned as having once worked as a gardener and carpenter for the Rumfoord family. San Lorenzo's historian Julian Castle writes that part of the success of Bokononism comes from its construction of an artificial battle between good and evil in the forms of Bokonon and McCabe. The charade increases general happiness by keeping the people of the island "employed full time as actors in a play they can understand" (174) and allowing them to unite against a common enemy. In *The Sirens of Titan,* Winston Niles Rumfoord[4] carries out a similar system of social control, in which an artificial war between humans and Martians—actually humans groomed to be opponents by Rumfoord—leads to the unification of all Earthlings. Like Bokonon, Rumfoord employs the people of Earth as unwitting actors in a play, and maintains his influence by establishing The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, a religion predicated on absurdity, which anticipates Bokononism's equally absurd belief in the value of lies.

[4] In *The Vonnegut Effect*, Klinkowitiz compares Vonnegut's representation of Winston Niles Rumfoord to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Rumfoord brings society back from financial collapse through engagement in war and the institution of a new religion, just as Roosevelt oversaw the end of the Great Depression through activity in WWII and the institution of a "secular mythology" in the form of the New Deal. While Klinkowitz's claims emphasize the motif of scripted public life as a means to social control within Vonnegut's novels, Klinkowitz also argues that this is not a nihilistic construction, rather it demonstrates that truth is self-invented (p.50-51).

While the two novels depict different fates for the human race and, therefore, do not form a unified timeline, *Cat's Cradle* nevertheless implies that Johnson may have learned about social control from his time with the Rumfoord family. The similarity in these social and political mechanisms is made all the more poignant by the disparity between the versions of reality they depict. In *Sirens*, Earth is an utterly insignificant speck in a vast universe, while in *Cat's Cradle* humanity's egocentrism is asserted, much to the detriment of the rest of the world; yet in both texts an artificial sense of belonging is both of benefit to society and a means for individuals to manipulate the populace to their own advantage.

Where, in the cases of Norman Mushari and the Rumfoord family, both names and major character traits remain constant, Vonnegut occasionally applies a single name to two or more highly distinct identities. Rather than treating these figures as separate iterations of a single archetype, Vonnegut provides enough information to suggest they are wholly individual, yet nevertheless retains the name as a point of comparison. Diana Moon Glampers, who first appears in the short story "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), is hardly recognizable in her role in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Whereas Vonnegut's archetypal characters represent fixed ideas that invite the reader to compare similar situations, such characters as Glampers are varied in order to offer two or more distinct views on a single idea, connecting seemingly disparate situations.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater features a candid third-person narrator who remains just as opinionated as an identified speaker. The narrator's introductions of characters, such as the aforementioned colorful anatomical description of Norman Mushari, leave little doubt as to which characters we are to sympathize with and which we are to vilify. Curiously, however, the narrator is no more forgiving when introducing Diana Moon Glampers, whom he describes as "a sixty-eight-year-old virgin who, by almost anybody's standards, was too dumb to live...No one

had ever loved her. There was no reason why anyone should. She was ugly, stupid, and boring" (72-3). Despite this highly unsympathetic introduction, Glampers is not an antagonist in the novel, nor is she so greedy or malintentioned as Mushari. Rather, she is simply an extraordinarily lonely woman who takes advantage of Eliot Rosewater's patience and benevolence. It is curious, then, that we are asked to admire Rosewater's unwavering sympathy towards Glampers, and yet are not asked to extend it ourselves. Instead, we admire the extent to which Eliot is committed to providing uncritical love, as he listens to Glampers' unflagging stream of complaints and concerns without ever losing his patience (75). At the same time, we are also led to wonder if it is worth the trouble, if Eliot really is crazy for bothering to help these people at all. If the division between good and evil were truly so distinct as we are initially led to believe, one would expect the people of Rosewater County to be kind-hearted paragons of human goodness. The picture Vonnegut paints instead is far more bleak and realistic; these people, while indeed poor and disadvantaged in many ways, are in fact dumb, dull, and impotent, possibly beyond the benefit of help. While we may admire Rosewater's optimism, the reality of Rosewater County begins to blur the lines between optimism and insanity.

The alternate incarnation of Glampers in "Harrison Bergeron" casts even further doubt on the value of Rosewater's attempts to give back. In this dystopian short story, Diana Moon Glampers is Handicapper General, a government figure in the year 2081 responsible for enforcing the use of constitutionally mandated handicaps to physical and mental ability in order to maintain a society based on absolute equality. Though the temporal discrepancy and extreme divergence of social roles between the two Glampers may seem to suggest two discrete identities, there are nevertheless comparisons to be drawn between the two. The self-conscious *Rosewater*-Glampers discusses her personal flaws at length, claiming "I was behind the door

when the good Lord passed out the brains...I was behind the door when the good Lord passed out the strong, beautiful bodies… I was behind the door when the good Lord passed out the money and the good luck, too...there wasn't one nice thing left...[he] had to give me a voice like a bullfrog" (75-76). This Glampers discusses desirable physical attributes as if they are something to be distributed systematically by God, inverting the system of handicapping in place in the dystopian future of "Harrison Bergeron."

Each of the qualities listed by Glampers in this passage is also highlighted in "Bergeron" as specific attributes that would be unfair for one person to possess and not another. George Bergeron's superior intelligence, Harrison's strength, and a dancer's beauty are all mentioned as potential threats to the balance and order of society; the dancer's voice is described as "a very unfair voice for a woman to use…a warm, luminous, timeless melody," which must be reduced by handicap to "a grackle squawk" (10), not unlike the voice of a bullfrog. Beyond the shared name, Vonnegut constructs a deliberate parallel between the two narratives, highlighting similarity in the way that these two societies place a great deal of emphasis on physical and intellectual advantages. One Glampers is repressed by her shortcomings, while the other actively and violently oppresses others under the assumption that she is doing away with such inadequacy, while also asserting her own superiority. Despite their highly disparate social roles, the two incarnations of Glampers share a fundamental similarity: they view the world through a lens of insecurity and inferiority.

In a dystopian future such as that of "Harrison Bergeron," one would expect a large and obscure governmental force to be a vague and imposing power, creating a sense of unease due to the scope of its control. Yet as the narrator explains, "all this equality was due to 211th, 212th, and 213th amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United

States Handicapper General" (7). Here, Vonnegut simultaneously satisfies and inverts such expectations. While the numeration of the amendments suggests exponentially increasing governmental control, the symmetrical construction of the sentence also equates the power of a singular figure to that of a century's worth of constitutional law-making. Glampers effectively becomes the government, as Hazel Bergeron's attempts at political speculation are phrased in these terms: "if I was Diana Moon Glampers" (8). It is not, to our knowledge, a broad bureaucratic power that controls this society with fear, but this mere individual. Such peculiar attention to the figure of Diana Moon Glampers makes the story's generalized reflection on social conflict and human nature oddly personal.

Placing such ominously far-reaching power in the singular figure of the Handicapper General immediately undermines the notion that everybody in this society is "equal every which way" (1) even as that notion is presented. Of course, the system itself is deeply and ironically flawed by the very nature of the handicaps. Though these mental and physical inhibitors are intended to make everyone equal, the presence of the physical devices used to do so nevertheless clearly divides society into those that need them and those that do not. Despite George's many handicaps, and indeed because of them, Hazel perceives her husband as different from herself, as she is said to be "a little envious" in remarking, "I think it would be really interesting hearing all the different sounds" that George hears (8). Likewise, the narrator notes of the dancer, "she must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous" (10), suggesting not just association, but cause. While the mask may hide her beauty from sight, it does nothing to disguise its existence, and only replaces the advantage itself with a symbol of that advantage. The system recreates inequality even as it destroys it, adding nothing to society but an enforced system of control that renders the public incapable of recognizing the hypocrisy at work.

In no place is this inherent contradiction more evident than in Harrison himself. He is not simply gifted, but depicted as monstrous and nearly superhuman. At seven feet tall and laden with more handicaps than any other person, his appearance is "clanking, clownish, and huge" (11). Ironically, it is not so much his natural physical form that makes him monstrous, but the "Halloween and hardware" (11) added to his visage by the H-G men. The handicaps have dehumanized him doubly, by attempting to hinder his genius, and by physically turning him into a scrap-iron monster. By contrast, when he publically frees himself of the handicaps, rather than regaining his humanity, Harrison instead becomes a figure of increasingly supernatural ability. Rather than distinctly seeking freedom for humanity, he instead declares himself Emperor. Vonnegut again inverts expectations of right and wrong uses of power by making Harrison, the would-be liberator of mankind, the Emperor, while the Handicapper General, a seemingly innocuous bureaucrat, is in fact a violent, tyrannical, and fearsome power. By conflating these depictions of power, Vonnegut shifts the focus of the climactic scene so that it becomes more a conflict between flawed, power-seeking individuals than between clear-cut good and evil.

Harrison is initially portrayed as merely an impressive human anomaly, yet quickly ascends to godlike power as he tears industrial-grade straps like "wet tissue paper," reveals an appearance "that would have awed Thor, god of thunder" and snatches "two musicians from their chairs, wave[s] them like batons" (12). This air of the supernatural begins to pervade the story, as the narration, too, grows increasingly surreal and fantastical as the story approaches climax. Harrison names a dancer his Empress, and begins to show the world an uninhibited dance in which "not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well" (13). Accordingly, the speaker’s language grows increasingly romanticized to accommodate the surreality of the scene. The two figures are said to spring into the air "in an

explosion of joy and grace...they reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled and spun. They leaped like deer on the moon...neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in the air" (13). Such poeticized language stands in stark contrast to that used in the opening of the story, which consists of dry, detached statement of fact, and brief, dull sentences that deliver information without obvious affect. Thus, the freeing of the artistic expression of dance in the surreal climax of the story is mirrored by the freeing of artistic expression in the narrator's language, as though he too has thrown off his own handicaps. With his invasion of the television studio, Harrison not only frees the minds of his audience, however briefly, but artistry itself. Art is among the first things to suffer in the story, as George wonders if "maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped" (8) and is instantly punished for the thought. Both the romanticized language and the surreal dance end abruptly with the entrance of Diana Moon Glampers as she "came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor. Diana Moon Glampers loaded the shot gun again" (13). The death and downfall of Harrison and the Dancer is mirrored in the abrupt return to dry clipped language, signifying the death of the brief moment of artistic freedom and independent thought.

On its own, "Harrison Bergeron" is a compelling warning against the dangers of the regulation of social order and tampering with human nature, yet by aligning the Handicapper with the pathetically lonely woman of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* Vonnegut underscores the role of the individual in a society that seeks to do away with the very notion of individuality. Such menacingly extensive governmental restriction in the name of social betterment is made all the more terrifying by the possibility that it is actually the result of one pathetic insecure woman attempting to bring the rest of society down to her level. Meanwhile, the Glampers of the later

novel becomes not just an exploiter of Eliot's patience and benevolence but also a reminder of the unforeseen good that may result from his uncritical love. The society of "Harrison Bergeron" seeks a sense of belonging for all in much the same way that *Rosewater*'s Glampers does for herself, yet the former exposes the hazards of doing away with division completely, while the latter casts doubt upon the rationality of reaching beyond those same social divisions. However, the juxtaposition of the two texts, encouraged by the multiplication of Diana Moon Glampers, instead proposes an alternative, by demonstrating that the forging of positive connections between human beings is fundamental to the progress of society.

As Kilgore Trout argues in the conclusion to *Rosewater*, "If we can't find reasons and methods for treasuring [useless] human beings because they are *human being*s, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out" (265). The options Trout lays out are essentially embodied by the two incarnations of Glampers: uncritical acceptance or dehumanization and destruction. The type of interconnected community that Eliot Rosewater attempts to forge is, therefore, asserted as not only beneficial to the world of his own novel, but the compassion and open-mindedness on which it is based is also proposed as fundamental to the very definition of humanity. On its own, "Harrison Bergeron" is fraught with meaninglessness and destruction, as both oppressor and liberator are in fact acting out of selfishness, reflecting the infinite deferment of meaning in Barthes, yet the juxtaposition of texts instead reasserts meaning by directing our attention to the author's suggestions for remedy.

As Hume notes in her article "The Hericlitan Cosmos of Kurt Vonnegut," the different incarnations of Bernard V. (or B.) O'Hare function similarly to those of Diana Moon Glampers, providing variations on a theme rather than forming a single narrative across multiple texts (*Critical Essays* 223). A version of O'Hare appears in three separate novels, each time with a

different personality, personal history, and occasionally a different middle initial; however, in all three novels he is a member of the American armed forces. In *Mother Night* (1961), O'Hare is a gung-ho soldier, who views the enemy as the devil, who "hate[s] without reservation… imagine[s] that God Almighty Himself hates with [him], too" (251). He hunts Howard Campbell with terrifying single-mindedness, acting on a hypocritical sense of duty and self-righteousness. Though the plots of *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) overlap, O'Hare is completely different in the latter novel. He is instead Vonnegut's real-life friend and fellow Dresden survivor, a victim of the horrors of war who reminisces with Vonnegut, while his wife expresses concern over the valorization of war in literature. *Slapstick* provides yet another version of O'Hare who is naive, optimistic, and patriotic. He has literally been kept in the dark from the events of the outside world, and his optimism proves both refreshing and sad as he expresses pride at having President Wilbur Swain bestow upon him a nonsense medal.

While O'Hare is Vonnegut's friend and ally in one text and seeming villain in the next, it is difficult to reconcile different versions of his person, As Hume argues, "each Bernard O'Hare alone is a pasteboard figure, a simplified model of one facet of the problem of what happens to Americans when they don uniform. But all the O'Hares together make an important comment on Americans who adapt to the army" ("Cosmos", *Critical Essays* 222-3). That Vonnegut makes a villain out of someone so close to him helps to further emphasize the assertions made in *Mother Night* that divisions between good and evil are heavily dependent on perspective. Likewise, the varied incarnations of O'Hare continue to complicate and enrich our perception of the military persona. As with Glampers, the variation in O'Hare's characterization across multiple texts helps to pluralize each individually, making them more discursive, while decrying moral absolutes.

