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“Poo-tee-weet?”

by Lynn Olson

Upon first reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* in a freshman literature course, I was intrigued by the little bird which chirps “Poo-tee-weet?” at the end. “What does it *mean*?” I wondered. “What is it *for*?” Since then I've grown up enough to know that concrete, sensible answers to questions like that are about as easy to come by as an answer to the question: “What difference does it make?”

In attempting to provide a possible answer to these questions, this essay will explore not only the “Poo-tee-weet?” bird but also some of Vonnegut's other birds. There is always a danger involved when one picks out a particular symbol (in this case the bird) and analyzes it to death attempting to get inside the heart and soul of the writer who used it. That danger is particularly evident in Vonnegut's books because his work resists that type of ordering at every turn. His stated aim (see *Breakfast of Champions*) is to bring chaos to order, not vice versa. Some read Vonnegut, for example, and see hopeless, depressing pessimism, while others see hope for humanity. Some think he draws interesting pictures and says funny things while others find him completely incomprehensible or pornographic and want to burn his books in furnaces. These differing interpretations of and responses to Vonnegut's work ensure that it will survive: they make it possible for the “chaos” to continue. And they may just have something to do with that little bird, too.

Birds are everywhere in the fiction of Kurt Vonnegut. They appear in names, Harold J. Sparrow in *Mother Night* and Emil Larkin and Mary Kathleen O'Looney in *Jailbird*, for example, and in the stories themselves. Examples include the bird which chirps to Eliot Rosewater at the mental hospital in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, the “Poo-tee-weet?” bird and Billy Pilgrim as a “filthy flamingo” in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a similar “Poo-tee-weet” bird in *Cat's Cradle*, the teacup-trained prothonotary warblers on the top floor of the Chrysler Building in *Jailbird*, the bird-calls and Kilgore Trout's parakeet Bill in *Breakfast of Champions*, and the blue-footed boobies and vampire finches in *Galapagos*. Because it would be almost impossible to document and explain all images of birds in Vonnegut's works, this essay will concentrate on only five of those im-

ages. It will offer a possible interpretation of the birds' significance, taking into account the themes Vonnegut seems to present and also some of the myths and beliefs associated with the birds he chooses to employ.

As mentioned before, one of the most striking and memorable bird images in all of Vonnegut's works is found in his 1968 volume *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut describes the aftermath of the Dresden firebombing during which 135,000 people were killed. Billy Pilgrim, the novel's protagonist, has emerged from the slaughterhouse two days after the firebombing to help dig for bodies. Vonnegut says there were "hundreds of corpse mines" operating, and soon soldiers began to cremate the bodies with flamethrowers. Edgar Derby, the former high school teacher and Billy's fellow prisoner, has been shot by the Germans for stealing a teapot. One of the soldiers who had to work in the corpse mines has died from throwing up. In short, there is some pretty strange stuff going on here (and all for a "worthy" cause?) in addition to senseless destruction. Yet something graceful and beautiful emerges from that insanity. After describing the scene, Vonnegut ends the book with the following passage:

And somewhere in there was springtime. The corpse mines were closed down . . .

Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind. There was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was green and coffin-shaped.

Birds were talking.

One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, "Poo-tee-weet?" (215)

This little bird, which seems to have risen literally from the ashes of the Dresden firebombing, is, according to Vonnegut, saying the only intelligent thing there is to say about a massacre. After a massacre, Vonnegut writes:

Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 19)

The image of a bird which rises from ashes is familiar to both ancient and modern cultures. Used today as a logo for fire insurance companies (according to Beryl Rowland in her book *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism*), this imaginary bird, known as the phoenix, has a rich history and appears in the legends of many different cultures

and time periods. According to Rowland, Herodotus first described this bird. "He claimed only that it came from Arabia to Heliopolis in Egypt once every 500 years, bringing its aged parent which it smothered in myrrh and placed in the temple of the sun" (134). Other poets later added to the story. The most familiar form of the phoenix story, Rowland writes, describes the bird in this manner:

When it notices that it is growing old, it builds itself a funeral pyre, after collecting some spice branches. On this pyre, turning its body towards the rays of the sun and flapping its wings, it sets fire to itself of its own accord until it burns itself up. Then on the ninth day afterwards it rises from its own ashes. (135)

The phoenix is probably closest in real life to the purple heron (the benu), Rowland writes, which was sacrificed by the priests of Heliopolis every 500 years. Arabians worshipped the bird, which they thought represented the sun (which died and rose every day). The benu also meant palm tree in Egyptian, "the palm tree itself being self fertile and everlasting" (135).

