

**Absurd Function Upends Familiar Form: Satire, Literary Space-Time, and the Subversion
of Deterministic Meta-Narrative in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan***

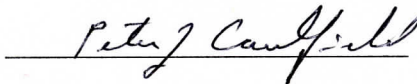
Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2015

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I derive the term 'actualism' from a distinction Werner Heisenberg makes between the actual and the real...at the subatomic level, he says, reality is not real but it is active, dynamic, 'actual'...Departing from the stable material reality underpinning Newtonian science and realistic fiction, actualism abandons and even subverts the narrative conventions of realism...actualism develops in America because reality has changed (7).

-Susan Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*

This change in perspective results from a shift in scientific paradigm that goes hand-in-hand with the cultural and ideological evolution that was being consolidated at the moment of the novel's publication in 1959 –from the modernist obsession with the discourse of integrative 'revelation' against the excesses of narrative totalization (61).

-Mónica Pascual, "Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan: Human will in a Newtonian Narrative Gone Chaotic*"

The Novel and Its Context

With the emergence of Einstein's special (1905) and general (1916) theories of relativity he concluded that "every reference body has its own particular time" but also that space and time are inherently interconnected concepts; this created in the culture a new paradox between "public time" and "private time" and undermined the world's understanding of time (Kern 12, 19). In his book *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*, historian Stephen Kern attributes the Cubist art movement's emphasis on time and "simultaneity," authors like Franz Kafka's emphasis on the stresses of modern life, and perceptions of the early cinema to the tensions of public time (which was only recently standardized when he wrote his theories) and individual time created by these developments (15, 19, 21, 22). As physics continued to develop and expound upon Einstein's ideas, quantum theory began to cast critical eyes on the a more unstable realm of science; "Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (1927) posits a radical indeterminacy in knowledge of the scientific realm...a particle without a determinable position and velocity cannot be located as a 'thing' in space or time" (Strehle 12-13). In her book, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, Susan Strehle links the "quantum spookiness" of these scientific principles –

in opposition to the earlier Newtonian models, which she correlates with realist literature— to later developments in literature, specifically in early post-modernist literature. Echoing Kern, she points out that “changes in physical theories inspire changes in a culture’s general attitudes” and that “[some post-modern] fiction and contemporary physics join in seeing the external world and the human relation to it as statistical[,] energetic[,] relative[,] subjective[, and] uncertain,” (Strehle 8).

According to Strehle’s analysis, given its linear, predictable, and fixed mathematical grammar for understanding reality, traditional institutions and the literature of realism had learned to get along harmoniously with science under Newton’s precepts. However, the rhetorical and cultural implications of Einstein’s theories of Relativity, Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle,” and the elusive and mysterious search for a comprehensive quantum mechanics (entering American culture alongside two World Wars) correlate with the disruption of what were once considered stable views. The linear narrative that could be spun in favor of “God” and “King” out of the grammar of Newton’s Laws bent in American culture as war assumed control of Einstein’s insights and released the atomic bomb. Humankind now had to react to the ghastly realization of its place in the universe: one group sought to carry on the traditions as “normally” as possible, retrofitting the “old ways” for a new world; some sought to capitalize on this new power; and others now fought for new ideas in the face of the folly apparent in the stories humans tell themselves that lead to such atrocities as World War II, in its many evil faces.

Kurt Vonnegut was among those who witnessed this shift, and for him, the change was symptomatic of the crooked beams of Dresden, the tarnished flags that hung in the post-war years, the start of the Cold War, and the earliest years of the Space Race, all juxtaposed against

an America that seemed to be getting along just fine in the 1950's. Somewhere Vonnegut caught a glimpse of something essential to the framework of his society, and he spent his life laughing and crying out his idea on the page. Perhaps he noticed the parallel between the fragmentation of scientific theory as a result of the New Physics, the disruptive power of the post-modernist and post-structuralist ideas coalescing at the time in the art world, and the irreconcilable absurdity of a "New Peace" established in the wake of the Earth's most shocking and war.

Given that he pursued a double major in chemistry and biology it should seem reasonable to assume that it is with science, cultural metamorphosis as a result of innovation and war, and (for his own self-defense) the coping power of laughter in mind that Vonnegut created his second novel (Kliknowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect* 8). In *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Vonnegut's classic satirical humor peppers a narrative that bounces among the planets Mars, Mercury, and Earth, with the characters finally arriving on Saturn's moon, Titan. The novel's action follows Malachi Constant, the rich playboy turned amnesiac space traveler; Winston Niles Rumfoord, the aristocrat whose decision to fly his private spaceship into a mysterious scientific anomaly (the "chronosynclastic infundibulum") leaves him clairvoyant and stretches him and his dog –named, in palindrome, Kazak– across time and space in a massive looping spiral; and his wife Beatrice, the snobbish virginal recluse turned rugged Martian war veteran, as they travel the Solar System in search of life's ultimate meaning for humankind or –as the characters discover the emotionally un-invested underlying influence of a distant species of alien upon all human events– the lack thereof.

In a 1975 literary biography of the author within his collection *Literary Disruptions*, leading Vonnegut scholar Jerome Klinkowitz writes of *Sirens*' "totally disreputable first edition, with its garish advertisements and sexy come-on cover," and one wonders how Vonnegut rose to

fame, considering these early circumstances (34). In *The Sirens of Titan*, –a novel that, given the obscurity of its publication, he surely could have assumed it would fade into the flotsam of pulp fiction– Kurt Vonnegut crafts a story that symbolically links American culture’s view of itself with evolving perceptions of space, time, and art. Through the careful use of satire and the depiction of various kinds of time, Vonnegut creates a deliberately self-nullifying (yet palatable) narrative whose only offer of hope in the face of a meaningless world is its multifaceted individualized rejection of humankind’s view of its own lofty destiny. Applying the lenses of the aforementioned contextual situations, this paper will analyze and attempt to describe the rhetorical matrix that Vonnegut uses to convey the thesis he layers deeply within the novel. Through the analysis of Vonnegut’s satire and alternative representations of literary time in *Sirens*, one can conclude that he is critiquing a specific theory of human narrative that relates to fiction as well as lived reality.