In “Death of the Author,” Barthes writes, "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (877). Indeed, Vonnegut’s ideas are not communicated in their entirety through a single novel, but through multiple writings and varying viewpoints, relying upon the reader to bring that multiplicity into focus. Barthes’ treatment of the interdiscursivity of literature, relying on the reader to create meaning bears a great deal of similarity to the way in which Vonnegut’s recurring elements connect separate texts and complicate meaning; however, Barthes also claims that this expanding role of the reader results in the reduction of the author’s own role. He notes that “Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him the passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt” (“Death*”* 877). Vonnegut, however, is both scriptor and author at once.

Whereas Barthes proposes a spontaneous, and perhaps even unconscious, process of reading influenced by previous experience, the manner by which Vonnegut's works transform one another is highly constructed and deliberate; many of the parallels and oppositions between separate texts would go unnoticed without the invitation to juxtapose provided by recurring names. Moreover, whereas Barthes argues “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, and is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing” (“Death” 876), Vonnegut’s insertions of author-as-character, inclusion of his personal history, and self-reflective assertions of omnipotence indeed allow him to both precede and exceed the writing; the very elements that Vonnegut uses to move his works beyond the notion of a self-contained work, toward a more open text, are also those that make the label “scriptor” sit uncomfortably as a description of his role. While Vonnegut does facilitate the proliferation of meaning beyond the

text, so that text is not a finite object to be computed ("Work" 878), that meaning is not "infinitely deferred" ("Work" 877) as Barthes claims it ought to be; rather, Vonnegut's work is still informed by "the passions, humors, feelings, impressions" of the author, maintaining certain limitations. It seems then, we must look beyond Barthes and consider not just what an active reader brings to the text, but the operations by which the author directs the reader's interpretations and how the experience of reading is altered by the author's more active shaping of the reading process.

A handful of Vonnegut's characters retain both personality and personal history when they reappear in subsequent texts. Rather than comparing differences, the presence of such figures as Eliot Rosewater reiterate points of view that remain constant across multiple novels. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*, Rosewater consistently provides a voice of optimism in otherwise bleak depictions of society, defined by the truism, "There's only one rule that I know of, babies —:'God damn it, you've got to be kind'" (129). Eliot's message may literally be addressed to infants, yet it speaks to the entire novel as well as Eliot's function in the rest of Vonnegut's canon; in every subsequent appearance he encounters people who need to be reminded that basic kindness is the most fundamental element of a civilized society. In *Rosewater,* Mushari and Rosewater's family question Eliot's sanity for his disposition to help and "to love people who have no use," (265). Kilgore Trout explains that Eliot "treasur[es] human beings because they are *human beings*" (265), a concept simple enough in itself, yet Trout argues that if the rest of the world cannot endeavor to do the same, society will destroy itself. Trout's assessment of Eliot's behavior underscores the surprising notion that simple tolerance has become a foreign concept in the modern world. While the empathy Eliot shows the people of Rosewater County may seem unremarkable, it takes the space of the entire

novel and an extension of the author for the characters to reach the realization that actively caring for others is both rare and absolutely necessary. Both Trout and Eliot's statements about uncritical love may be simplistic to the point of condescension, yet as Trout points out, if something that simple has been overlooked, then surely it needs saying.

In subsequent novels, Eliot's presence recalls these arguments for the necessity of community and understanding, whether those sentiments are explicitly spoken or not. Vonnegut takes care to establish that Eliot Rosewater both performs the same function and is the same literal person from the former novel when he appears again in *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Here, protagonist Billy Pilgrim meets Eliot in the same mental hospital that Eliot inhabits at the end of *Rosewater*, the same bird saying "poo-tee-weet?" is heard, and details of Eliot's life story remain constant. Eliot introduces Billy to Kilgore Trout's science fiction novels because "he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war…So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help" (101). Though Eliot argues in this scene that literature needs to keep inventing new lies to help people cope with reality, his previous address to a conference of science-fiction writers in *Rosewater* suggests that these "lies" are not a means to help us escape from reality, rather they are a way to contextualize reality in order to gain a new perspective:

> I love you sons of bitches…You're all I read any more...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. (18)

Though he admits the quality of the prose in these novels is questionable at best, Eliot sees value in science fiction because it deals with ideas that are too broad, too important, even too obvious

to be treated in traditional forms of literature; yet, like his own call for uncritical love, these ideas desperately need saying.

In *Rosewater*, Eliot's father expresses incredulity that Eliot's epiphany that "people can use all the uncritical love they can get" (269) is all that noteworthy. Yet Trout counters, "It's news that a man was able to *give* that kind of love over a long period of time. If one man can do it, perhaps others can too. It means that hatred of useless human beings and the cruelty they inflict upon others need not be parts of human nature" (269). Just as Eliot asserts that science fiction's value lies in its ability to handle the "big, simple ideas" that other forms of literature overlook, it takes a science-fiction writer to explain to the other characters the value in Eliot's actions, in his big, simple ideas, in his ability to care about people not because of who they are, but because it is the human thing to do.

Therefore, when Eliot offers Trout's novels to Billy in *Slaughterhouse*, he also offers science fiction as a model for dealing with traumatic experience by focusing on the "big, simple ideas" rather than on the individual. Klinkowitz argues that Billy takes this advice literally, by making his life into science fiction so that it is easier to cope with, and convincing himself that the Tralfamadorians—mentioned in *Rosewater* as characters in a Kilgore Trout story—have caused him to become unstuck in time (*Effect* 82). Indeed in *Slaughterhouse*, Tralfamadorian literature is explained to Billy as a potential model for "reading" his own life:

> 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. (88)

Just as Eliot's science fiction novels inform his humanistic world-view, this science fiction reality—or at least the science fiction delusion that takes over Billy's reality—informs the "so it

goes" detachment from death and destruction that Billy adopts at the behest of the Tralfamadorians. However, rather than, as Klinkowitz argues, providing the inspiration for Billy's detachment from reality and acceptance of the Tralfamadorian viewpoint, Eliot's sci-fi informed optimism actually provides a counterpoint to the detached absurdity of the Tralfamadorian world view. Eliot praises the genre for "agonizing" over the uncontrollable absurdity of the world, over causes and effects, over the influence of the past and the uncertainty of the future. The Tralfamadorians, by contrast, actively turn away from these concerns because there is no reasonable solution. Eliot urges confronting reality, although through a filter, whereas the Tralfamadorians filter the negativity completely. The Tralfamadorian viewpoint, then, is analogous to Barthes' approach to literature, whereas Eliot's is more akin to Sartre's approach; the Tralfamadorians turn away from fixed meaning and toward proliferating associations, while Eliot and the science-fiction writers seek to understand the meaning of these contradictions and ambiguities with regard to their origins.

By having Eliot introduce Billy to the novels of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut places Eliot's worldview in direct contrast to the views proposed by the alien race. In "Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut," Charles B. Harris argues that many of Vonnegut's novels contain "figures like Julian Castle and Eliot Rosewater, whose concern for humanity contrasts with the absurdity of their surroundings and the hopelessness of the novel's tone. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, no such figure appears…So the pervasive hopelessness of the novel's tone remains unmitigated by any character who strives, no matter how futilely, to act in a meaningful manner" (*Critical Essays* 137). Yet Harris has overlooked the fact that Eliot Rosewater *is* in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; though Eliot may not actively voice the same call for uncritical love that he does in the former novel, his presence in the latter nevertheless reminds

the reader of his argument for those ideals. The repetition of "poo-tee-weet" outside the hospital's window demonstrates that the timelines of the two novels' overlap. Not only is this the same Eliot Rosewater from the preceding novel, but it is also possible that Billy was audience to Trout's speech about valuing humanity for its own sake. The inclusion of these elements invites juxtapositions of the two texts that threaten the disillusioned detachment *Slaughterhouse* seems to argue for. Through recurring characters such as Eliot, Vonnegut challenges definitive meaning, especially when that meaning is meaninglessness, yet the tension in that movement both towards and away from a signified is overlooked entirely by those who neglect to consider the implications of characters' (such as Eliot) reappearances.

Reading Thematically

Eliot's reading of fiction contextualizes the way in which he "reads" life, and our attention to Eliot's function as both character and reader shapes our reading of Vonnegut's novels and the statement's they make. In the same vein, throughout Vonnegut's body of work, there persists an intimate connection between methods of reading literature and methods of perceiving reality[5]. This dynamic features prominently in *Cat's Cradle* in the form of Bokononism, a religion based on the acknowledgement that the entire content of its philosophy is a lie. The Books of Bokonon urge people to "live by the foma [harmless untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (epigram). These foma include the idea that humanity is organized into karasses, or "teams that do God's will without ever discovering what

[5] In "The Paradox of 'Awareness' and Language," Loree Rackstraw notes: "While an emphasis upon the artifice of language and life is now an important focus in contemporary literary criticism, it was not in academic vogue in American universities when Vonnegut was making his way into literary history. Thus, it is worth noting that Vonnegut was one of the first American writers to make explicit through his self-reflective fiction the irony that he was using language to explore the curious and powerful nature of language itself—how it functions as 'signs' or symbols that can influence our perceptions and what we take to be real, and thus can shape our system of values and ethics" (*Images and Representations* 53).

they are doing…if you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reasons…that person may be a member of your karass" (2). Another of these foma is the wampeter, or "the pivot of a karass, around which the souls of the members of the karass revolve" (52). Though this invented religion is often comically absurd and in many ways parodies all religions, its major principles also emphasize the strength and value of a close-knit community.

Throughout *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut crosscuts between one plot involving the history of the creation of the first atomic bomb and another detailing the Bokononist culture, until the two intertwine. As Vonnegut juxtaposes science and religion throughout, rather than favoring one over the other, Vonnegut critiques and praises both ends of the spectrum simultaneously, bringing the two ways of approaching life into tension. Bokononism may be used to enforce social control, yet it does so by bringing people together and making them feel valuable. When the world ends abruptly at the hands of great scientific achievement, and even greater human carelessness, Bokononists face their fate together, turning themselves into frozen statues with permanent smiles on their faces, and Bokonon himself lies on his back and dies thumbing his nose at god, laughing at the absurdity of life, rather than be crippled by it.

Though frozen extinction may not be an ideal end, and the religion may be absurd, its success lies in the fact that it is self-consciously so. Bokononism does not so much provide an escape from reality as a comic lens through which to confront the hardships of reality. Though the Bokononists are wiped out along with most of humanity, their religious principles provide a form of remedy in community. The surviving characters are all non-Bokononist and must find their own method of dealing with disaster. Each attempts to cope with his or her own misery by turning to some form of artifice; Frank Hoenikker builds toy models, Newt Hoenikker paints,

their sister Angela plays the clarinet, and the narrator writes. The forms of artifice they turn to are not all that dissimilar from Bokononists foma, save for the fact that these activities isolate the survivors, while the Bokononists experience togetherness until they meet their end. Community, therefore, is valued above all else, despite the absurdity of Vonnegut's imagined religion.

Vonnegut uses this relationship between Bokononism and useful artifice, as Klinkowitz asserts, to "flesh out metaphors for novel writing" (*Effect* 62). The narrator warns early in *Cat's Cradle*, "anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. So be it" (5), aligning the novel itself with the fictional religious text. Similarly, the epigraph to the novel reads, "nothing in this book is true," echoing the opening line of the books of Bokonon: "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (5). Vonnegut titled his collection of speeches, essays, and interviews *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons*[6] (1974), noting in the preface, "taken together, these words form as good an umbrella as any for this collection" (xiii) and so suggesting that he too views Bokononism as a metaphor for writing. Therefore, if we consider Bokononism as a guide to reading that parallels a way of viewing life, it becomes a guide for reading the Vonnegut canon as a connected universe, a reminder of the value of contextualizing reality through a comic lens, and an illustration of the way in which communal bonds can form through literature.

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[6] The granfalloon, another tenant of Bokononism,which refers to a false karass, a commonality that people often think forms an important bond between them and another human being, which is actually meaningless. Vonnegut's examples include "the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows - and any nation, anytime, anywhere" (*Cat's Cradle* 91-2). Though these groups may resemble communities, Vonnegut argues that the reasons these people may feel connected to one another are shallow; they are not actually connected by a wampeter. Bernard B. O'Hare embodies the idea that nations are granfalloons in *Mother Night* as his overzealous patriotism causes him to hate as if god hates along with him (251). His actions ironically parallel those of the Nazi's he views as evil, illustrating Vonnegut's assertion in the introduction that even in war, national divisions are arbitrary as he could have easily been born in Germany and fought for the other side of the war (170). In *Player Piano,* the company competition at the Meadows leads to an excess of competition and fanatical team spirit. While on the surface being on the highly coveted blue team might seem to provide the camaraderie that Paul so desperately seeks throughout the novel, he instead is even more disenfranchised by the emptiness of the so-called community.

Vonnegut's novels, and in fact all literature, constitute foma: untruths that are helpful for understanding the world rather than obscuring it. The web of interconnected characters in Vonnegut's work can be thought of as a karass, which "ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries. It is as free form as an amoeba" (*Cat's Cradle* 2-3). Vonnegut uses that karass to do his literary bidding, suggesting he is god-like in his manipulation of the text. In tracing this web of connections and its effects on the narrative, I, then, am looking for the wampeter of that karass. Indeed, many critics use the vocabulary of Bokononism to discuss elements of Vonnegut's other works, such as Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl who discuss "whether the theories of Tralfamadore qualify as foma" in "Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: The requirements of Chaos" (*Critical Essays* 147). Yet while the religion's usefulness as a metaphor for the workings of literature is widely recognized and frequently implemented, many of these critics neglect to discuss the importance of the fact that a concept from one of Vonnegut's novels helps to illuminate his others. Even while recognizing that karasses exist in each of Vonnegut's novels, the fact that one also exists between those novels is generally overlooked.