In Christian symbolism as early as the Third Century, the phoenix was seen to represent Christ. "The circumstances of the bird's death and rebirth symbolized the resurrection, immortality, the mystery of the trinity, the birth of Christ, or the penitent sinner" (136). During the Renaissance, the phoenix symbolized fire, rarity, rebirth, eternity, solitariness, and hope (137). Rowland cites Geoffrey Whitney, a 16th century writer, who foreshadowed Vonnegut when he used the image of the phoenix to symbolize the town Nantwich in Cheshire, England, which was destroyed by fire December 10, 1583. Many of the town's buildings were destroyed, but only two people died in the fire. The town was eventually rebuilt through the generosity of Queen Elizabeth, and Whitney makes a connection between the reconstruction or "rebirth" of the town and the rebirth of the phoenix after it is destroyed by fire. In much the same way, one might venture to say, Vonnegut has his bird emerge after the town of Dresden is destroyed.

Through the years, then, the phoenix has come to represent a resurrection of sorts. Just when all appears destroyed, the phoenix rises from its ashes and flies away, just as beautiful as before. Vonnegut seems to use this paradoxical image in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to provide a gleam of hope which shines through the insanity of the Dresden firebombing. The whole situation was insane; the few soldiers who survived were saved from be-

ing incinerated by fires caused by bombs dropped by their own forces only because they were housed in, of all places, the underground meatlocker of a slaughterhouse. And when they finally do emerge, what do they see? A bird, chirping as if nothing had ever happened.

That little bird at the end of the book may provide something positive and comforting in an otherwise insane environment. Hope might be a way of describing it, but somehow it seems more than that. There is hope that people will come to their senses and stop killing, but there is also an apparent attitude that it is pointless to rationalize about it and to try to figure out why it happened. The firebombing was so absurd, so ridiculous and so inhumane that indeed the only intelligent thing which *can* be said about it is "Poo-tee-weet?". What happened? or What's the idea? is about all we can ask, yet there is no answer. In his use of the bird rising from the ashes Vonnegut does not necessarily express a hope that people will change, but rather provides a way of dealing with the insanity people will inevitably cause and suggests a way of making that insanity and pain bearable. Terrible things may happen, and sometimes there is nothing we can do about them, but as long as there are birds to listen to (or pretty pictures to look at or books to read), that terribleness will be easier to face.

Just as both the firebombing in the book and the incineration of the phoenix in the legends bring forth something graceful and beautiful, Vonnegut's experience in Dresden resulted in his book *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut includes in his 1981 volume *Palm Sunday* a reprint of the introduction he wrote in 1976 for a special edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He says:

The Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned, was so meaningless, finally, that only one person on the entire planet got any benefit from it. I am that person. I wrote this book, which earned me a lot of money and made my reputation, such as it is.

One way or another, I got two or three dollars for every person killed. Some business I'm in. (302)

A rather morbid thought, granted, but it would be difficult to effectively argue that the book, regardless of the terrible circumstances under which it came to be written, is not a work of art. Lots of people (school board members, for example) have tried to diminish the book's value by banning or burning it, but it—like the "Poo-tee-weet?" bird—remains. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a result both of the Dresden episode and of the pain that episode inflicted upon Vonnegut. He experienced firsthand the

Dresden scene he describes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; he saw the insanity of the aftermath, felt the pain, and had to deal with it in some way. When faced with such an ugly situation, he seems to say, we have two choices: we can either commit suicide or we can find some way to come to terms with whatever pain we are feeling and seek to enjoy life anyway. Vonnegut apparently chose to come to terms with it by writing about it. In *Palm Sunday* he writes:

Most of my adult life has been spent in bringing to some kind of order sheets of paper eight and a half inches wide and eleven inches long. This severely limited activity has allowed me to ignore many a storm. It has also caused many of the worst storms I ignored. My mates have often been angered by how much attention I pay to paper and how little attention I pay to them . . . To put it another way: Sometimes I don't consider myself very good at life, so I hide in my profession . . . What saved my life? Pieces of paper eight and a half inches wide and eleven inches long. (331-32)

The image of a little bird surviving a firestorm is not exclusive to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however. A similar image appears in Vonnegut's 1965 volume *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Here the narrator describes a gigantic firestorm which Eliot Rosewater, the novel's main character, believes he sees consuming the city of Indianapolis. Eliot had never seen a firestorm, the narrator says, but "he had certainly read and dreamed about many of them" (175). Eliot had a book about the bombing of Germany which he kept hidden in his office. He would read one passage over and over again—the passage which described in detail the firebombing of Dresden. The passage tells of trees being uprooted and of complete burn-out (ignition of everything combustible) occurring because the temperature became so high.