Satire as Operator: The Vonnegutian Smirk

Even in summarizing the plot of Vonnegut’s novel, one can see the influence of satire permeating its structure: a rich and deluded man, Constant, is told by a prophetic and superhuman former aristocrat, Winston Rumfoord, that he will have no choice but to his marry his own wife, Beatrice Rumfoord, and visit two planets and a distant moon; as this basic arc unfolds, Constant loses fortune then his memory, becoming “Unk” as he is co-opted into an army of remote-controlled humans from Mars that is destroyed in a comedic attack on Earth orchestrated by Rumfoord, and Unk becomes “the Space Wanderer” upon his return to Earth and is shamed and exiled in order to establish a “gimcrack religion” celebrating “God the Utterly Indifferent” just before ancient aliens are revealed to have orchestrated it all in service of the return of a spare part to a space ship, whose pilot is carrying a two-syllable message across the

galaxy (Vonnegut 1). The description of the basic plot is indeed as absurd as its content, but this playful mode is not an empty device; within this silly narrative, Vonnegut achieves a unique and specific effect. In *The Sirens of Titan*, satire operates as both an aesthetic and structural means in service of Vonnegut's metafictional and metacritical ends. In her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh writes that "[m]etafiction sets mutually contradictory 'worlds' against each other...authors enter texts and characters appear to step into the 'real' world of their authors" (101). Vonnegut achieves this effect in various ways in the pages of his novel.

Keeping in mind Strehle's view of literature and Heisenberg's view of reality, one can see that from the outset, Vonnegut's uses satire to create an "unstable core" for his rhetoric, a moving target. The disclaimer printed on the copyright page of the novel makes this humorous aim perfectly clear: "No names have been changed to protect the innocent, since God almighty protects the innocent as a matter of heavenly routine" (Vonnegut ii). The novel's satire appears before the text proper, and immediately, it begins to function as a device to disrupt and redirect the reader away from the comforts of traditional reading. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines satire as "an eminently versatile form whose structure, style, tone, and subjects vary across a wide spectrum... attacking its victims with the hopes of dissuading readers from vice...in terms of structure, satire is primarily a borrower of literary and rhetorical forms, using other genres to support its didactic aims" (Greene and Cushman 1255). The didactic message of Vonnegut's interruption of the novel's front-matter functions as an early indication that he will be using satire to undermine this "heavenly routine."

Vonnegut even designed the chapter divisions to serve as blocks of organization both for plot and as a way of chunking the social critiques peppered throughout the novel. For instance,

the chapter entitled “United Hotcake Preferred” engages with the dubious stock-market investment practices of Malachi Constant’s father, whose use of the Bible as an investment guide parodies the dubious practices that caused the Great Depression (). The subsequent chapter “Tent Rentals” –at play with Vonnegut’s onomatopoeia “*Rented-a-tent,*” meant to indicate a “snare drum on Mars”– takes rhetorical aim at military decorum, colonial motion, and nationalistic impulses like those that led to the First World War, in its representation of Constant and other characters being controlled by antennae that “would give him orders and furnish drum music for him to march to” (Vonnegut 95). One chapter called “An Age of Miracles” deals, unsurprisingly, with the absurdities of religion. This technique is unique because it allows for each chapter to exist as both a standalone quixotic episode as well as a necessary part of a larger plot.

The most explicit attacks of public ills in *Sirens* are perceptible upon a single reading, such as the critiques of Christianity inherent to Rumfoord’s creation, “The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent” (Vonnegut 176). Upon deeper analysis however, there are many rhetorical sleights-of-hand in his satire that could go unnoticed. In his discussion of Muriel Spark’s satire in her novel *The Finishing School* (2009), Ian Gregson writes that “[t]he most important premise of [her] satire is accordingly the most hidden; what should be central is peripheral, and what should be marginal becomes central” (102). This sentiment echoes the Hungarian critic Zoltán Abádi-Nagy’s observations on Vonnegut’s use of what he calls “ironic undercutting”:

The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, founded by Constant’s alleged educator[, Rumfoord,] itself becomes ridiculous ...this ironic undercutting in *The Sirens of Titan* becomes justified in the light of what we learn about how Rumfoord himself is programmed by [the Tralfamadorian aliens], how this wave-phenomenon remains an earthling aristocrat, and how the Church in its absurd

concept of equality becomes the parody of all the ideas that sent Constant into exile on Titan. (53)

Readers see much of Rumfoord's perspective throughout the novel, but Vonnegut makes it clear that he is not the god-like figure he seems to be in the novel's early sections. Although it seems that Vonnegut is merely creating an atheistic version of a Christian earthly paradise in Rumfoord's grand vision, the tone signals to the reader that this idea is an absurd failure and one to be avoided at all costs: it is not what is represented that we should follow; it is what is misrepresented that we should avoid. The flaws in following Rumfoord's path are abundantly clear when one considers that he is "genially willing to shed the blood of others" in nuclear war to establish his religion, a fact which nullifies its moral credibility (Vonnegut 177). The reader can now see the underlying message about the paternal and teacherly Rumfoord: that despite his knowledge of "all past, present, and future events" received through the "chronosynclastic infundibulum" he, like every other character, is eventually ridiculed by Vonnegut and thus reduced to a foiled symbol, one of wrongheaded justifications and a mentality that seeks to reduce the world to a single ontology, or meaning-making framework.

One could argue that science-fiction acts more as an operator in this text, given its recurrence in devices such space travel, aliens, and made-up scientific phenomena in *Sirens*, but satire permeates the entire novel –including the more "realistic" parable of Constant's father who used the letters of the Bible as "his investment counselor" (Vonnegut 70). As Ellen Cronan Rose conjectures in her essay "It's all a Joke: Science-Fiction in *The Sirens of Titan*," "[*Sirens*] is not science-fiction...it is more accurate to say that science-fiction in *Sirens* is 'an extended allusion' to reality" (161). This "allusion to reality" does not take on the typical extrapolative quality of much science-fiction, but instead, as Rose argues, it takes on the theatrics of the absurd;

“science-fiction is not the object of the joke: it *is* the joke” (161). Rose applies Freud’s analyses of jokes to the role of science fiction in *The Sirens of Titan*, and she concludes that Vonnegut employs the stylistic conventions of “gallows humor” through which “[he] can approach the dangerous and painful truths he (and we) might not otherwise be able to bear” (166). One can infer, then, that Vonnegut is shielding us with fantasy, to allude to deeper harsher meanings. This fact is evident in Vonnegut’s depiction of soldiers controlled by “radio antennae under the crown[s] of [their] skull[s]” on Mars (100). Representing an army this way is undoubtedly satirical and potentially funny; but the implication of this control –the purposeful annihilation of the entire Martian colony– is indeed as grim as the gallows. The inverted usage of science-fictional elements alludes to Vonnegut’s play with form and mechanical elements of writing, further evincing Vonnegut’s decidedly metafictional satirical style.