Tracing Vonnegut's literary karass reveals that one text informs another constantly. Individual characters invite comparisons of separate portrayals of inferiority, greed, and pride, eliminating the boundaries between texts in the process. Vonnegut's canon is then one continuous discussion rather than a series of individual statements; therefore, larger thematic trends recur both as an extension of, and in parallel to, the way in which characters reappear. The assertion that "lies for the sake of artistic effect…can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling form of truth" (*Mother Night* x) applies not just to the effect of Howard Campbell's artifice within both the narrative and narration of *Mother Night*, but also illuminates many of Vonnegut's

creations. The foma of *Cat's Cradle* is considered harmless, and in fact highly beneficial, precisely because of this notion. Artifice is a method for coming to terms with, rather than escaping, reality in *Mother Night, Cat's Cradle, God Bless You Mr. Rosewater, Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, Slapstick, Deadeye Dick* (1982)*, Galapagos* (1985)*, Bluebeard* (1987), and *Timequake.* Just as Bokonon's teachings guide the fictive world of *Cat's Cradle* on the literal level and Vonnegut's approach to writing on the metafictive level, so too does the notion of lies as a window to truth apply to both the narratives of Vonnegut's work, and his approach to creating those narratives.

Not limited to a single recurring figure, Jonah allusions appear frequently as a means of highlighting elements of determinism and various characters' frustrations with a lack of control over their own lives. In *The Sirens of Titan* Malachi Constant uses the pseudonym "Jonah" to hide from fame. Just before he gives himself that moniker, he wonders, "if there could possibly be eyes up there [in the sky], eyes that could see everything he did. And if there were eyes up there, and they wanted him to do certain things, go certain places—how could they make him?" (44). Indeed, Malachi does find himself subject to forces beyond his control: his memories are altered, his mind is controlled with an external device, and he is dragged back and forth all over the universe in a space ship aptly named "The Whale," only to discover the history of humanity has been nothing but the product of another race trying to send a greeting. Likewise, Eliot Rosewater claims that if he were to ever try to abandon his humanistic mission, a version of the story of Jonah would be force itself upon him and he would be returned to Rosewater County via whale, as if to claim even his subversive benevolence is in part due to the influence of larger forces (*Rosewater* 212).

In the same vein, *Cat's Cradle* opens with the lines, "Call me Jonah…not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there" (1). Mount McCabe, the place where Bokonon takes refuge from the law and later expires in a final act of defiance against cosmic absurdity, is fittingly shaped like a giant whale (210). Stanley Schatt's analysis of Vonnegut's use of Jonah figures in "The Whale and the Cross: Vonnegut's Jonah and Christ figures" is microcosmic of the tensions in cosmic forces which persist throughout Vonnegut's novels: "Although Vonnegut centers his attention on the passivity of his Jonah figures, he appears to be well aware that at the heart of the Jonah story is a struggle between the benevolent forces of human and divine love and mercy and those malevolent forces of human selfishness and hardheartedness" ("Whale" 30).

In addition to the biblical allusion, the opening line to *Cat's Cradle* is also a play on that of *Moby Dick,* "Call me Ishmael" (1). *Cat's Cradle's* Jonah bears similarity to Ishmael in his role as an outsider, observer, and survivor of strange events, yet the dual allusion also places the biblical story in contrast with Melville's work; the suggestion of a mysterious whale invokes the idea that this character is not just subject to irresistible conveyance by an unknowable force but also actively engaged in an unflagging pursuit of that unknowable force (Rackstraw, "Paradox" 55). Therefore, Jonah's experience in *Cat's Cradle* is about his desire to understand the cosmic forces that lead him on this journey, manifesting in his exploration of Bokononism, as much as it is about the potential meaninglessness of the absurdity produced by those cosmic forces. Vonnegut echoes the opening of *Cat's Cradle*—and by syllogism, the opening of *Moby Dick*—in *Timequake*, which opens with the line "call me Junior" (1) calling attention to the fact that even

as he discusses his motivations as author and creator, he is also discussing the external forces that have shaped him and his career. The line "call me Junior," therefore, functions much like Vonnegut's recurring characters, compounding information from previous texts to multiply meaning through repetition and blurring the lines between the way in which the reader "holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (Barthes, "Death" 877) and the way Vonnegut imbeds himself in both the content and construction of the novel, making it ever more difficult to view him as merely scriptor.

In *Mother Night,* Howard Campbell is subject to the manipulations of two governments and as well as those of the author; as Klinkowitz notes, "if Campbell feels he is being used by the intelligence and propaganda interests of various countries, readers can see all the more so how he is being manipulated as a fictive creation" (*Effect* 53). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim's mantra is "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" (60). As the narrator notes, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future" (60), just as the Talfamadorians assert that free will is a concept that exists only on Earth (86). *Breakfast of Champions* deals with these issues even more explicitly, as Vonnegut addresses his characters directly as their creator. Across all of Vonnegut's novels, various systems of social control, alien manipulation of Earthlings, the randomness of the universe in contrast with the insignificance of humanity, and the deterministic machinations of the author-as-god are persistently in tension with the desires and motivations of the individuals Vonnegut uses to produce those themes.

A concern about the dangers of technology is likewise a fixture of Vonnegut's canon. The supposed advancement of society through technological innovation is portrayed as social devolution in *Player Piano* (1952)*, Cat's Cradle, Slaughterhouse-Five,* and *Deadeye Dick*. In

Player Piano, emotional interactions betweens spouses are just as automated as the appliances that fill their household. Advances in weapons technology cause the senseless self-destruction of humanity in *Cat's Cradle, Slaughterhouse*, and *Deadeye Dick*, while simultaneously devaluing human existence. In each of these cases, the causes and consequences of technological advancement may vary, yet, for Vonnegut, seemingly positive technological and scientific growth always results in a reduction of consideration for fellow humans, leading to social collapse. In each case, the formation of supportive communities is suggested as a remedy to, or at least a means of coping with, this moral regression.

Depictions of loneliness, isolation, and social disenfranchisement appear in some form in every novel. Paul Proteus, in *Player Piano,* wavers between the upper and lower classes of Ilium; belonging to neither, he realizes, more than feeling outrage at the state of society, he "was voracious for love—Anita's love, vividly imagined love, vicarious love—any love, whatever was immediately available" (248). Howard Campbell similarly describes his relationship with his wife as a "nation of two" (*Mother Night* 43), and without her he is "a stateless person," who feels no real allegiance to either the US or to the Nazi state, even as his life is heavily influenced by the both. When he finds out that all of his friends are Russian spies sent after him he is devastated, crying "'with a few well chosen words…you've wiped me out. How much poorer I am in this minute than I was in the minute before! Friends, dream, and mistress…*alles kaput"*" (*Mother Night* 197).

Other characters, such as Beatrice Rumfoord and Billy Pilgrim continue to search for a greater sense of belonging, while forming one very strong connection with another individual (with Chrono and Montana Wildhack respectively). These pairings of isolated individuals only enhance their relative isolation; a larger community is necessary for remedy. In *Slapstick,* the

Swain twins are labeled freaks by society yet consider themselves two halves of a single person; they are complete, happy, and ingenious together, yet depressed and barely functional when apart. Having learned the value of such connections between human beings, Wilbur Swain goes on to end loneliness by forming communities of artificial extended families. Such figures of isolation and the remedy provided by connecting with other human beings are prevalent in every one of Vonnegut's fourteen novels, varying in degrees and specifics, but always highlighting the need for community. Though Vonnegut's novels are fraught with destruction, desolation, hopelessness, and despair, such positive social bonds as Rosewater's uncritical love, Bokononism's togetherness, Rumfoord's post-war society, and Swain's extended families, provide a counterpoint, demonstrating that community—the highest of abstractions according to Vonnegut's humanism—is not just an integral part of a healthy functioning society but is an absolute necessity in the face of the collapse of that society.

While individually, Vonnegut's recurring characters pluralize and disperse meaning in Barthesian manner, the totality of those recurrences also narrows the focus of interpretation as particular recurring themes come into greater focus. As Sartre writes, "an object in a story does not derive its density from the number and length of the descriptions devoted to it, but from the complexity of its connections with the different characters. The more often the characters handle it, take it up, and put it down, in short, go beyond it towards their own ends, the more real will it appear" (61). The same is true of Vonnegut's canon, as not only are ideas such as isolation and loss of control important to Vonnegut's discussions, but the more they appear in different contexts, the more it becomes clear that they are immovable fixtures of our world as well. Moreover, the universe itself appears more "real" through complexity and proliferation of connections, as ideas go beyond single novels towards their own ends. This seeming realness,

rather than merely appealing to the reader's infinite play of language instead makes the author's actions more present to the reader.

Reading Holistically

While Sartre's and Barthes' understandings of the relationship between author and reader are fundamentally different, they share a respect for the reader's freedom that stands in opposition to the New Critical approach. For Barthes, the freedom of the reader manifests in a movement away from the scriptor's words, whereas for Sartre the same freedom is actually a responsibility to the writer based on a mutual confidence between the two. Sartre argues that "the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return that confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal" (52). Likewise, as the overlaps between Vonnegut's works grow more complicated, rather than merely pluralize, the reader must instead pay closer attention to the operations and intentions of the author in order to bring the full narrative into being. Though *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* deal with the same relative moment in history, the two novels take vastly different approaches to the duration and aftermath of World War II. Whereas in *Mother Night* Vonnegut seemingly distances himself as much as possible from the first-person narrative by prefacing the novel with an editor's note and declaring the text a found manuscript, the narrative of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is deeply grounded in Vonnegut's own experiences. Whereas the former is jarringly realistic, the latter is distinguished by surreal

science fiction elements. *Slaughterhouse* provides the soldier's experience of war, while *Mother Night* is slanted towards civilian involvement. The two novels provide distinct perspectives on war, yet the two are brought together through a single point of comparison: Howard W. Campbell Jr., a Nazi propagandist and spy for the American government, protagonist of one novel, and passing miscreant of another.

As with each of Vonnegut's recurring characters, Howard Campbell is shared between the two texts without direct acknowledgment that he is someone we should have prior knowledge of. Yet Campbell is a unique case in that Vonnegut deliberately plays with what the reader may or may not know. In the pages preceding Campbell's appearance in *Slaughterhouse*, an English officer in the German prison camp is referred to as "The Blue Fairy Godmother" (127) due to his absurd dress following a performance of Cinderella. A German then enters with a report on American prisoners of war "written by a former American who had risen high in the German Ministry of Propaganda. His name was Howard W. Campbell Jr. He would later hang himself while awaiting trial as a war criminal. So it goes" (128). Vonnegut then gives a thorough summary of Campbell's back-story, including his time as a playwright, the death of his wife, his attempts to fill her absence with her sister, and his eventual suicide. Vonnegut gives Campbell a more complete introduction than most of the other characters in the novel, and as with Rosewater, enough detail to establish that he is the same Campbell from *Mother Night.* Yet despite the array of information given, Vonnegut leaves the most important detail of Campbell's story out; though he was one of the Germans' most prominent propagandists, he in fact used that position to spy for the American Government, transmitting coded information through his inflammatory broadcasts. In *Mother Night*, the only person who can prove Campbell's innocence is Frank Wertanen, his contact with the American government, whom Campbell often refers to as

his "Blue Fairy Godmother." Though the Englishman in *Slaughterhouse* is not intended to be Frank, the use of the same peculiar moniker acts as a reminder that Campbell is a character we have seen before and that his previous appearance will alter our understanding of the current one.

As Vonnegut informs us in the introduction to *Mother Night*, he believes the moral of his story to be "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (v). Though Campbell tells us throughout that novel that he was working for the Americans and did not believe any of the propaganda he distributed, Vonnegut, as editor, also tells us that he was a man who "served evil too openly and good too secretly" (xiii). Campbell's appearance in *Slaughterhouse* seems to confirm these sentiments, as without knowledge of his memoirs in *Mother Night*, we see him as an American traitor. When Campbell visits the slaughterhouse two days before Dresden is destroyed, he is referred to as "an American who had become a Nazi" (162). There is no ambiguity or hint towards Campbell's role as spy; he his not an American who worked for the Nazis, but an American who *became* one. Indeed, even if we are aware of his story as presented in *Mother Night*, his scenes in *Slaughterhouse* only confirm that for all his good intentions, the false role he puts on is more powerful than what lies beneath it.

Vonnegut's construction of Howard Campbell is unique amidst his numerous uses of recurring characters as points of comparison. Instead of merely providing a means for enriched discussion of social issues, by withholding information from the narration of *Slaughterhouse*, Vonnegut toys with the audience's response to the text based on whether they do or do not have knowledge of Campbell's full story. In *Mother Night*, Campbell returns to America after the war and tries to return to a normal quiet life; however, he never manages to do so completely because his famed Nazi persona brings him social isolation. If one encounters Campbell in *Slaughterhouse-Five* without full knowledge of his story, a third version of the narrative is

created between the two texts in which that reader is transformed into one of those who stigmatize Campbell for his Nazi associations. In this case, Vonnegut's recurring figure does not just involve the reader in the role of juxtaposing two texts, but also makes that reader a part of the text, demonstrating the subjectivity involved in making moral judgments.

In *Mother Night*, Campbell tells us that he never tried very hard to be convincing in his public statements, and a few characters that are sympathetic to the Nazi cause call attention to the fact that his speeches were weak and unconvincing, despite their popularity. In *Slaughterhouse,* though he is presented as completely allied with the Germans, we see this ambivalence in his report on the American prisoners. As he writes, "America is the wealthiest nation on Earth, but its people are mainly poor, and poor Americans are urged to hate themselves" (125) and "expect no brotherly love, even between brothers. There will be no cohesion between individuals. Each will be a sulky child who often wishes he were dead" (130), his words may seem harsh and treacherous; however, nothing he says is untrue. Similar criticisms of the American class system are expressed by Vonnegut in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and this disunity between fellow soldiers is seen throughout *Slaughterhouse,* as characters such as Weary and Lazzarro fight with and threaten their fellow soldiers. Therefore, rather than seeing these letters as cruel criticisms by a heartless traitor, knowledge of *Mother Night* allows us to see Campbell's half-baked words of hate for the cover they really are.