Another important use of satire in *Sirens* is Vonnegut’s allusions to various fictitious texts of his own creation, such as *The Winston Niles Rumfoord Authorized Revised Bible*, *The Beatrice Rumfoord Galactic Cookbook*, *The Winston Niles Rumfoord Pocket History of Mars*, and *Unk and Boaz in the Caves of Mercury* (199). If “[m]odern Literature usually offers,” as Ronald T. Swigger writes in his article “Encyclopedism and the Cognitive Value of Literature,” “if only in passing or implicitly, its own criticism of literary procedure [and s]elf-consciousness is a feature of encyclopedism,” then Vonnegut’s use of fictional reference texts for satirical ends is doubly self-reflexive (Swigger 353). In addition to this keen insight about the metafictional thrust of encyclopedic texts, Swigger includes another interesting discussion about the “Menippean tradition” of satire discussed by Roger Frye in his *Anatomy*. Swigger observes that:

“[d]ialogical tensions and carnival perspectives are the main elements of the tradition of the Menippean satire...a variety of forms may be employed, including

dialogue, narration, verses, songs, letters; the *menippea* is topical, often polemical. The *menippea* is ‘the ultimate genre of ultimate concerns’... it explicitly confronts...theological, ontological, or just plain existential issues; however, there is no stress on philosophical or religious decorum. (354)

Swigger’s description of the *menippea* points to several key elements of Vonnegut’s texts: the aforementioned “reference works,” various “sermons” and other crass treatments of religious rhetoric, the letters to Unk from himself and the one from Constant’s father, and the two books written by Beatrice further evince the fact that Vonnegut is caravalizing literary form while simultaneously exploring the “existential issues” recurrent throughout his novel. While the name of Vonnegut’s specific form of satire is not the object of this paper, Swigger’s discussion bears striking resemblance to many of the tactics of Vonnegut’s satire in *The Sirens of Titan* and serves to elevate the novel above a work of mere comedy.

It may seem strange for discussions of “encyclopedism” to enter into analyses of Vonnegut’s satire, but by employing this formal technique, Vonnegut can mock humankind’s attempts to quantify the universe and reduce it to simple, widely applicable terms. Thus, when coupled with the analyses of the “*mineppea*” the definition provided in the *Princeton Encyclopedia* almost exactly describes this interpretation of Vonnegut’s satire in *Sirens*: he assimilates elements of science-fiction, methods of academic discourse, and his plot, characters, and even sections of the text not typically fictionalized, into the presentation of a thwarted ideology, satirizing multiple subjects through absurd representation and counterpoint.

The effect of the “near-references” Vonnegut makes through his use of satire (where he presents counterpoints to an unstated or understated status quo) is that the novel is constantly signifying various ideas without presenting them in their “traditional” or “realistic” context is

that they become so distanced from their earthly referents that the ideas become bound up in the specifics of a fiction whose subject-matter moves in two parallels: the diegetic, the literally represented fictional world; and the signified, the contemporary world activated as a consequence of the satire. The function of his satire serves a higher purpose than laughter: to emphasize Vonnegut's idea of a punctual existence versus one which transcends linear space and time like his faux authorial stand-in Winston Niles Rumfoord. (that is, the immediacy of satire creates a "right now" reading experience, whereas the "chronosynclastic" view of a work of literature emphasizes the work's overall impression Vonnegut satirizes a particular kind of narrative; that is, linear: Vonnegut's satirical aims do not allow for a final "culmination" of his characters in some transcendent way. Instead, he uses the humorous as a signifier by counterexample; all of his characters are cautionary tales.

Ultimately, even the high-culture implications the "sirens" and "titan" of the novel's title are thwarted as the reader learns that the three "sirens" which had earlier appeared as lascivious bait to coax Constant off on his journey are nothing more than statues at the bottom of Rumfoord's pool on Titan; this is a deliberately underwhelming reworking of Greek mythology (Vonnegut 283). This kind "narrative deflation" is one of Vonnegut's primary weapons of re-entering the somber from the satirical, a tactic that enforces the seriousness of Vonnegut's message, however "funny" the delivery may be. Vonnegut's satirical mode of delivery allows him to set up a thought experiment in which all of his characters and events take on symbolic or explicit referents outside the text, and readers allow him to take narrative liberties—such as his implausible sci-fi elements and sudden shocks of painful emotions, like when Constant is rejected by his son Chrono upon their first meeting—in the name of joking. The liberties Vonnegut takes in *The Sirens of Titan* are not as seemingly random as they may appear; even his

descriptions of luck and accidents are laced with implications, such as when Chrono's "good luck piece" turns out to be the missing part of the Tralfamadorian space-ship on Titan (307).

As Donald E. Morse points out in his article "Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*: Science-fiction and Meaning in History, "*Sirens*...makes no pretense of being even remotely realistic in action, setting, or character, but as far-future, satiric science fiction it becomes a non-extrapolative exposé of human foibles, false beliefs, and hypocrisy violating any and almost all rules of realism as it satirizes human society" (52). The connection Morse draws between the satiric mode and the uprooting of the conventions of realism highlights the unique experience of space-time in *Siren*, in which symbols and characters change in connotation according to the parameters of the moment's particular satire. The fictional arena that Vonnegut creates takes on a unique persona, which can be characterized as a literary realm of pure metaphor –pure signification– through which readers obtain the simultaneous representation of several diegetic layers of space-time. These layers come in the form of the novel's major characters, each of whom takes on a symbolic function as Vonnegut explicates his various models of literary space-time, which forces the reader to consider these modes of as they interact. The whole plot, then, is an entanglement of ideas with characterized faces. Thus, the reader can take for granted the fact that satire operates as a device for the metafictional. Another of Vonnegut's metafictional elements is the recurrence of discussions of time and space, which, in Vonnegut's novel, are inextricably linked to the structure of plot and human understanding of the universe.

Ouroboros or Caduceus: The Novel and Literary Space-time

The Greek *ouroboros* is a symbol that depicts a snake eating its tail, which represents cyclicity and eternal creation and destruction (Encyclopedia Britannica). The *caduceus* on the other hand represents the messenger god Hermes (Mercury in the Latin), and it is also the

symbol for the medical profession; it is depicted as a winged staff with two snakes intertwining up its height (Encyclopedia Britannica). One can apply these symbolic shapes to time *The Sirens of Titan* with interesting results: rendering cyclical and metamorphic forms of time.

Like the metafictional strategy of satire, Vonnegut includes his first wink to the novel's play with time before the text formally begins. On the dedication page, Vonnegut includes a "quotation" from one of the fictional characters who appears later in the text. The quote from Constant's business manager Ransom K. Fern (who bears the first bad news about his impending catharsis –that is the end of Magnum Opus, his father's company) emphasizes the science-oriented nature of the satire, stating that "[e]very passing hour brings the Solar System forty-three thousand miles closer to Globular Cluster M13 in Hercules –and still there are some misfits who insist that there is no such thing as progress" (Vonnegut iii). While this passage reads as a mere for-fun backhanded satire, this meta-fictive element forces readers to attempt to conceptualize a galaxy moving across an index of time and space (much like Vonnegut's apparent view of literature, as described later), indicating that *The Sirens of Titan* is a novel "dedicated" –literally and figuratively– to the idea that space, time, and fiction are deeply interconnected.

The novel is narrated by an anonymous commentator positioned in the reader's near-future as a voice describing a fictional recent past. Vonnegut establishes the relationship between reader and narrator in the first two sentences, which state that "[e]veryone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself. But mankind wasn't always so lucky" (1). This implies a shift in status quo since the story's action and allows for an open-end to Vonnegut's critiques. The narrator's position in an ambiguous future time "between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression" juxtaposed against the novel's present –"The Nightmare Ages"–

functions to engage Vonnegut's 1959 reader on the basis of a combined historical continuity and dissonance, making the novel's space-time persona, like the satire, a disruptive and metafictional element (2).

The importance of time as a theme in *The Sirens of Titan* is written in bold print on the first page of text. The opening chapter is entitled "Between Timid and Timbuktu," which, Vonnegut writes, "is derived from the fact that all the words between timid and Timbuktu in very small dictionaries relate to time" (6). The two words seem randomly selected, but when placed as a dichotomy, they take on an important significance within the novel's world; while "timid" can be understood as an emotional state of unwillingness, fear, or anxiety concerning uncomfortable places or situations, "Timbuktu" is often idiomatic for a far off, potentially unattainable place. The significance of the preposition "between" in this semantic relationship is that it implies that transition itself is a place. The idea that movement from an emotional state to a physical location is an actual place emphasizes the mental and tactile experiences of watching internal and external space react in time, a description which typifies the act of reading literature. The first chapter-heading also makes reference to the novel's own textuality in two ways: first, that it is both Vonnegut's title as well as that of a "slim volume of poems" written by his character Beatrice Rumfoord; and second, it emphasizes the nature of plot as a journey through spaces and times (6).

Beatrice Rumfoord is one of three principal characters Vonnegut introduces within this pivotal first section, and each of them has a unique and symbolic relationship to time. Early in the plot, Beatrice invites the novel's hedonistic protagonist, Malachi Constant, to meet her husband Winston Niles Rumfoord, – an aristocrat turned "wave phenomena –apparently pulsing in a distorted spiral with its origin in the Sun and terminal in Betelguse" – thus beginning the

interplay of a three-way matrix of space-time experiences (7-8). Beatrice implores Constant to be “punctual” in his arrival:

Malachi Constant locked the Alice-in-Wonderland door behind him...[he] smiled at that –the warning to be punctual. To be punctual meant to exist as a point, meant that as well as to arrive somewhere on time...[he] could not imagine what it would be like to exist in any other way...Mrs. Rumfoord’s husband existed in another way. (7)

Vonnegut employs the familiar reference to the “Alice-in-Wonderland door” and the allusion to “another way” of existence in a similar way as he uses devices like the initial setting of “Newport, Rhode Island, U.S.A., Earth, Solar System, Milky Way”: to prepare the reader for the cognitive jump-cut implied by the introduction of the ontological model of the “CHRONO-SYNCLASTIC INFUNDIBULA,” the source of Winston Rumfoord’s condition (3, 9).

Vonnegut takes great pains to describe this abstract pseudo-scientific idea, emphasizing –through reference to the fictional work of nonfiction, “*A Child’s Encyclopedia of Wonders*”– that “*chrono (khro-no) means time. Synclastic (sin-classtik) means curved toward the same side in all directions, like the skin of an orange. Infundibulum (in-fun-dib-u-lum) is...a funnel*” (8, 9). The significance of this rhetorical device is multifaceted. Rumfoord himself provides an alternate definition of the phenomenon stating that “When [he] ran [his] space-ship into the chronosynclastic infundibulum, it came to [him] in a flash that everything that ever has been always will be and everything that ever will be always has been (Vonnegut 20). It is also described in the encyclopedic light of a place “where all the different truths fit together” (Vonnegut 9).

While discussing Roger Frye’s *Anatomy* Swigger writes that

“In every period...writers have developed forms and works which, like sacred texts, provide comprehensive and encyclopedic visions. Frye associates these visions with anagogy, literature’s total order of words which tends to comprise or reflect the totality of Being...at this ultimate level of representation, a symbol may be taken as a monad: from its perspective, the entire universe may be grasped intelligibly. (355)

Vonnegut’s chronosynclastic infundibulum can be described in light of Frye’s theory; through it, Rumfoord can grasp past, present, and future events. As Dr. Mónica Pascual observes in her essay “Kurt Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*: Human Will in a Newtonian Narrative Gone Chaotic” this Rumfoordian perspective reflects “the Newtonian notion that past, present, and future fuse in a static whole,” which is opposed to the “thermodynamic order from chaos paradigm” (59). However, since he undercuts Rumfoord’s message, Vonnegut’s novel, in more ways than one, attacks the idea of literature as a static entity, one which holds itself up as lens through which to perceive something transcendental.

If the novel is not a vehicle for a singular “encyclopedic vision,” then it must be an active, metamorphic form. Susan Strehle writes of the shift into quantum physics from Newtonian physics, observing that “the reality scientists study loses the solidity of matter...to take on the energetic quality of acts,” and in its literary context, this “energetic quality” can be seen throughout Vonnegut’s text (8). The substrate is indeed “active” in the quantum sense, since at different points in the story, –in the way that the “Church of God the Utterly Indifferent” critiques both traditional religion and ultimately its own message– different characters and plot points convey shifting meanings and carry different connotations as they recur, emphasizing the idea that Vonnegut is forcing the reader to consider the novel as a whole as well as a sum of

individual parts. This is a notion echoed in Vonnegut's use of the term "punctual" placed in binary opposition with the "wave phenomena" of Rumfoord's chrono-synclastic infundibulated state (7-8).