As Vonnegut-the-editor remarks, "lies told for the sake of artistic effect...can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth" (*Mother Night* xi-x). Such moments wherein we glimpse the two narratives simultaneously are also a reminder of the emphasis placed on dual identity throughout *Mother Night*. Campbell's duality is manifested visibly in *Slaughterhouse* as he presents himself in a uniform that he has created for himself. His appearance is an absurd

combination of superhero, cowboy, and SS officer, as he dons a blue body stocking and ten gallon hat embellished in stars, stripes, portraits of Abraham Lincoln and swastikas (*Slaughterhouse* 162-3). Though Campbell informs us of his affected pro-Nazi persona, in *Mother Night* we never actually see him perform these duties, nor do we ever see him as anything less than a very serious figure, making this appearance shocking and unsettling, and compounding the multiplicity of his identity. While this new perspective on Campbell confirms Vonnegut's warnings that Campbell becomes what he pretends to be, his near lunacy in this moment also leads us to retrospectively question his reliability as a narrator in *Mother Night*.

Yet even as we might begin to doubt his secret identity—the very premise of *Mother Night*—we must also remember a seminal moment from the end of that text in which, Campbell delivers what is effectively the novel's other moral, "'There are plenty of good reasons for fighting…but no good reason 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'" (251). Vonnegut reminds us that as tempting as it is to establish clear distinctions of good and evil in times of war, individuals do not fit so easily into such categories. As horrible as the crimes of the Nazis were, including those that Campbell had at least some indirect part in, Bernard O'Hare comes to hate and hunt Campbell with that same unmitigated fervor. In the introduction added in 1966, three years after the initial publication and three years prior to the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut, as himself, writes, "If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes" (viii). He acknowledges that despite the atrocities surrounding World War II,

good and evil exist on both ends of the spectrum. Though the prisoners in *Slaughterhouse* are in German custody, the Americans are responsible for the bombing of Dresden. Likewise, there are surely soldiers on the Nazi side who are just as lost and clueless as Billy Pilgrim, fighting not for a cause, but because they were born within certain arbitrary boundaries. All nations are granfalloons after all, and as Campbell argues throughout *Mother Night*, he cannot force himself to assimilate coincidental lines on a map into his personal being and thus remains a politically and morally ambiguous figure. Therefore, as Campbell's presence in *Slaughterhouse* reminds us of *Mother Night*'s discussion of dual identity, Vonnegut also asks us to remember that while villainy and morality are relative, unreserved hatred inevitably only proliferates cruelty.

The aforementioned instance of "So it goes" in the introduction to *Mother Night* is the first time Vonnegut's most famous phrase appears in his canon. It appears precisely in between the publication of the two texts, rather than contemporary with either, suggesting that as Vonnegut was looking back on Howard Campbell's story in *Mother Night*, he was also looking forward to Billy Pilgrim's. In the introduction-like first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut compares himself to Lot's wife in the bible, who, Vonnegut speculates, looks back over Sodom and Gomorrah out of sympathy for all the innocents who are punished among the guilty, only to be turned to a pillar of salt for that kindness. Vonnegut says he too is a pillar of salt, suggesting even in his novel that is meant to expose the evils of war, he cannot help but have sympathy for some on the other side such as Campbell, who are perhaps not entirely innocent, but are also undeserving of outright hatred. Throughout both texts, Vonnegut emphasizes the fact that individuals are much more complex and have much more personal history than we could possibly begin to understand from a passing moment, and thus are wrong to judge others so swiftly. It is unlikely that we would be able to gain this insight from our brief

encounter with Campbell in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, yet such a deep understanding of and connection with another person is, in fact, made possible through the juxtaposition of the two novels.

While Barthes claims that it is "language which speaks, not the author" ("Death" 875), Sartre, by contrast claims:

> The literary object though realized *through* language is never given *in* language… it is the absence of words, the undifferentiated and lived silence of inspiration, which the word will then particularize, whereas the silence produced by reader is an object…It is a question of silences which are so particular that they could not retain any meaning outside of the object which the reading causes to appear. (44)

As with all of the recurring features of Vonnegut's works, and with Howard Campbell in particular, it is the silences, the gaps between incarnations of the character that requires both the creative and reconstructive efforts of the reader to bring the author's ideas into being. The fact that Campbell appears so different to us in his second appearance makes it necessary for the reader to evaluate both the content and cause of the sudden change. Therefore, whereas a Barthesian reading would depend on the associations of signifiers that grow from the words on the page, Vonnegut uses the words on the page to invite us to discover what is absent. Indeed, when engaging with Vonnegut's work, the reader must engage in "a continual exceeding of the written thing. To be sure the author guides him, but all he does is guide him. The landmarks he sets up are separated by the void. The reader must go beyond them" (Sartre 45). Vonnegut's recurring figures are the landmarks and the gaps between novels remain a void: it is, therefore, the reader's inference that dissolves the autonomous text as much as it is the author's direction, yet both parties are necessary to the operation's complete realization.

Just as Vonnegut's characters move almost imperceptibly from one text into the next, his language maintains a similar level of fluidity. Vonnegut often highlights particular phrases, such as "Hi Ho" and "And so on," throughout individual works, and across multiple works, repeating

them to such an extent that they take on a life of their own and begin to operate much like Vonnegut's repeated characters. Also like Vonnegut's repeated characters, it is not so much the language of these phrases themselves, but the way in which they act as landmarks that develops meaning, as the reader is called upon to fill in the gaps by evaluation of comparisons. In *Cat's Cradle*, just before the earth is consumed by ice-nine, a bird asks Jonah, "pootee-phweet?" (260). The same noise recalls Eliot Rosewater to consciousness after his vision of the conflagration of Indianapolis in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (255). Billy Pilgrim awakens to that same "poo-tee-weet?" (100) sound in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* and hears it again at the end of the novel while wandering the ruins of Dresden (215). Each time it appears the ominous avian inquiry is associated with mass destruction, and each time it is delivered in the form of a question. As Jonah notes in *Cat's Cradle*, "it seemed to be asking me what had happened" (260). The imposition of confusion and concern on a small unaware animal is a reminder that while senseless human destruction may be occurring, the world moves on, even in its newly altered state, outside of human affairs. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut, as narrator, notes that "everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet" (19). Because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre, Vonnegut ends the novel with that same innocuous inquiry. Yet with every new appearance of the chirp, each previous chirp—and the destruction that precedes—is recalled. Though the bird was chosen precisely because it is an innocent bystander, through its repeated association with mass-devastation, the bird also becomes a harbinger of destruction.

In each case where Vonnegut repeats such phrases, the repetition results in both the destruction and creation of meaning at once. While the individual words begin to lose their

original impact and meaning, the phrase as a whole becomes a symbol, reminding the reader of every instance in which those words have been used before. With every new instance of the refrain, the words themselves become less poignant, yet the phrase continues to accumulate meaning. Vonnegut first uses this device in *Player Piano.* The phrase, "I love you, Paul" is said frequently by the protagonist's wife, and is instantly returned with "I love *you*, Anita." The supposedly sentimental exchange quickly takes on a mechanical quality through repetition, suggesting the characters, too, have lost a sense of what the words actually mean. As Paul becomes dissatisfied with the artificiality of his life and his marriage, the mechanization of his personal interactions echoes the increased mechanization of modern life central to the novel's conflict. However, there is a moment in the middle of the novel, when Paul receives the promotion he is supposed to want, and realizes he would rather retreat from society entirely, and that refrain changes: "suddenly understanding that he, like Anita, was little more than his station in life, he threw his arms around his sleeping wife, and laid his head on his fellow wraith-to-be…'Anita, I love you'…'I love *you,* Paul'" (136). This time, the previously automatic response is transformed into a rare moment of emotional authenticity. The clarity Paul suddenly achieves is highlighted by the fact that the old mechanical words are reformed into something new through the comparison to their previous usage.

In this early instance Vonnegut alters the phrase slightly by placing the name first in order to highlight the shift in its usage. However, in his following novels, Vonnegut keeps such leitmotifs consistent throughout, instead relying on a sardonic tone, irony, and context to highlight the moments in which the same words mean differently. Instead of communicating through the words themselves, Vonnegut transforms the way we think about words, reducing them to symbols and communicating through the comparison of one moment to another.

Timequake's circuitous semi-narrative structure has several of these phrases, such as "FUCK ART," "Lotsa luck!," and "Ting-a-ling," woven throughout it. These phrases help to make sense of the fractured text; as Vonnegut moves fluidly from fiction to autobiography to personal philosophy, the phrases help to signify that Vonnegut is returning to a particular moment or idea expressed earlier in the text. The phrase "FUCK ART" originally appears when Monica Pepper, an embodiment of Vonnegut's sister, spray paints the words on the door of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Throughout the text, Vonnegut returns to this phrase whenever he questions the validity of art as a means of self-expression or change. At times he uses the phrase to question the triviality of art, and at others to question how we could possibly dismiss the importance of art. Just as the other repeated phrases act as a reminder of the instances in which the phrase has been used before, in *Timequake* that notion is made literal as the words are given physical form as graffiti on a door. Throughout the text, as characters pass this location and see the fragmented "UCK AR" left on the door, we are reminded of the context in which both the phrase and the physical location have appeared previously, and left to consider each moment in context of the others.

One of Vonnegut's most prolific, and certainly most famous, uses of this device is the repetition of "So it goes" in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The phrase appears 106 times in the novel (Klinkowitz, *Effect* 85), each time following an instance of death. Though Billy and Vonnegut alike use the phrase throughout the text, it is of Tralfamadorian (alien) origin. As Billy tells us, because of the Tralfamadorians' ability to see in four dimensions, with all time happening simultaneously:

> When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a 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." (27)

Some critics have taken "So it goes" to be roughly equivalent to "shit happens," suggesting this attitude makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* utterly nihilistic in its flippant treatment of death (Harris, *Critical Essays 136)*; however, this interpretation relies on the assumption that the implications of "So it goes" are uniquely rigid. Yet just as the repeated phrases in *Player Piano*, *Timequake, Slapstick* and others change across the course of each narrative, "So it goes" is likewise constant in form yet malleable in meaning and subject to context. Therefore, in order to critically engage with the way in which Vonnegut uses the phrase "So it goes," to convey different meaning, we must engage with the context, and first examine the phrase's alien origin.

One of the major critical issues in dealing with *Slaughterhouse* is whether Billy's time travel and abduction by the Tralfamadorians is taken to be the reality of the novel or whether Billy is actually crazy and has invented the Tralfamadorians as a coping mechanism. Many critics, such as Tony Tanner, argue for the latter approach, given that Billy's time travel tends to coincide with sleep, the actual bombing of Dresden only appears in the novel as a memory rather than time travel, and the fantastical science fiction elements are incongruous with the novel's personal and historical context (*Critical Essays* 123). If this view of the Tralfamadorians is accepted, then Billy coming unstuck in time is a manifestation of a post-traumatic disorder—what Klinkowitz calls schizophrenia ("Crimes" 42). If viewed through this lens, then the argument of the novel at its most basic is: "war makes people go insane."

However, because the Tralfamadorians reappear from *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut retains the possibility that Billy is not hallucinating his time travel and the Tralfamadorians actually are an outside force acting upon Billy's life. Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, first introduced in *Sirens*, is also in the hospital with Billy and refuses to believe the novel's protagonist was present at Dresden. Rumfoord's skepticism ironically threatens the reader's

skepticism about the reality of Billy's experiences by providing an extra connection between the two novels in which the Tralfamadorians appear. Likewise, Eliot Rosewater's presence, as previously discussed, is a reminder that the alien presence, however seemingly absurd, should not be taken at face value. Therefore, if we entertain the possibility that the time travel in *Slaughterhouse* is real, then the function the Tralfamadorians serve in *Sirens* informs our understanding of their role in *Slaughterhouse.*

Throughout *Sirens* the Tralfamadorians are used as evidence against human exceptionalism; their very existence as well as their vast knowledge of the universe serve as a reminder that in comparison to the vastness of the universe, home to an unknown number of life forms, humans are relatively insignificant. Yet rather than giving up and deeming life pointless, because of the perspective the Tralfamadorians provide, Earthlings instead look inwards to find meaning in life. Thus in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the presence of an alien other forces the speaker to define what constitutes "human."

Throughout *Slaughterhouse*, Vonnegut offers numerous declarations and definitions of what it is to be human, from both the Tralfamadorians' and Billy's perspectives. Upon his arrival on Tralfamadore, the first thing Billy does is ask "why me?" (76), which, according to his abductors "is a very *Earthling* question…Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber?...Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*" (76-7). Just as the Tralfamadorians in *Sirens* make the human race seem random and inconsequential, so too do the aliens raise the point that the role humans play in the universe is far less important than we seem to think it is. The changing emphasis in each of the Tralfamadorians' questions communicates the absurdity they find in Billy's human egocentricism, given that he is asking such a thing when

confronted with the existence of an alien race that proves his very insignificance. The moment also recalls the Bokononist calypso: "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" (*Cat's Cradle* 183), which also portrays the futility of asking "why" as an irrevocably human endeavor. Here, too, in order to identify that trait as distinctly human, Vonnegut aligns that quality with the natural instinct; however, in doing so, he also suggests that we are no different than the other creatures that are ruled by their nature, despite the fact that we use that same notion of inquisitiveness to elevate ourselves above them. Both the Tralfamadorian and Bokononist statements use what is definitively human as a means to argue that the role humans occupy is ultimately insignificant. It is not just such questions that the Tralfamadorians define as human, but the answers to those questions as well. As Billy continues to ask "where," "how," and "why," rather than respond directly, the Tralfamadorians again give a very non-Earthling answer, offering instead:

> It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are great explainers, explaining why this event is structures as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am Tralfamadorian, seeing all the time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations, it simply is, take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber…only on Earth is there any talk of free will. (85-6)

While Earthlings feel the need to explain everything in order to feel as though they have control over some part of their lives, the Tralfamadorians accept things as they are. In both *Cat's Cradle* and *Sirens,* humans need to feel like we have a purpose, so religion and false histories are used to create that sense of belonging.