Likewise, the chrono-synclastic infundibulum is a symbol with many potential interpretations. Several descriptions of the phenomena seem to be describing the novel-form as it is experienced after reading (looking back over a novel) or in the novelist's mind before writing; the effect on Rumfoord upon entering the infundibulum is that he perceives that "everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been" (Vonnegut 20). Rumfoord tells Constant that "they'd like it just as much . . . [i]f the big reward came before the great suffering," and he elaborates saying that the "[o]rder of events doesn't make any difference to them. It's the thrill of the *fast reverse*" (Vonnegut 251, 252). While, in the plot's context, the third-person-plural referents are an audience of patrons of Rumfoord's new religion, it can be interpreted as an address to the reader about the very act of reading; this relationship is one that seems to lace Rumfoord's entire characterization.

Vonnegut also uses Rumfoord's relationship to the chrono-synclastic infundibulum to simultaneously dictate and disrupt the otherwise linear plot of *The Sirens of Titan*. Rumfoord unveils several prophecies about the course of Malachi's life, and in so doing, an active character reveals the basic shape of the plot, a task typically reserved for the author or narrator. One of Rumfoord's early prophecies is that "[Beatrice] and [Constant] will be married on Mars" (21). As a result of Rumfoord's prophecies of the entanglements of his own wife and Malachi Constant appearing early on in the novel both Constant and Beatrice are forced to react to their implications.

Malachi and Beatrice outwardly resist the idea that they will have a child on Mars, –and remain coupled for the rest of their lives– but each, having seen evidence of Rumfoord’s meta-human state, is secretly resigned to this prophecy of his. This internal discordance with traditional foreshadowing –that is, the characters reacting to authorial knowledge simultaneously with the reader– creates a paradox of the momentous and the fatalistic inherent to the novel. This fact is evinced by Constant’s attempts to “make himself absolutely and permanently intolerable to [Beatrice]” in order to prevent his future, and oddly, this conviction takes the form of offensive letters to his cosmically betrothed (Vonnegut 45). Again, Vonnegut represents his characters using reading and writing to defy the effects of time in their lives. As Jerome Klikowitz writes in his book *The Vonnegut Effect*, “[t]he thematic statement of this novel is essentially a technical one: that in answering specific questions about the future and the one big general one about the purpose of life, an entirely new interpretation of temporal and spatial reality is presented;” thus, as even fuzzy knowledge of future events is revealed, the characters necessarily create a new reality in reaction to this knowledge (48).

Vonnegut distances himself from Rumfoord as an emissary from the author, which he appears to be in the novel’s early stages as he reveals Constant’s future. He alludes to Rumfoord’s limitations as an adequate representation of authorship (and potentially the limitations of authorship in general) in a conversation between Winston and Beatrice just before she and Malachi are recruited for the Martian army:

Life for a punctual person is like a rollercoaster...I can see the whole rollercoaster you’re on...I could give you a piece of paper that would tell you about every dip and turn...you’d still have to take the rollercoaster ride...I didn’t design [it]...I don’t say who rides and who doesn’t...I just know what it’s shaped like. (54).

Rumfoord's ability to comprehend "the rollercoaster" allows for the reader, like the characters, to be vaguely aware of that which will unfold across the course of the novel's plot. This is a unique device that Vonnegut could easily use to force the plot's culmination into a predictable unfolding of events, but instead, he uses it further layer and complicate the plot. Also, Rumfoord is admitting here to his contingent senses of fatalism and lack of control over his circumstances, calling into question the surety with which he conducts his manipulations of Constant's life. As Philip M. Rubens writes in his article "'Nothing's Ever Final': Vonnegut's Concept of Time" "[Rumfoord] gives little evidence of being able to understand or control this ability; the only knowledge [he] gains from his experience –the deterministic nature of history– is a rather pessimistic legacy for mankind" (67). Meanwhile, Rumfoord –a "red herring" of authorial exceptionalism– is in possession of a form of knowledge that transcends the barriers of the novel's linear plot, but as Vonnegut undercuts his message, even transcendental knowledge is called into question. Vonnegut manages to disrupt the teleology, because as the novel unfolds, the prescriptive nature of Rumfoord's outlook is foiled.

In his essay "Changing of the Old Guard: Time Travel and Literary Technique in the Work of Kurt Vonnegut" Daniel Cordle argues that "Vonnegut himself...rejects the idea that teleological development –a beginning, a middle, and an end– is anything more than an illusion in either stories or life" (166). The many textures and scales of time Vonnegut represents in *The Sirens of Titan* supports Cordle's claim. He elaborates that, "When beginning, middle and end are strung together in one story, a causal and teleological development is implied...the cause-driving events is what gives meaning to the story" (166).

Cordle links this narrative "teleology" with a scientific perspective; he analyses the work of science-writer Jay Gould in an unlikely comparison with Vonnegut's fiction. Gould "argues

that a misapprehension of evolution and a mistaken emphasis upon progress have led us to misunderstand our place in the world (seeing ourselves as the goal toward which all previous evolutionary traits tended, rather than one more unlikely and fortunate consequence of a series of contingent factors)” (Cordle 166). One could assume, then, that Gould would agree with Constant’s assertion at the latter portion of *The Sirens of Titan* that “[he] was the victim of series of accidents . . . as are we all,” and thus, he might agree with Vonnegut’s opposition to Constant’s earlier declaration that “I guess somebody up there likes me” (15, 232).

Memory becomes an important space-time device of the novel as Vonnegut portrays Constant/Unk’s attempts to retain some understanding of himself while living as a part of the “glass-eyed robots” of the Martian war effort and having his “memory [made] virtually as sterile as a scalpel fresh from the autoclave,” hence his name change (111, 105). While on Mars, Unk writes and hides letters to and from himself between visits to the hospital where this mind-wiping occurs. During the point in the text where both Unk and the reader are unaware of Unk’s authorship of these letters, Vonnegut includes the fact that “[a]ll of the things that the writer knew for sure were numbered as though to emphasize the painful, step-by-step nature of the game of finding things out for sure” (124). The reader then finds that “Unk had written the letter to himself before having his memory cleaned out” and that “[i]t was literature in its finest sense, since it made [him] courageous, watchful, and secretly free” (132). By the acts of reading and writing, Unk/Constant is freed from blind submission to the stories told to him by his superiors, and though he cannot regain his memory fully and return to the Constant of the beginning of the novel, he is able to create a personalized view despite his programming.

In his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” Mikael Bakhtin explores what he calls the “literary chronotope,” in which different types of literary time are

represented through various genres. As an example, “[i]n [the Greek adventure-time chronotope] there is a sharp hiatus between two moments of biographical time, a hiatus that leaves no trace in the life of the heroes or in their personalities” (90). An example of this “highly intensified but undifferentiated” time, as Bakhtin calls it, appears in Constant’s early experiences in the novel, as he uses drugs and goes on believing that his good fortune and rich lifestyle are the result of divine providence (Bakhtin 90). Bakhtin describes another manifestation of time in literature, which seems to apply to much of the rest of plot of *The Sirens of Titan*. This next kind of time can be characterized by metamorphosis, wherein the plot “unfolds not so much as a straight line as spasmodically, a line with knots in it, one that therefore constitutes a distinctive type of temporal sequence” (Bakhtin 113). This “temporal sequence” is one which seems to describe much of Constant’s life in Vonnegut’s novel, as well as the lives of the other “punctual” characters and can be conceived in the shape of the *caduceus*; a transformative, metamorphic, and healing type of story (Vonnegut 54). On Mars, Constant is transformed to Unk as he is subsumed into the Maritan war machine; Unk then loses his own identity and regains it through the act of writing; on Mercury he remains Unk, and wanders underground caves in an existential haze until he returns to earth and becomes the Space Traveler, the great sacrificial “Jesus-figure” of Rumfoord’s new religion. Bakhtin goes on to say that “the temporal sequence is an integrated and irreversible whole” in this metamorphic form of time (119). This aspect of this kind of time seems to correlate with Constant’s development as well as the chrono-synclastic view of Rumfoord.

Not only do the characters experience metamorphosis, but the plot itself changes shape at the end of the novel. One can observe, as Constant’s social sphere degenerates almost entirely during his exile on Titan, and the shifts into a type of time Bakhtin calls the “agricultural labor

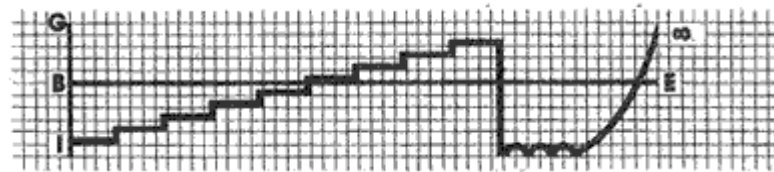
cycle,” a type of time that resembles the (206). As Vonnegut writes in the last chapter of the novel “Constant was self-sufficient. He raised or gathered everything he needed” (313). Bakhtin writes that “the mark of cyclicity, and consequently of cyclical repetitiveness, is imprinted on all events occurring in this type of time” (210). The routine of “tiding up [Chrono’s] shrines [to the gods of the Titanic Bluebirds]” and visiting Beatrice in Rumfoord’s palace on Titan signify Constant’s transition from a storyline that transpires mostly with “knots” of metamorphosis driving major plot events to one which reflects his state of contented resignation to the cyclical (or perhaps vorti-cyclical) forces pushing like seasons and weather patterns through the universe, moving the reader into an *ouroboros* form of time (312).

Bakhtin elaborates on the implications the “agricultural cycle,” arguing that “[t]he motif of death undergoes a profound transformation in the temporally sealed-off sequence of an individual life . . . the more [the individual life] is severed from the social whole, the loftier and more ultimate its significance becomes” (216). This “lofty” and isolated texture of time appears in Constant’s solemn wanderings on Titan. The idea that they had fallen in love “[o]nly an Earthling year ago . . . [i]t took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved (Vonnegut 320). Beatrice dies at the end of the novel; in a more traditional story, a reader might expect for this death to be a disruptive tragedy in the middle of the story, leading to Constant’s transformation. He has already undergone his metamorphoses, therefore death loses its power; he simply “burie[s] his mate” and the act is meaningful in itself (318). The significant aspect of the scene is that, by learning “loving whoever was around to be loved” they have already reconciled the differences between them and still maintained individual lives and coping mechanisms. Since they had

learned to find fulfillment in the day-to-day, the metanarrative of afterlife loses its power; life, not afterlife, becomes the emphasized narrative.

Through the Looking Glass, Into the Wall: Narrative Subverts Meta-narrative

In *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, Vonnegut details what he calls “the universal shapes of stories;” he graphs “Cinderella” and other stories on the axes of “good/ill fortune” and “beginning/end”:



The steps you see, are all the presents the fairy godmother gave to Cinderella....The sudden drop is the stroke of midnight at the ball....But then the prince finds her and marries her, and she is infinitely happy ever after...[The] steps at the beginning look like the creation myth of virtually every society on earth. And then I saw that the stroke of midnight looked exactly like the unique creation myth in the Old Testament...I saw that the rise to bliss at the end was identical with the expectation of redemption as expressed in primitive Christianity. (Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* 285-286).

Vonnegut uses Constant’s death scene to defy the idea of a similar “rise to bliss.” After Beatrice’s death, Salo –the Tralfamadorian alien stranded on Titan– offers to bring Constant back to Earth, and although it is winter, “three in the morning,” and he has nowhere to go, Constant asks to be dropped off in Indianapolis, “the first place in the United States of America where a white man was hanged for the murder of an Indian” (Vonnegut 321, 328). Salo anticipates that Constant will die shortly upon his arrival, and as a result, “he decide[s] to

hypnotize Constant in order that the last few seconds of [his] life would please the old man tremendously” (Vonnegut 322). What Constant sees as this illusion kicks in is a vision of being taken to Paradise. However, as Zoltán Abádi-Nagy writes “Paradise here is not a happy ending . . . Paradise can be a dream, an illusion at best” (54). Vonnegut critiques the perception that success and happiness are in some way ordained and infinite once achieved. Vonnegut’s “Cinderella” story-arc also seems to correlate also with the chrono-synclastic view of Rumfoord. Just as Rumfoord –the proverbial “fairy godmother”– is shown to be just as flawed and wrong as every other character, the story-arc he represents is also foiled in *Sirens*.