While the contrast inevitably created by the juxtaposition of the human and the other is frequently used to diminish the importance of humans in the universe and provide a distanced perspective to the atrocities of war, Vonnegut's definition of humanness is not always so

detached. One of the most startling moments in the novel is not one that involves time travel, aliens, or even cataclysmic bombings; instead, it is an intensely quiet, understated moment. As the prisoners of war are crammed into the train to Dresden like cattle, Vonnegut builds an expectation that the prisoners' dignity and humanity will begin to disintegrate. While the prisoners are sorted, packaged, and shipped, the trains that carry them "tootle to one another...they were saying 'hello'" (69-70). Through this personification, these inanimate objects become civilized individuals, while the human individuals around them become one chaotic mass, as "each car became a single organism which ate and drank and excreted through its ventilators it talked or sometimes yelled through its ventilators, too. In went water and loaves of black bread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and piss and language" (70). Vonnegut appears to satisfy expectations by reducing hundreds of individuals to one base organism, and even language, typically used to distinguish the superiority of higher beings, instead devolves into excrement. Yet this eradication of identity is followed by a startling shift from referring to the prisoners as "it" to "human beings," highlighting the very individuality he has just erased and so renewing the value of language. Despite the fact that the "human beings in there were excreting into steel helmets which were passed to the people at the ventilators…When food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared" (70). Even though we are made witness to the horrendous conditions forced upon these prisoners because of war, because of the acts of other human beings, sharing is what Vonnegut identifies as most definitively human, asserting that such generosity outweighs the misery that necessitates it in the first place.

In fact, despite all the horrors of war that Vonnegut brings to his readers' attention, war is not one of the things the Tralfamadorians identify as distinctly human. Billy himself articulates

this convention, as he "expected the Tralfamadorians to be baffled and alarmed by all the wars and other forms of murder on earth. He expected them to fear that the Earthling combination of ferocity and spectacular weaponry might eventually destroy part or maybe all of the innocent Universe" (115-6). Yet when Billy asks his alien hosts how they manage to have such a peaceful planet, to Billy's surprise as well as our own, they reply "today we do, on other days we have wars as horrible as any you've ever seen or read about. There isn't anything we can do about them, so we simply don't look at them" (117). The notion that war is an intrinsic part of every culture in the universe, and not a human invention, is extremely jarring in an antiwar novel, yet Vonnegut informs us of this notion from the very beginning of the novel, when he states in the prologue-like first chapter "there would always be wars...they were as easy to stop as glaciers" (3). He does not seek to stop war by exposing the ensuing devastation; instead he destabilizes our understanding of it in order to encourage us to think about our world and our role as a species in a new way. In much the same way that Bokononism provides humorous balance in the face of destruction, as Vonnegut argues, it is not the self-inflicted atrocities that define us as a species, but the way we respond to those atrocities that best defines our humanity.

While the Tralfamadorians assert that we would fare better as a species if we learned to focus on the good things and not dwell so much on the bad, looking back is also human. Again, Vonnegut starts the novel with the biblical story of Lot's wife who "was told not to look back where all those people and homes had been" (21-22) because they were vile people, and the world was better off without them. She was turned into a pillar of salt because "she did look back," and Vonnegut admits, "I love her for that, because it was so human" (22). This is the precise reason why Tralfamadorian literature varies from our own. Whereas Tralfamadorian literature is only a clump of symbols with no morals and no causality, and Vonnegut may indeed

try to achieve that through his nonlinear structure, he also tells us from the beginning "this one is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt" (22). He fails at writing Tralfamadorian literature because, despite his many attempts to make the novel “alien” in every sense of the word, his work is still far too human in that it looks back on his own experiences; in trying to write the alien to expose the human, Vonnegut instead enacts the human. Still in attempting the alien, Vonnegut does propose an alternative way of thinking about literature, and about war, as he uses the contrast of atrocity to seek out the good in people. Rather than the statement of *Slaughterhouse-Five* being “war makes people crazy,” if it is read with this tension between the human and the alien in mind, that statement instead becomes “war itself is crazy,” a statement much closer to the unfamiliar way of writing about war that Vonnegut claims to strive for.

If the same tension between human and alien responses to war is applied to “So it goes”, then we cannot assume that “So it goes” should be accepted at face value. Just as Vonnegut’s other uses of repetition result in dissolution and re-creation of meaning, highlighting plurality over rigidity, so too does the implication of “So it goes” transform across the course of the novel. The appeal of adopting this Tralfamadorian response to death is to avoid being weighed down by something that is inevitable and unremarkable. Because one cannot help but recall every previous death with each new utterance of “So it goes,” the frequency of repetition seems to confirm the Tralfamadorians’ point that death is an unchangeable and intrinsic part of life that should be accepted rather than feared. Yet even as the frequency of the repeated phrase makes death unremarkable, it also makes the narrative increasingly morbid because of the constant attention to the accumulating death toll. Therefore, even as the Tralfamadorians’ argument is evidenced, it becomes more and more difficult to accept, as the sheer volume of death becomes

more affecting than each death would individually. The proliferation of "So it goes" in the novel therefore creates ambiguity by simultaneously sensitizing and desensitizing the reader to death.

When the phrase first appears in *Slaughterhouse*, before its Tralfamadorian origins are explained, it refers to the conflagration of Sodom and Gomorrah (21), to the random and gruesome crushing of a man in an elevator (9), and to the accidental death of Billy's father (24). When associated with these violent and unsettling deaths, the phrase seems shockingly cold and flippant. However, as the novel goes on and the deaths occur more frequently and more senselessly, we begin to see the value in the Tralfamadorian understanding of the universe, as death becomes so common it would be a pointless and weighty task to fully lament each one. For the reader, for Billy, and for Vonnegut alike, the "So it goes" attitude towards death is appealing as it provides a way to come to terms with of the chaos and violence in the world.

However, because the presence of the Tralfamadorians emphasizes the importance of human caring even when faced with our own insignificance, our understanding of "So it goes" is shaped by that same tension between the other and the human, between the desire to cope through self-imposed distance and the possibility of losing something fundamentally human in the process. While indeed we may be encouraged to avoid our human egocentricities by accepting the Tralfamadorian attitude towards death, Vonnegut also asks us to question the cost of doing so, as "looking back" is a fundamentally human action. The argument that we should take death lightly is in part based on the assumption that all lives and all deaths matter equally: however, as "So it goes" constantly reminds us of this notion, the comparisons the repetition of the phrase inevitably creates between individual deaths reveals that not all instances are, in fact, treated entirely equally.

The hobo on the train to Dresden is a relatively insignificant figure, yet his death is returned to several times, often with unusual emotional detail. Though one would expect a nondescript vagrant to be a relatively expendable character, his death is instead described more poetically than many others: "the hobo was last. The hobo could not flow, could not plop. He wasn't liquid anymore. He was stone. So it goes" (81). The hobo's body is seen again as the prisoners leave the first camp, as "he was in the fetal position, trying even in death to nestle like a spoon with others. There were no others now. He was nestling with thin air and cinders…it was all right, somehow, his being dead. So it goes" (148). The image of the hobo alone and childlike, seeking human contact even in death imbues his death with an emotional intensity that is opposed to the dismissal of emotion that "so it goes" demands. This tension is further wrought by the qualifier "somehow." Though "it was alright" seems to be a reiteration of the ideas expressed by "So it goes," the inclusion of the hesitation "somehow" suggests that we should not be so quick to dismiss his death as unimportant or unaffecting. These lines could also be read as "So it goes" referring not to the hobo's death, but to the fact that his death is acceptable to Billy. Therefore, Vonnegut plays upon the way we value different forms of human life to at once justify, and tempt us to question the validity of a Tralfamadorian view of death.

In the same vein, though the phrase itself is a reminder of the certainty of death, ironically, it begins to lose its effectiveness when its use becomes overly ubiquitous. In addition to marking the numerous casualties of war, "So it goes" also follows a glass of stagnant water described as dead (101) and a bottle of flat champagne (73), as if in parody of the way it is applied to all deaths without discernment. When the American prisoners are deloused upon arrival at the first German camp, we are aware that we are getting closer to the massacre at Dresden, yet instead we are told "body lice and bacteria and fleas were dying by the billions. So

it goes" (84). Though this does provide further evidence for the Tralfamadorian point that a human life is no more significant than any other, our very humanness is inclined to fight against that notion. Similarly, the lines "down in the locker were a few cattle and sheep and pigs and horses hanging from iron hooks. So it goes. The locker had empty hooks for thousands more" (165) is followed closely by "it was the next night that about one hundred and thirty thousand people in Dresden would die. So it goes" (165). Though the same phrase would attempt to indicate to the reader that the death of thousands of humans is just as negligible as the death of thousands of livestock, the premise is difficult to accept. The actual bombing of Dresden does not occur as time travel, but as a memory in which Billy recalls that he sat safely inside the meat locker, while those above "were all being killed with their families. So it goes" (177). The phrasing, as well as the fact that this is a memory Billy is haunted by, rather than an actual experience of the event, makes the moment more emotionally poignant. As much as the Tralfamadorians may be right that humankind would in some ways benefit from making light of death and as much as the reader, and even Billy may want to think of these deaths as negligible, actually doing so is another matter.

The leitmotif "So it goes," therefore, is not so much an assertion for a particular viewpoint as it is a means of placing the human response to death in direct tension with the Tralfamadorian response. Tralfamadorian detachment may be the most logical response, the most broad-minded, and most comforting; however, Vonnegut challenges us to question what is lost if we accept this alien detachment. Instead, just as Vonnegut asserts that war does not so much define us as a species as our response to war, so too does death fail to define us so much as our response to death, exposing the fact that even in the face of the utmost tragedy, there is remedy in forming positive human connections. As Sartre argues, "if I [the reader] am given this

world with its injustices it is not so that I might contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation, that I might disclose them and create them with their nature as injustices, that is, as abuses to be suppressed" (62). Our attention to the ambiguities and tensions created by recurring characters and recurring phrases is essential to recognizing the invitation that Vonnegut extends to the reader to go beyond the text and challenge the words on the page.

Writing this account of his experiences may, to a certain extent, be a coping strategy for Vonnegut in dealing with his own experiences of war, just as the Tralfamadorian perspective is a coping device for Billy. Recontextualing experience through an alternative view point allows both men to make sense of the chaos and violence they witness, and to feel as if they have gained some sort of control over their experiences; however, in writing this novel, Vonnegut is also trying to make a statement about that experience, even if, as he says, there is nothing intelligent to say about war. In the opening chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Vonnegut informs his readers that the unusual narrative structure of this particular novel is crucial to authentically representing the author's experiences in Dresden. Whereas a traditional, linear novel[7] would hinge upon making connections and developing patterns into a cohesive statement, as Vonnegut tells us, "there is nothing intelligent to say about war" (19). A normative war novel will not suffice, could not possibly encompass the true madness of war, thus he does not seek to write a traditional novel. Instead, what Vonnegut attempts to create is something more akin to the clump of symbols with "no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects" (88) that constitutes Tralfamadorian literature.

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[7] In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* Mary O'Hare, the real O'Hare's wife, expresses a related concern that Vonnegut will write a standard war novel, which even as it exposes horrific experiences, also glorifies the soldiers as heroes, when they are, in fact, helpless children (13-5). Therefore, in order to effectively communicate the pointlessness of war, Vonnegut promises to avoid writing the familiar war novel by rejecting logical linearity.

By removing the standard structure of the novel, Vonnegut forces us to think about war in a new and unfamiliar way (Davis 77). In these moments, Vonnegut's work indeed appears to align with Barthes, as the various overlaps of character, language, and theme do not necessarily suggest cause and effect, morals, or even a beginning and end, but, like the Barthesian text, together the comparisons and associations form a single larger picture, creating a richer portrayal of life than any one of them possibly could communicate on their own. Yet, the notion that this collection of symbols has no "particular relationship...except that the author has chosen them carefully" (*Slaughterhouse* 88) is opposed to Barthes' claims. Moreover, as Vonnegut relates to Mary O'Hare in the opening of the novel, though there may be nothing intelligent to say about war, he also wishes to avoid glorifying war. As Barthes moves to base interpretation entirely on the experience of the reader, doing so gives up the capability that literature has to criticize the world. In exposing the horrors of his own experience at Dresden, Vonnegut indeed seeks to criticize the absurdity and permanence of war; therefore, rather than opening meaning completely to the reader's will, Vonnegut instead makes those horrors more present to reader's by relying on them to realize the task he has entrusted us with.

Reading Theoretically

Such complex revisions of character and theme created by overlaps in the Vonnegut universe necessarily revise the way in which we interact with the text, and through it, the author. The author's function, therefore, cannot be clearly defined as god or scriptor, rather is deeply intertwined with our experience of the text. Vonnegut calls our attention to the fluidity of this relationship in the following passage from *Cat's Cradle,* in which our perception of the first person narrator, known to us as only as Jonah (or John), is troubled:

> Marvin Breed nudged some of the boughs aside with his toe so that we could see the raised letters on the pedestal. There was a last name written there. "There's a screwy name for you," he said. "If that immigrant had any descendants, I expect they Americanized the name. They're probably Jones or Black or Thompson now."
>
> "There you're wrong," I murmured.
>
> The room seemed to tip, and its walls and ceiling and floor were transformed momentarily into the mouths of many tunnels—tunnels leading in all directions through time. I had a Bokononist vision of the unity in every second of all time and all wandering mankind, all wandering womankind, all wandering children.
>
> "There you're wrong," I said, when the vision was gone.
>
> "You know some people by that name?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> The name was my last name, too. (72-3)

Throughout the text, this nearly anonymous narrator serves primarily as an impartial observer and a straight man to the more outrageous characters of the Hoenniker family, while we learn very little about him as an individual. Despite our distance from the narrator, this scene lingers on the fact that the last name on the statue—an unspecified, yet decidedly peculiar, name belonging to forgotten German immigrant—is shared by this relatively anonymous narrator. In the original typescript for the novel, the name appeared on the tombstone as “Vonnegut”; however, the publishers insisted that this detail be removed, as the conflation of author and fictional narrator it creates was deemed too radical a departure from convention (Klinkowitz, *Effect* 154). Nevertheless, the implication that we can no longer be certain of the identity of our speaker remains, as the awed slowing of the narrative leaves us wondering whether the origin of the statement “that name was my last name, too” is indeed Vonnegut. Thus, in the absence of information, we are invited to make the leap on our own and close the familiar distance between the voice of the Jonah and that of the author. This conflation of previously distinct roles destabilizes the reader, placing us in the same position as the narrator just as he experiences his epiphany, as the sharing of a name suggests the sharing of identity, which reveals to us the tension between unity and simultaneous separation of speakers, in parallel to the character’s revelation of the “unity of all mankind.”

As noted above, throughout *Cat's Cradle* Vonnegut uses "Bokononism to flesh out metaphors for novel writing" (Klinkowitz, *Effect* 62). Thus, in providing this "Bokononist vision" in which the distinction between the speaker and the author is eliminated, Vonnegut extends the fictional world into our own and includes his readers in the unity of all time and all mankind. The traditionally absent voice of the author invades the text even further than his publishers initially anticipated, as he creates a parallel between the Bokononist vision of the structure of the universe—a series of substantive connections between seemingly unrelated individuals—and his own vision for revising the structure of literature, by fostering connections between seemingly separate texts.

In the same manner, by constructing a functioning universe out of individual novels made less separate by recycled images, characters, and sayings, Vonnegut also forms a phenomenological relationship with the reader. Sartre describes the dynamic as a close partnership between author and reader:

> Since the creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language. (46)

The way in which we juxtapose ideas presented in separate Vonnegut novels makes the text collaborative. Whereas Barthes' insistence on the importance of the reader's freedom tends to move interpretation away from both the author and the original content of the text, Sartre's recognition of the importance of the reader actually renews focus on the text by making the production of a text a partnership rather than relying more on the efforts of one party or the other. Just as Vonnegut uses connections between novels to emphasize the importance of community, so too is the very process by which he communicates those ideas bound up in the vitality of personal connections. Both in parallel to, and as a result of, the way in which

Vonnegut creates a community by connecting characters, in reconstructing that community we also form a connection with the author. In seeking to understand Vonnegut's karass, we come to find that the unique way in which it is constructed also demands that we become a part of it.

In the prologue to *Slapstick*, Vonnegut claims that "this is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography" (1), yet the narrative is presented as the fictional autobiography of a character named Wilbur Swain. Rather than a literal autobiography, this novel is "about what life *feels* like to [Vonnegut]" (*Slapstick* 1). Though the first person narration and fictitious events of the novel separate the text from the author, this early assertion indicates that we should treat the sentiments and ideas expressed through that fiction as in some way analogous to those of Vonnegut's own experience. With this in mind, the actual autobiographical information provided in the prologue is essential to our understanding of the fictional plot.

As Vonnegut recounts the experience of attending his uncle's funeral, reuniting with his brother, and remembering the earlier the loss of his sister, he finds himself disconcerted by the dwindling size of his extended family. Consequently, the novel discusses at length the importance of extended families as a support system and the value of familial love, which he calls common decency. This familial love is embodied in the relationship between the narrator, Wilbur, and his twin sister, Eliza, whose bond is by far the strongest and most intimate between any of Vonnegut's characters. In the prologue, as Vonnegut discusses the loss of his own sister Alice, he informs us that, "she was the person I had always written for. She was the secret of whatever artistic unity I had ever achieved. She was the secret of my technique. Any creation which has any wholeness and harmoniousness, I suspect, was made by an artist or inventor with an audience of one in mind" (17). Given that the novel is at least metaphorically autobiographical, and Wilbur the narrator is an extension of the author, then Eliza must also be

an extension of Alice. The bond between Wilbur and Eliza is a reflection of that between Vonnegut and his sister. Together Wilbur and Eliza produce numerous intellectual doctrines and social critiques, most notably the creation of massive artificial extended families intended to end loneliness, which Wilbur later implements as President of the United States. Likewise, Vonnegut, with his sister as intended audience and source of unity, creates social critiques within his novels, as well as the artificial extended "family" that is his web of characters.

The relationship between Wilbur and Eliza is not simply one of familial love and support, but is also directly tied to their intellectual and creative ability. Their influence on each other shapes the way in which they interact with the world:

> Eliza and I used bodily contact only in order to increase the intimacy of our brains. Thus we did give birth to a single genius, which died as quickly as we parted, which was reborn the moment we got together again… I did all the reading…but it was Eliza who did the memorizing, and who told me what we had to learn next. And it was Eliza who could put seemingly unrelated ideas together in order to get a new one. It was Eliza who *juxtaposed.* (54-55)

Eliza embodies Alice and, by syllogism, the reader. As Wilbur makes the words and information available and Eliza processes and synthesizes that information, the way in which Eliza and Wilbur create meaning together is analogous to the way in which Vonnegut and his audience create meaning through their mutual participation in the text. Barthes argues "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" ("Death" 877); however, as Alice—and by association the reader—is the source of unity in Vonnegut's work, but also his intended audience, the origin and destination of unity are actually one in the same. This representation of the author-reader relationship is, therefore, a personification of the same phenomenological relationship described by Sartre. In contrast to Barthes, Sartre argues, "one of the chief motives of artistic creation is certainly the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world" (39), but artists can not read what they write, they only repeat the same mental operations that occurred in the object's creation; therefore, a separate party is necessary to the act of creation. Indeed, "the

operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative, and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effort of author and reader, which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind" (43). The partnership created by a reader's active participation in the text creates an intimacy between author and audience, as the writer may project while writing, but he touches only his subjectivity; the object he creates is out of reach; he does not create it for himself" (42). Therefore, as the author can anticipate the reader's experience, but he can never experience it himself, the reader is the source of his inspiration, but also the destination of the object as the party who also brings the work into being through reading. The author and reader thus glimpse one another, however briefly, through the creation of the object, creating a singular more complete mind in parallel to the way Wilbur and Eliza manage to form a single genius through momentary contact.

The notion that Eliza "juxtaposes" is heavily emphasized, highlighting the literary connotations of this relationship. If Alice/Eliza is Vonnegut's ideal reader than we should take this passage as an indication of how he believes one should read his work. Eliza does not just process the information but puts "seemingly unrelated ideas together in order to get a new one;" Eliza does not consider information in isolation, but rather forms insight by connecting new information to the old. Both the process and product of this way of reading involves connecting with others, as she strengthens familial bonds with her brother and forms new ones with the prospect of artificial extended families. Therefore, it seems Vonnegut wishes for his readers to engage in the same process, to make connections by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated ideas in separate works in order to realize, but also go beyond the text, thereby forging a closer relationship with both the material and the author.

By the end of *Slapstick*, Eliza is deceased, reflecting Alice's earlier passing, leaving Vonnegut to search for a new source of unity. Though the twins are eventually separated and reduced to shadows of the intelligent people they were in partnership, and, through unrelated events, society crumbles from war, disease, and natural disasters, the one glimmer of hope that remains is the institution of artificial extended families on which Wilbur founds his presidency. This policy to end loneliness was an idea created by the Wilbur-Eliza partnership in their youth. Its success as a sole remaining source of comfort seems to validate their genius, as well as the idea that Vonnegut continually asserts throughout this text and its predecessors—human connections are necessary to personal survival, as well as to the maintenance of civilization. In its metaphorical implications for the functions of literature, this also reflects the Sartrean notion of despair, which is at least partially remedied by connecting with others through language. Yet there is also the suggestion that now that Alice is dead, Vonnegut is searching for a new audience, just as Wilbur is left to find new familial connections after the death of Eliza. The artificial extended families are in themselves a work of fiction, "composed" by the partnership between Wilbur and Eliza. Therefore, the sorts of connections of mutual support and understanding, of compassion and decency that Vonnegut argues are so utterly vital to humanity, can also be found within literature and through literature. Vonnegut comes to the realization through his fictional narrative, that the common audience Alice stood in for can still be inspiration for the "harmony" in his works, just as Wilbur eventually learns to cope as the artificial families bring him together with granddaughter Melody. Just as this, Vonnegut's "autobiography," is only an artificial representation of the truth, in relating to and unpacking the artificial we come to understand and connect to the real man; the bond is real though it is constructed artificially.

Vonnegut also personifies such author-reader relationships, both good and bad, through Kilgore Trout, who, as Vonnegut's science-fiction writer alter ego, encourages us to reflect on the way in which Vonnegut interacts intimately and unconventionally with both the reader and the text. Trout is both Vonnegut's most prolific and most protean character. He appears in six of Vonnegut's fourteen novels, in varying degrees of centrality. His personality and personal history range from disheveled madman, to Christ-figure, to Nobel Prize-winner, but in every appearance his relevance to the text is related to his fictional body of writing. In *Timequake* Vonnegut admits, "all I do with short story ideas now is rough them out, credit them to Kilgore Trout, and put them in a novel" (17); yet then he goes on to describe an idea for a story he had about an alien race on the planet Booboo, noting, "these examples of Boobooling pedagogy aren't mine. They're Kilgore Trout's" (20). Vonnegut's schizophrenic relationship with Trout persists throughout the fifty years of work following his introduction in 1965 in *Rosewater*.

Such inconsistencies in Trout are a source of particular consternation for critics who view the inconsistency in Vonnegut's cosmos as the basis for its having little critical potential, as Hume writes in "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction":

> Reviewers who found the recycling of Trout confusing, or took it as a symptom of enfeebled imagination, are overlooking the role Trout plays as his creator's most durable other self...His fortunes and adventures are major expressions of Vonnegut's inner vicissitudes and developments. More than any other Vonnegut projection, he represents an enduring part of Vonnegut's outlook: its courage in the face of chaotic unreason, and its ability to respond with words, with creative effort, to events and situations that the rest of us tend to filter out and forget. (188)

Trout's particular relationship to words, as Hume notes, is critical to his role in each of Vonnegut's works; he is not just a vessel through which the author expresses his point of view, but also a means of demonstrating how that point of view manifests in literature. Trout's fictional canon, supposedly consisting of over 117 novels and 2000 short stories—though of course only a handful are actually mentioned in Vonnegut's work—is alluded to more frequently than any

source from real literary history. Klinkowitz notes that they are referenced in "imaginary-library style" as though "a more complete narrative exists somewhere else" (*Effect* 107). These allusions produce a heightened awareness of the constructedness of the text.

As with any allusion, the referenced other text provides a point of comparison to, or clarification of, the text at hand, a way of guiding how we perceive a character or event. Yet Vonnegut's allusions to Trout's canon defamiliarize as much as they clarify. These moments make the reader aware of the fact that the comparison is a bit too perfect, that the Trout story does not exist in any form but the brief summary before us and was in fact invented to shape the way we read a particular moment. For instance, in *Breakfast of Champions,* Vonnegut describes a story by Trout entitled "The Dancing Fool:"

> A flying saucer creature named *Zog* arrived on Earth to explain how wars could be prevented and how cancer could be cured. He brought the information from Margo, a planet where the natives conversed by means of farts and tap dancing. Zog landed at night in Connecticut. He had no sooner touched down than he saw a house on fire. He rushed into the house, farting and tap dancing, warning the people about the terrible danger they were in. The head of the house brained Zog with a golf club. (58)

Vonnegut also notes, "like so many Trout stories, it was about a tragic failure to communicate" (48), which is indeed one of the prominent themes of *Champions,* as well as Vonnegut's canon as a whole. While giving the appearance of opening up the text at hand for interpretation with the inclusion of supposed other texts, Vonnegut guides the reader, as we are aware the story actually only exists in the present form, providing a lens through which we can view the narrative as he does.

As seen in the moment from *Timequake* discussed at the beginning of this paper, Vonnegut oscillates in the way in which he relates to Trout; he uses his fictional alter ego to simultaneously embody his own perspective on writing, and yet distance himself from those opinions. Throughout *Timequake*, Vonnegut has conversations with Trout as though he were an

entirely separate and unknown entity, writing, "I was privileged to hear the old, long-out-of-print science fiction writer describe for us, and then demonstrate, the special place of Earthlings in the cosmic scheme of things" (xvii), as though Trout not only has something to say which Vonnegut does not already know, but also that Trout is capable of operating outside of Vonnegut. By embodying the role of author in a fictional character, Vonnegut provides a means for himself to play either author or reader as he so chooses. Trout is often a direct mouthpiece for the author, such as in *Rosewater* when he delivers the approximate moral of the story, and is considered an authoritative figure precisely because he is an author. Yet when Vonnegut refers to Trout's fictional catalogue, he contextualizes Trout as "author" and instead reports on the content and the significance of Trout's works, as though to defer the role of author and adopt the role of reader. Therefore, when Vonnegut refers to Trout's canon, and interprets the stories as a model for how we should approach the larger narrative, Vonnegut enacts the role of author and the role of reader at once, yet by making this action apparent to the reader, he also allows us to assume both roles along with him.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Kilgore Trout's writing is both the source of the novel's conflict, and our means to interpret the thematic implications of that conflict. Trout attends the Midland City Arts Festival after receiving a letter from Eliot Rosewater. The two characters have met in previous novels, yet Trout fails to "make the connection between the Rosewater Coal and Iron Company," that is, the Rosewater of Vonnegut's previous two novels, and the present Rosewater; "He still thought Eliot Rosewater was a teenager" (126). As in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Eliot's presence is a reminder that literature within the narrative, especially that written by Trout, serves as a guide for the characters to comprehend their own experiences, as well as a guide for our reading of the novel itself. One Trout story

depicts a world in which ideas are highly contagious, highly toxic diseases, and in the narrative of *Breakfast of Champions,* Dwayne Hoover thus becomes "infected" by ideas after reading Trout, embodying the tragic failure to communicate that Trout laments in "The Dancing Fool." Ironically, Trout's writing provides a guide for how to read life, a reminder of the importance of connecting with other people, yet he fails to do so himself. He fails to recognize the very person who brings to our attention the function of his writing.