Other than his role as the administrator of Constant’s final illusion of paradise, one of the functions of Salo, the Tralfamadorian is to compare human time with another form of alien time. The Tralfamadorians –not to be confused with those described in *Slaughterhouse Five*– are robotic alien beings who utilize a fuel source Vonnegut calls the “Universal Will to Become” to travel and send messages across millions of miles and spanning hundreds of thousands of Earth years (Vonnegut 275). The significance of Vonnegut’s inclusion of an essentially ageless being is multifaceted. The Tralfamadorian society sends messages through “certain impulses of the Universal Will to Become echo[ing] through the vaulted architecture of the Universe...to influence creatures far, far away, and inspire them to serve Tralfamadorian ends” (Vonnegut, 277). The narrator describes Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, and other major monuments as the results of alien influence, and the effect of this Tralfamadorian lens on human history is a compression of time as well as a stripping of agency and significance from human events. The idea of living a life without meaning, the reader is led to believe under Rumfoord’s control over the narrative, is the greatest folly of all.

On the other hand, Salo's character provides a foil for Winston Niles Rumfoord's symbolic characterization. Salo is "eleven million Earthling years old" yet he, like Constant, is described as "punctual –that is he lived one moment at a time" yet he "had seen, living a moment at a time, far more of the past and far more of the Universe than Rumfoord had" (Vonnegut 272-273). Compared with these ancient aliens, Rumfoord is proven to be limited and fallible, despite the apparent infinity in which he lives. This negates further his significance as a prophet of human meaning. Rumfoord's subsequent exit from the galaxy signifies Vonnegut's stance that the old metanarratives must, too, move out of our realm of the present time, leaving instead for the annals of history (292).

According to In his article, "Literary Narrative as Soteriology [religious meaning-making] in the works of Kurt Vonnegut and Alasdair Gray" Gavin Miller argues that "[t]he realist genre has a testimonial character; although a work is fictional in its details, it is essentially based on reportage. This leads to an almost inescapable providentialism in the relation of the author to his experience" (314). He defines the "providential form" as one in which "earthly evil is negated because it is the means by which authenticity is forced upon characters through accidental causation" (Miller 314).

Miller goes on to support his claim by discussing writers like Schopenhauer and Tolstoy and how their perspectives translate into "a more general transcendental fatalism," which emphasizes the "link between 'the obvious physical contingency of an event and its moral meta-physical necessity'" (Miller 301-302). The idea of a "meta-physical necessity" for tragic events parallels the justification provided by Rumfoord for the "suicide of Mars" as an integral part of the establishment of his religion: "Let us have, for a change, a magnificently-led few who die for a great deal" (Vonnegut 174, 177). This parallels Miller's arguments that Tolstoy's *War and*

Peace –a bastion of high realism– “smugly redeems moral evil by presenting Pierre’s domestic happiness as an unintended consequence of Napoleon’s ruthless ambition” (Miller 302). The difference here is that Rumfoord’s creation of this type of story is intentional, as is Vonnegut’s depiction and refutation thereof.

Miller later cites Leszek Kolakowski who summarizes George Bergson’s theory of “determinism”: “for a determinist every event unfolds the ready-made reality hidden in existing conditions” (312). This description of determinism, along with Miller’s references to literary “providentialism” strongly correlates with Rumfoord’s “chronosynclastic” viewpoint in *The Sirens of Titan*, as well as his desire to influence other characters in the novel. The recurring “zodiac on the foyer floor,” of Rumfoord’s house symbolizes Rumfoord’s urge to prescribe and categorize life (Vonnegut 94). When coupled with his “encyclopedic” impulse evinced by “Skip’s Museum” –a room in Rumfoord’s house dedicated to his childhood collection of “mortal remains,” which he describes as “one of the few things in life I ever really wanted”– it is easy to look back over the novel and see early evidence of Rumfoord’s deterministic outlook (Vonnegut 18, 19). Therefore, if reality is ready-made and Rumfoord can perceive this entire reality, he can then excuse his own actions, since they inevitably serve his grand vision. From a surface reading of *The Sirens of Titan*, one might argue that Constant’s “series of accidents” comprises a teleological providentialism constructed by Vonnegut, since so much of what Rumfoord predicts is contingent upon Constant’s adherence to the chain of events, but because of the problematic situation arising from Rumfoord’s interpretation of reality, Vonnegut does not allow the story’s rhetoric to end there.

As Monica Pascual writes, “if Rumfoord –and the reader with him– were a man of the thermodynamic age instead of a Newtonian one, he would have realized how everything was just

a series of accidents . . . not an inevitable sequence of extraterrestrial manipulations of world history to achieve his personal ends” (60). Pascual uses scientific terms to describe what Vonnegut depicts in the novel’s epilogue: Beatrice composes a hyperbolistically long book – “thirty-eight cubic meters” large– as “a refutation of Rumfoord’s notion that the purpose of human life in the Solar System was to get a grounded messenger from Tralfamadore on his way again” (314). In this and several other ways, Vonnegut is foiling the “shape of story” which Rumfoord represents, but Constant is not necessarily our shining alternative. In the chapter entitled, “We Hate Malachi Constant Because . . .,” Rumfoord lambasts Constant at the ceremony for the return of the Space Wanderer imploring him to “[t]ell [him] one good thing [he] ever did in [his] life” (Vonnegut 256). Looking back over the novel’s action, the reader struggles to find anything other than selfishness, reactionary behavior, and confusion in Constant’s past.

Vonnegut takes a bold step in the refutation of his protagonist: what is left of the “hero” status of Constant is dissolved by Rumfoord’s question; the novel no longer has a hero; and it begins to disperse from there. While in this scene Rumfoord still very much appears to be a villain, as he too is reduced to a fallible level, the novel also loses that force. Salo begs for Rumfoord’s friendship and “against the very nature of being a machine” reveals the contents of his message (Vonnegut 305). Beatrice falls from being “the cleanest, most frozen little girl [Constant had] ever seen,” preserved in a painting on Rumfoord’s wall, to a gold-tooth donning weather-hardened mother of a “wayward [Chrono]” (Vonnegut 18, 237). Vonnegut seems to wave a wand that undoes the “Cinderella” spell for each of his characters and, ultimately, the entire narrative.