Furthermore, the way in which Trout fails to make the connection between two seemingly disparate figures—the rich humanitarian he meets in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and the eager bright fan who writes to him in *Champions*—parodies the way in which readers may fail to connect versions of a single character across multiple novels. Whereas Barthes finds it difficult to determine anything as a wrong reading because a text is antitheological, Sartre claims "if [the reader] is inattentive, tired, stupid, or thoughtless, most of the relations will escape him. He will never manage to 'catch on' to the object…he will draw some phrases out of the shadow, but they will seem to appear as random strokes" (43). There *is* such a thing as a wrong reading in Sartre, and certainly in Vonnegut, as Dwayne's behavior demonstrates in *Breakfast of Champions.* Dwayne reads a Trout novel, which describes a world in which all humans are actually machines, save one, who is instead the subject of the creator's grand experiment: the reader. Dwayne takes this to be a literal message from his creator, causing him to have a panicked and violent breakdown, in which he becomes indifferent to harming others, because he believes them to be machines. The object, Trout's story, escapes Dwayne because he views the text as self-contained, giving no mind to the object's origins, or the creator's intentions. He does not consider the work a piece of science fiction, but assumes it is a message. The author's intentions, therefore, while not immediately accessible, are a least necessary as

points of consideration when dealing with Vonnegut's work. The oversights of those critics who choose to ignore Vonnegut's universe are analogous: they focus on the content of the text in isolation, giving no consideration to the text's origins, instead assuming that it is only "the text [that] speaks and not the author" ("Death" 875), and the object escapes them. Thus the relationship Sartre discusses is more effective; rather than impose limitations upon one another, the author and reader "in turn solicit [creative freedom] by a symmetrical and inverse appeal" (51).

A failure to engage properly with words is, therefore, equated to a failure to connect directly with people. As Klinkowitz notes, much of *Breakfast of Champions* "is given to the progress of these two figures [Trout and Dwayne Hoover] coming together" (*Effect* 105). Yet their coming together is not source of harmony, but is a source of conflict, due to Dwayne's failure to engage with literature properly. Dwayne's "tragic failure to communicate" also extends to his interactions with the other characters in the novel. A waitress in a diner anxiously approaches Dwayne: she "knew who Dwayne was, Dwayne didn't know who Patty was. Patty's heart beat faster when she waited on him—because Dwayne could solve so many of her problems with the money and power he had" (137). But Dwayne dismisses her as a machine and takes no notice of her. Wayne Hoobler, a recently paroled ex-con, approaches Dwayne with similar hope for financial assistance: "he needed the work right away or he would starve to death…Dwayne thought the young man was a hallucination…Dwayne Hoover broke Wayne Hoobler's heart by shaking his head vaguely, then walking away" (96-99). The similarity in the two men's names resembles the way in which Vonnegut's characters tend to reappear, with slight differences, further parodying some reader's failure to make connections because of such

small differences between incarnations, as Dwayne and Wayne too do not connect, despite their ability to help one another.

Throughout *Breakfast of Champions*, several such minor characters appear in synonymous vignettes wherein they approach Dwayne hopeful that he will be able to help, are ignored because he believes them to be inhuman, and then are hardly mentioned again. Dwayne is a foil for Rosewater in that he is wealthy and capable of bettering the lives of many people around him, yet ignores their requests for help. Likewise, Dwayne's indifference to the needs of others is the direct result of his improper reading of literature, whereas Rosewater's benevolence is related to his positive reading of literature.

Breakfast of Champions contains significantly more character overlaps than any of Vonnegut's previous novels. As the seeming center of Vonnegut's intertextual universe, there is an implication that in parallel to the way in which a person interacts with literature shapes the way they interact with the world, so too does the way characters interact with literature within the novel also contextualizes the way we read Vonnegut's canon as a whole. Failing to make connections causes problems within the text, just as failing to connect texts hinders our reading of Vonnegut's work. In the preface to *Between Time and Timbuktu* (1972), Vonnegut writes "I now understand, because I want to be a character in all of my works…Everything of mine which has been filmed so far has been one character short, and that character is me" (xv). Indeed, from this point on, Vonnegut at least prefaces his novels with some discussion of the biographical information or personal opinion that provides a lens through which to read the text. In *Breakfast of Champions*, published the next year, however, Vonnegut is at his most present in the text as he narrates from the position of authorial-god, and appears in the room as both character and Creator.

Towards the end of the novel the formerly disembodied narrator sets up at a table in the lounge of the Midland City Holiday Inn saying, "I was there to watch a confrontation between two human beings I had created: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout" (192), asserting that the narrative voice is indeed the author, even as he also becomes a character. He also notes that he is wearing sunglasses, as if fearful that his characters will somehow recognize him: "the lenses were silvered, were mirrors to anyone looking my way. Anyone wanting to know what my eyes were like was confronted with his or her own twin reflections. Where other people in the cocktail lounge had eyes, I had two holes into another universe. I had leaks" (192-3)[8]. The author becomes a character in order to interact with the scene, and in doing so also makes his own point of view accessible to the reader. Because the author's eyes are replaced with "leaks," looking through the author's eyes is also to look from one universe into another. For the characters within the story, the other universe contains their twin reflection, as if they might glimpse the other versions of themselves that occupy Vonnegut's other narratives. By disrupting the traditional distance of the author from the story world, and placing us in his shoes, Vonnegut provides a virtual portal that allows us to see from our own world into the world of the text, and from one text into another. While, in this moment, Vonnegut appears to create a Barthesian text by extending our experience of reading beyond the boundaries of the content of the written page, he also defies Barthes' claim that "the author is never more than the instance writing," by becoming Author-god and character at once.

In *Deadeye Dick,* also set in Midland City and featuring many of the minor figures from *Breakfast* as major characters, Vonnegut-the-Creator makes another appearance. At Celia

[8] Mirrored surfaces are described as leaks throughout the novel in reference to the fact that "Trout did another thing which some people might have considered eccentric: he called mirrors leaks. It amused him to pretend that mirrors were holes between two universes" (19). Trout's fiction becomes "real" in world of the narrative.

Hoover's funeral (Dwayne Hoover's wife), narrator Rudy Waltz notices a peculiar figure in attendance, who goes unnoticed by the other characters. Waltz is momentarily transfixed, as the man "did not look away when I caught him gazing at me. He went right on gazing, and it was I who faced forward again. I had not recognized him. He was wearing large sunglasses with mirrored lenses. He could have been anyone" (224). The figure may be unknown to the narrator, but he is not unknown to the reader: he is the author incarnate. Fittingly, Vonnegut appears right as Waltz is lost in reflection on the decay of his hometown and the general meaningless of life. Waltz muses that the planet is breaking down, as if it, like Celia, had imbibed Drano. As he begins to think, "there was no reason to take us seriously as individuals…How comical that I, a single cell, should take my life so seriously" (223), Vonnegut intrudes, as if challenging his creation to continue that train of thought. Barthes would argue that this potential meaninglessness of life reflects the capability of a text to signify infinitely. For Sartre, this is an embodiment of human despair in the absence of god, as we have no way to be sure of our place in the world, just as we can never be sure if we correctly understand an author, but rather than turn that despair into chaotic indifference, as Dwayne does, we find remedy in communication. Interrupting Waltz's train of thought with the appearance of the creator may either confirm or refute the claim to meaninglessness. If there is a creator, his life is indeed determined, closing off the signified, yet the fact that he is created by an author would also suggest there must be meaning in his existence, as the novel which he narrates surely seeks to communicate something.

The presence of the author as a god-figure in both *Deadeye Dick* and *Breakfast of Champions* creates tension between deterministic rigidity and intertextual ambiguity. Vonnegut's physical presence in these novels may seem to close off interpretation, yet in becoming not just a character, but a recurring character in his own novels, Vonnegut also invites us to question his

function in the text by making the actions of the author present to the reader. The physical presence of the speaker in the text thus troubles our conception of the role of the author. In *Champions*, Vonnegut writes, "I was on par with the Creator of the Universe there in the dark cocktail lounge. I shrank the Universe to a ball exactly one light-year in diameter. I had it explode. I had it disperse itself again" (200). Though the explosion of the universe may suggest the ceaseless creation of meaning, as the reader's experience goes beyond the framework of the novel, again this is only accomplished through the assertion of omnipotence, not through the absence of such. By eliminating the normative distances between author as creator and narrator as impartial observer, Vonnegut apparently asserts his complete and absolute power over the text, even while dissolving the normative boundaries that shape our experience of the text, making not only the text present to the reader, but also the author's machinations.

For the rest of *Champions*, Vonnegut removes the normative illusion that characters are acting of their own accord; rather Vonnegut writes "Dwayne did something extraordinarily unnatural. He did it because I wanted him to" (252). He confronts Kilgore Trout and tells him, "I am a novelist and I created you for use in my books…I'm your creator…you're in the middle of a book right now—close to the end of it, actually" (291). Vonnegut may verbally set Trout free, yet he returns in *Jailbird* (1979) because, as Vonnegut says, "he could not make it on the outside" (1), suggesting that Trout is not as independent of his creator as he often seems and as much as Vonnegut might try to separate himself from his characters, as their creator, he is as irrevocably tied to them as they are to him. Even as Vonnegut asserts his complete omnipotence, he also undercuts it. He informs Trout that he has set him free, yet he is unable to fulfill Trout's final request to be young again, and expresses surprise that his creation speaks with his father's voice. Similarly, after hearing the fictional artist's speech, Vonnegut writes, "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" (220).

The closer Vonnegut gets to confronting Trout, the more his own creations continue to surprise him. When he is finally walking towards Trout, Vonnegut finds himself "about to be attacked by a Doberman pinscher. He was a leading character in an earlier version of this book" (285). That dog is Kazak, and though he is a different breed and gender, he shares a name with The Hound of Space from *The Sirens of Titan,* and the German Shepherd from *Galapagos*. Kazak attacks Vonnegut at the precise moment he speaks to Trout, and a detailed description of Vonnegut's physiological responses follows, as if to emphasize further that control is suddenly stripped from the supposedly all-powerful Creator. In these climactic moments of the text, Vonnegut's struggle with his own omnipotence in relation to the autonomy of the text is made manifest. While such elements challenge the power of the author, the absurdity of the battle also serves as a reminder that even these destabilizing elements are deliberately constructed. Vonnegut, therefore, asserts his omnipotence *by* undercutting it. These problematic elements such as Rabo Karebekian's enlightening speech and Kazak's "unexpected" attack are so ironic that we cannot help but notice that they, too, are in fact an expression of the author's will. By elevating his own status and then self-consciously undercutting it, Vonnegut makes the artificiality of the narrative apparent to the read more drastically than if his omnipotence were asserted straightforwardly.

Throughout *Breakfast of Champions,* Vonnegut not only rewrites, but also consistently rejects the standard role of author. He frequently inserts simplistic drawings in the text, abdicating the most basic function of author: choosing words to convey information. Yet those

brief, often comical illustrations also call our attention to the surface of the page on which the drawing appears, reasserting the book as a thing rather than the world contained within that thing. Although viewing the book as an object asserts its definitive boundaries, making it seem more autonomous, it also reminds us that is an object in our world and, therefore, is constructed by the collaboration between reader and the author. Moreover, the drawings remind us that while the pages the novel occupies may be limited, the content of that novel, that is, the narrative world, is separate from that physical support; therefore, it is not such a stretch to view the narrative world as extending beyond those boundaries, as a text. Vonnegut not only asserts his own omnipotence and dissolves the autonomy of that which he supposedly has power over, but also accomplishes both contradictory operations through the same devices. This tension in which Vonnegut confines the text and opens it again, asserts himself as god and challenges his own authority, effectively sustains the text in a state of fluxuating ambiguity. Therefore, the only thing that truly dissolves is our assumption that the presence of an author who exceeds the function of scriptor "impose[s] a limit on the text, furnish[es] it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, "Death" 877). On the contrary, Vonnegut uses this tension in ambiguity to "appeal to the freedom of other men so that, by reciprocal implications of their demands, the may re-adapt the totality of being to man and may again enclose the universe within man" (Sartre 58).

Conclusions

Just as Vonnegut's methods in *Breakfast of Champions* assert his omniscience while dissolving the autonomy of the text, throughout many of his novels, Vonnegut includes dangling details that likewise extend the narrative beyond the boundaries of a single novel, and disrupt any comfortable relationship we have with the text. In *Mother Night*, a noose sent to Howard

Campbell is put into a trashcan, 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" (146). These two lives just barely brush past one another, and yet are closely connected. The resemblance of the name "Szombathy" to "somebody" suggests that the man himself does not matter so much as the idea that though this is Campbell's story, life goes on outside of it, while Campbell's story also does not exist independently from the outside world, rather is intertwined with it in ways we cannot entirely comprehend. In *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut, through narrator Rabo Karebekian, taunts coyly "One would soon go mad if one took such coincidences too seriously. One might be led to suspect that there were all sorts of things going on in the Universe which he or she did not thoroughly understand" (229). Of course the intersection of lives that prompts this observation from Rabo, we know cannot be coincidence; therefore, there really are "all sorts of things" going on with Vonnegut's universe, that people choose not to take to seriously, under the assumption that we cannot understand the totality of these "coincidences."