Just before the publication of several integral works of postmodern theory, Vonnegut presents a narrative that is, keenly, one of transition. Vonnegut’s second novel seems to reinforce

his reputation as a moralist, but it also elucidates a peculiar edge to his morals. In his pivotal, *The Post-Modern Condition* Jean-Francois Lyotard “define[s] postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it.”(xxiv) The term “metanarrative” can be understood as the overarching tales that serve to justify stories of human destiny or dictate self-fulfilling ones; these stories are quite akin to the providential form discussed earlier. Though Lyotard’s text appeared much later than *Sirens* the “incredulity toward metanarrative” he describes is apparent in Vonnegut’s novel through its satire and disruptions of traditional forms of time and narrative. Postmodern authors are often accused of needlessly complicating their novels to the point of narrative oblivion with an overemphasis on self-reflexivity, but in Vonnegut’s novel, metafiction, by way of satire and contemplations on time and literary form, is a device of narrative substance; the invitation of readers to construct their own meaning makes contrasting the Rumfoordian narrative seem truly “no more substantial than a moonbeam” (Vonnegut 18). One could argue that Vonnegut is hypocritical, since he too presents a didactic message.

However, readers accept Vonnegut’s unique didacticism because, through its play of the satirical and the somber he achieves a certain level of narrative humility: heroes, villains, gods, and princesses all reduced to an equally folly-ridden human level. Abádi-Nagy points out the effect on Constant that, through Rumfoord’s exposures of his flaws and failures, “he learns that his loose, rich life attributed to God’s grace was just a social accident” (50). Vonnegut’s use of plot mirrors his use of satire in the sense that each device presents a similar ontological problem: that of simply accepting the status quo, or not. Vonnegut’s plot is not one driven by a simple conflict/resolution relationship as many stories are because the conflict is with existence itself. He argues not for a new rule of a new ruling class or dominant mindset, not for the replacement

of one “concrete” providential human narrative with another, but a vision of equality that can be realized through a world of individually actualized selves, not one dictated by a single person.

For Vonnegut, as for Constant, time is an open loop that –to whatever end– we who ride must be ridden by some greater force (as each character is shown to be), but it is not the hierarchy which defines the individual. Ultimately, it is one’s reaction to the harshness of reality which informs the inner-most of their meaning-making framework, reminiscent of Vonnegut’s thesis explicitly stated at the beginning of *The Sirens of Titan*: “mankind must find the meaning of life within himself,” not in external reality (7).

Conclusion

The benefit of the three-pronged critical approach taken in this essay is that it provides readers with a guide for navigating a rhetorically complex novel, and hopefully, this paper deepens somewhat –through its engagement with *The Sirens of Titan*– the reader’s understanding of the significance of Vonnegut’s early works, thus defying the biographical narrative which often simplifies the author down to a homonym of his single most popular work. Potentially, this model can be extended out as a prism through which to view Vonnegut’s entire repertoire. Novels such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) –along with others employing Vonnegut’s meta-critical Kilgore Trout character (a philosophizing science-fiction writer), such as *Breakfast of Champions*; and detailed discussions of the mechanics of space-time perception, such as *Timequake*– and *Galapagos* (1985) –with its emphasis on evolutionary narratives and human roles thereof– lend themselves to this critical understanding.

According to Lyotard, in the development of post-modernism, “[t]he narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements--narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive,

descriptive, and so on” (xxiv). In the light of Lyotard’s description, Vonnegut’s novel reads as a comic decrescendo of one of these “great voyages,” and at the end of *The Sirens of Titan*, the audience feels a palpable element of “dispersal” as the novel concludes with a series of rhetorical sighs and nods to a less stable, more personal and thus more demanding “great goal”: to dare to attempt happiness in this world. Lyotard’s text (as well as many of the other critical frameworks applied to the novel in this essay) may have appeared much later than *Sirens*, but that difference in time seems moot when considering Vonnegut’s evidently keen insight into literary trends that were in development in 1959.

Concluding his own metacritical analyses of literary rhetoric in *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut also describes a cloud, which has striking implications when imagined in conjunction with Lyotard’s vision of a “the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and the university institution which has in the past relied on it;” this disruption was brought about by the decay of traditional fiction and criticism (xxiv). In Vonnegut’s vision, Salo’s society decided upon the underwhelming content –“Greetings”– of the message headed across the galaxy by way of:

A kind of university –only nobody goes to it. There aren’t any buildings, isn’t any faculty. Everybody’s in it and nobody’s in it. It’s like a cloud that everyone has given a puff of mist to, and then the cloud does all the heavy thinking for everybody. I don’t mean there’s really a cloud. I just mean it’s something *like* that...All I can say is, there aren’t any meetings. (274).

Vonnegut’s image of the “cloud” seems to be more optimistic than Lyotard, in that the novelist’s description allows for the possibility of dispersal *and* condensation. This passage –which remarkably seems to describe the internet as well as the sway of history as a meaning-making

mechanism— reflects the “constallatory” and “thermodynamic [order from chaos]” nature of the kind of literature Vonnegut seems to be vindicating in *Sirens*: a novel where chapter to chapter various characters and devices symbolize points of perspective on a rhetorically a-linear path to the novel’s message of individual meaning-making; the novel thus gives off its own “puffs of smoke.” This model, with its uncertain narrative and connotative twists and turns, mimics Vonnegut’s representation of “life as unfolding” through Malachi Constant, the one variable in *Sirens* that helps maintain a logical, if chaotic, chronology. Vonnegut’s representations of Constant enforce the message underlying many of the events in *The Sirens of Titan*: he reassures readers that everyone falls short and is somehow fallible in the greater scheme.

An earlier description of how the robots of Tralfamadore came to exist as ends and means of a human-esque species’ search for meaning (and subsequent search for extinction as a result of life’s apparent meaninglessness because “they hated purposeless things above all else), highlight the existential problems of will, agency, and potency of action raised throughout the novel (Vonnegut 280). These questions are not answered by the proclamation of a simple step-by-step methodology of living, like the idea of irrevocable “truths” so popular in realist ideology. Instead, they are left simmering in the air alongside the suggestion that life cannot easily be reduced to general terms and must be taken on a case-by-case, day-by-day basis. Absent in Vonnegut’s novel are the inflated deterministic resolutions of earlier texts or the unanswered “ineffable” open ends. Here is a story of human possibility on an attainable scale: for Vonnegut, saving the world with a single idea is a fantasy, but coming to terms with a reality which is cruel and often “stranger than fiction” is an obvious goal for which we should all strive.

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