Many of the random deaths in *Slaughterhouse-Five* follow this pattern: an old man is crushed by an elevator (9); Billy's father is shot in a hunting accident (24); and while visiting his mother in the hospital, Billy sees "the body of an old man covered by a sheet …The man had been a famous marathon runner in his day. So it goes" (44-55). The brief mention of these instances seem to imply random coincidence, and yet the notion that there ever was such a thing as this man's "day" is enough to provoke the readers curiosity about his life; yet as Campbell says of Lazlo Szombathy, "that is another story." In that vein, in at least three novels, Vonnegut mentions a pornographic picture involving a young woman and a miniature horse. Its significance in any one text is not explained and we are left to wonder why it reappears. In *Slaughterhouse, Slapstick*, and *Galapagos* various characters are invited to "take a flying fuck at

a rolling doughnut…Go take a flying fuck at the moon" (*Slaughterhouse* 147). The line "somewhere a dog barked" appears as an isolated paragraph four times in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a reminder that despite the atrocities Billy Pilgrim witnesses, elsewhere domestic life moves on unawares. Wanda June is present in four separate texts, yet is always a background figure, even in the play in which she is the titular character. In *Deadeye Dick,* Rudy Waltz notes that his father could have killed Hitler, but accidentally befriended "the worst monster of the century" (6) instead. Vonnegut himself serves the same role as a mere passing figure in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as we get brief, jarring statements, such as: "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O' Hare" (67). Though Vonnegut's presence in that narrative is a haunting reminder that the author experienced the reality of these semi-fictionalized events of the war, these interjections of the authorial presence are also often comical. When Billy comes across a soldier having violent diarrhea in the latrines who complains of having excreted everything but his brains, Vonnegut writes, "that was I. that was me. That was the author of this book" (125). Such statements persistently remind us that despite the many fantastical features of *Slaughterhouse,* these particular scenes probably did happen; therefore, the distinction between the fictional reality and the real world are blurred into oblivion.

Slapstick contains passages that lay out webs of interconnectivity that are unexplained other than our assumption they arise out of humanistic consideration:

> Thus began her incredible journey eastward, ever eastward, in search of her legendary grandfather. His palace was one of the tallest buildings in the world.
> She would encounter relatives everywhere — if not Orioles, then at least birds or living things of some kind.
> They would feed her and point the way.
> One would give her a raincoat. Another would give her a sweater and a magnetic compass.
> Another would give her a baby carriage. Another would give her an alarm clock.
> Another would give her a needle and thread, and a gold thimble, too.
> Another would row her across the Harlem River to the Island of Death, at the risk of his own life.
> And so on. (274)

Melody's journey demonstrates the effectiveness of her grandfather's artificial family program. Numerous lives intersect in the most fleeting ways, yet our knowledge that this occurs helps to highlight the necessity of the generosity that these people display. If Vonnegut's recurring characters create an interconnected universe, then these connections left dangling make that universe appear to be infinitely expanding. The fact that each of the more detailed recurrences holds thematic implications suggests that these must too, and yet we can never know them all. Vonnegut's inclusion of these elements further dissolves the boundaries that we assume exist between novels, enacting Barthes' claim that "the Text is not a coexistence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to interpretation…but to an explosion, a dissemination" ("Text" 879).

In *Champions,* Kilgore Trout accidentally falls in dog excrement; and Vonnegut notes, "by an unbelievable coincidence, that shit came from the wretched greyhound belonging to a girl I knew" (198). The coincidence is unbelievable indeed, as even while these moments extend the narrative beyond the space of the novel, and make the narrative universe feel more real in their randomness, we know that these moments are not coincidental at all, rather are deliberate manipulations by the author. These moments extend connectivity not only beyond the boundaries of each individual novel, but also beyond the boundaries of his canon and into our world as well. In that sense, Vonnegut diminishes his own power, yet because this occurs as the result of his deliberate action, Vonnegut only intensifies the tension between chaos and constructedness, calling the reader's attention to the irony in the way in which seeming chaos is, in fact, constructed.

As with the elements that occasionally threaten Vonnegut's omnipotence, we are made aware that these features too are landmarks chosen by the author to arouse certain reactions from

the reader. Yet these elements do not play on the reader's passivity, do not force emotion or insight upon them; rather, the readers conjectures with "the great certainty we have that the beauties which appear in the book are never accidental" (Sartre 54). Sartre clarifies, "that does not mean that we fathom the artist's intentions easily," but "however far [the reader] may go, the author has gone farther. Whatever connections he may establish among the different parts of the book—among the chapters or the words—he has a guarantee, namely, that they have been expressly willed" (54). The author is not a god-figure, according to Sartre, nor is reading a matter of discovering the precise intentions of the author—the notion that Barthes reacts against so vehemently—but it is precisely because of the absence of a god, an absolute authority, that we turn to seek the author. We can only have our own perception, and despair at not knowing the truth, but in seeking to complete the task the author offers, we can at least approach something of a return to order or completion, in which the reader and author understand each other, if only for a brief moment. In these moments in which Vonnegut appears to expand his universe in a manner such that it signifies infinitely, we see instead see what Sartre calls "the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him" (51). Even as Vonnegut appears to direct interpretation away from himself as author, and towards an antitheological action on the reader's part, we in fact are brought back to him through our consciousness of our mutual freedom and our mutual responsibility to the text.

This persistent active tension between dissolution and reconstruction continues throughout Vonnegut's work, as structural boundaries are subverted, inviting the reader to constantly reevaluate the way in which we relate to the text. This pattern manifests most clearly in Vonnegut's use of framing elements, such as prologues, epilogues, and author's notes.

Vonnegut's earliest novels—*Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan*—have no such framing elements. Fittingly, they are also the most "traditional" in that they follow a linear structure and self-contained story arc. *Mother Night,* by contrast, contains multiple layered framing devices that disturb the notion of a self-contained narrative. In the original publication, an editor's note asserts Campbell's confessions are a found text. This authenticating device ironically calls our attention to the possibility of an unreliable narrator, even while asserting the text as the truth. Also fitting is the fact that *Mother Night* begins to introduce more of the postmodern, circuitous, nonlinear structures that Vonnegut would become known for after later gaining critical success. The framing of *Mother Night* is complicated even further by the addition of an introduction three years after publication, which discusses biographical information that helps to illuminate Vonnegut's satirical intentions. The juxtaposition between the fact-filled introduction and false editor's note creates a heightened sensitivity to the way that lies can illuminate deeper meaning—the effective moral of the novel as expressed by Vonnegut in 1966 in the introduction. Not only does the layering of frames alter our perception of the first-person narrative, but also encourages readers to actively engage with issues of authorship, and the way in which the information is presented, rather than simply accepting the information passively, as Howard Campbell's listeners might have.

Whereas the framing devices in *Mother Night* impose layers of boundaries calling attention to their constructedness, *Slaughterhouse-Five* dissolves such boundaries. The first chapter of the latter novel bears a great deal of resemblance to the introduction of the former in its discussion of Vonnegut's experience in World War II, yet this section is not an introduction but Chapter One, while the narrative begins in Chapter Two. The lines between the author's reality—our reality—and the fictive world become irrevocably blurred. Despite the

autobiographical elements of *Slaughterhouse,* in the introduction to *Slapstick* Vonnegut claims that novel is the closest thing to an autobiography that he has ever written, reducing the authority of the fictional first-person narrator in favor of the text's metaphorical implications, in its reflections on both familial and creative relationships. The epilogue troubles the authority of Wilbur as narrator even further, as the new speaker, presumably the author himself, informs us: "Dr. Swain died before he could write any more" (259). The epilogue is filled with statements such as, "he never got to tell us about…" (260), yet the new speaker goes on to tell us that information anyway. Though the rest of the story supposedly dies with Wilbur, the new speaker continues the story anyway, with no real change in his manner of speech, inviting us to question whether there ever was any difference between the character and the author at all.

In *Jailbird*, elements of the plot seep into both prologue and epilogue, while an index of characters appears at the end, which does not differentiate between fictional and historical figures, blurring the lines between fiction and factual worlds even further. *Deadeye Dick* features a preface by the author and an epilogue by the first person narrator. Within that prologue, Vonnegut explains which major figures in the book symbolize issues from his own life that the narrative reflects on, making it nearly impossible for the reader to separate the text from the intentions the author held while writing it. Narrator Rudy Waltz notes, "we all see our lives as stories…if a person survives an ordinary span of sixty years or more, there is a chance that his or her life as a shapely story has ended, and all that remains to be experienced is epilogue. Life is not over but the story is" (235). Even within the fictional narrative, divisions between artifice and "reality" are diminished. *Hocus Pocus* (1990) contains an editor's note, which claims the novel is a found-text reassembled from hundreds of scraps of paper. The printing of the novel maintains lines of division between every few paragraphs to mark the site of the original

separations, as though the original physical object is integral to our interpretation. These lines also echo the similar divisions which appear in the majority of Vonnegut's novels as "* * * *." Not only is *Hocus Pocus* composed of fragmented pieces that create a whole, but also remain somehow fundamentally separated, so are all of Vonnegut's novels, and the sum of those novels in the form of an interconnected universe.

Timequake, Vonnegut's final novel, is the culmination of this process of dissolving boundaries between author and narrator, author and text, reader and text, and therefore reader and author. Only nominally a novel, the text begins with the scraps of an unfinished narrative around which Vonnegut builds a discussion of his own body of work, blending autobiography, personal philosophy, and critical essay into the remains of that fictional narrative. While each of his novels may have contained most or all of these elements before, they were divided by remaining structural boundaries. In *Timequake,* Vonnegut's friends, family, critics, fictional creations, and Vonnegut himself are all "characters" that interact with one another on equal footing. Vonnegut cycles between reflecting on events from his past, reporting on but never directly reciting the unfinished narrative, and attending a beach party in which he converses with Kilgore Trout, Jerome Klinkowtiz, and Peter J. Reed[9]. Though Vonnegut's original plan for *Timequake* never came to fruition, the resulting compromise is a more fitting capstone to his work than any fictional narrative could have been, as he accomplishes what he has been moving towards all along and utterly collapses the boundaries that ordinarily constrain the medium of novel. What results from this disintegration of normative structures is not a chaotic scattering of disconnected ideas, but in fact a greater sense of unity as his discussion of the tensions he feels between life and art is no longer constrained by the formal separation of those categories. As in

[9] Klinkowitz and Reed are two of the most senior and most prolific Vonnegut scholars. Their presence in the text thus includes those who read Vonnegut seriously in his literary karass.

many of Vonnegut's individual works, like *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, throughout Vonnegut's entire interconnected cosmos, destruction is also a form of revelation.

Vonnegut's actions as the creator of that universe are not merely limited to the dark cocktail lounge in *Breakfast of Champions*; rather, when he claims "I shrunk the Universe to a ball exactly one light-year in diameter. I had it explode. I had it disperse itself again" (200), he in fact describes the way in which his interdescursive creation entirely restructures the way both reader and author interact with the text. In that scene, Vonnegut goes on to note: "What was the apple which Eve and Adam ate? It was the Creator of the Universe" (201). If the author is creator and the apple is that which imparts knowledge, then in engaging actively with Vonnegut's work, we consume the Creator, and come to know him. As Sartre claims, the author surrenders himself in turning his work over to the reader who likewise offers "the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies" (51). In both Sartre and Vonnegut, the relationship between author and creation is deeply personal, as Rudy Waltz, an aspiring playwright, notes in *Deadeye Dick,* "I had loved Celia at least a little bit. She had been in my play, after all, and had taken the play very seriously—which made her a sort of child or sister of mine" (199). Therefore, in seeking to discover that which comes into being through Vonnegut's artificial community of interrelated characters, in investigating the wampeter of his literary karass, we also become a part of it.

Though Vonnegut begins *Timequake* with a feeling of uncertainty as to whether the function of great literature is to expose the horrors and absurdities of life, or whether it is to offer remedy to such viewpoints, he eventually arrives at a way to reconcile that tension. Vonnegut reiterates the issue in the self-imposed question "Why bother?," to which he responds simply, "Many people need desperately to receive this message: 'I feel and think much as you do, care

about many of the things you care about, although most people don't care about them. You are not alone'" (221). Literature, more so than any other artistic medium, has the ability to communicate such ideas and facilitate an experience of conversing and connecting with another human being. The vast web of interrelated people, places, creatures, and ideas that compose the Vonnegut universe, not only highlight the absolute necessity of community in every version of reality, but also enhances the social possibilities of literature by fostering a phenomenological bond between the author and reader. Sartre's description of the aesthetic joy that can result from the success of this phenomenological relationship is akin to the way Vonnegut proposes a solution to loneliness through literature: "aesthetic joy proceeds to this level of the consciousness which I take of recovering and internalizing that which is non-ego par excellence, since I transform the given into an imperative and the fact into a value. The world is *my* task, that is, the essential and freely accepted function of my freedom is to make the unique and absolute object which is the universe come into being in an unconditioned movement" (59-60). Despite the fact that some literature may expose that "being alive is a crock of shit" (*Timequake* 1)—and Vonnegut's often does—as Sartre argues, there is respite from despair in connecting with others through active engagement with language. The tension between aesthetic, humanistic joy and intellectual nihilism that pervades Vonnegut's body of work is, therefore, not so much an uncertain hesitation on Vonnegut's part, rather is an appeal to the freedom of the reader to "create what he discloses" and so remedy the isolation that tempts despair in the first place. The Vonnegut universe, therefore, also enacts that which it argues for, dissolving formal, critical, and social boundaries and replacing them with a new humanistic unity within and through the text.

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