After Eliot believes he sees such a storm engulfing Indianapolis, he wakes up in a mental hospital with a bird above him in a sycamore tree singing "Poo-tee-weet?". This image parallels very closely the one described earlier in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and it seems as though a similar, although not identical, idea is being presented. In *Rosewater*, the bird appears more than once and the doctors quote Eliot as having said he knows a way of cleaning up the whole mess in which he finds himself. "You simply announced," said the senator [Eliot's father], "that you had just been struck by an idea that would clear up this whole mess instantly, beautiful and fairly. And then you looked up in the tree" (179). The "idea" Eliot seemed to be referring to (although he didn't remember it) was that of "unconditional love"; that is, loving people who have no use or who appear worthless and of no value to society. Eliot showed kindness to everyone,

regardless of how fat or ugly or useless or pathetic or stupid or ignorant they were. This, according to Kilgore Trout (another character in the novel), is what we should do. Trout uses the example of volunteer fire departments to demonstrate this unselfish and unprejudiced caring:

. . . they are, when the alarm goes off, almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land. They rush to the rescue of any human being, and count not the cost. The most contemptible man in town, should his contemptible house catch fire, will see his enemies put the fire out. And, as he pokes through the ashes for remains of his contemptible possessions, he will be comforted and pitied by no less than the Fire Chief . . . There we have people treasuring people as people. It's extremely rare. So from this we must learn. (184)

If we could love people unconditionally, the world might be a much nicer place. The bird in the sycamore tree which emerges after the "firestorm" sings to anyone and everyone who will listen, just as Eliot will help anyone. This bird, like the phoenix, could represent a hope that petty meanness and destruction and pain will be replaced with something beautiful: people simply being kind to one another.

A different bird example which seems to give additional support to this notion appears in *Breakfast of Champions*, published in 1973. In this volume, Vonnegut describes Fred T. Barry's mother and the way she performed bird imitations for the blacks who worked for her. The blacks enjoyed this and, in turn, learned how to imitate birds themselves. One of the birds they imitated was the nightingale.

The image of the nightingale, like that of the phoenix, is rich in legend. According to Rowland, "Listening to the nightingale's song" was once a euphemism for sexual intercourse (106). Others interpreted the nightingale, "sitting on her eggs and warbling while she works, [as] the poor but honest wife singing as she toils at her spinning to get bread for her infants" (109). Perhaps the most familiar legend, though, is that of the nightingale singing its beautiful song with a thorn in its breast. According to Ernest Ingersoll in his book *Birds in Legend: Fable and Folklore*, the nightingale's oriental equivalent is the Persian bulbul. As this bird sings its song, Ingersoll writes, "it is pressing its breast against a rose thorn to ease its heart's pain" (49). Rowland comments that the nightingale "continues to be associated with grief rather than gladness" (110).

This symbolism appears to relate especially to Vonnegut's *Breakfast*

of *Champions*. Before performing the nightingale imitation, the blacks would say, "What adds peculiar beauty to the call of the Nightingale, much beloved by poets, is the fact that it will *only* sing by moonlight" (283-84). The nightingale's beautiful song comes only out of a strange mix of lightness and darkness—the light of the sun, reflected by the moon, shining down on a dark earth. In the legend, the nightingale's song is beautiful when the nightingale experiences pain. It impales itself on a thorn to take away the pain of its broken heart, and a beautiful song results. The song would not be possible were it not for the pain, just as the blacks in *Breakfast of Champions* might not sing were it not for the pain and darkness of their lives.

The blacks in this novel were leading dark, depressing lives. Vonnegut writes:

A black man would stick his head through a hole in a piece of canvas at the back of a booth, and people would pay money for the privilege of throwing hard baseballs at his head. If they hit his head, they won a prize. (262)

This is a disgusting and demeaning scene for the blacks, yet imitating bird calls seems to bring something comforting (however small) to their lives. In a sense it provides a way for them to stay alive because it allows them, if only for a moment, to forget about the injustice to which they are subjected. Yet were it not for the pain they were forced to experience, they might not have had any desire or need to imitate the birds. In any case, imitating the birds eased their pain and allowed them to momentarily forget the error and cruelty of a world where people derived pleasure from throwing baseballs at their heads. The blacks were able to grab on to something nice in a world of pain by imitating nightingales, just as the nightingale itself produces a beautiful song from its pain.

Likewise, one could also assert that Vonnegut writes his books as a way of alleviating *his* pain, and that we as readers read them for the enjoyment we get out of them, and not necessarily for the profound truths they may contain. This is why it does not really matter how much or how little sense his books make; they are funny and provide entertainment for us as readers. If they help to alleviate the pain of our world, *that* is what matters. What seems important is that pain is alleviated and that *something* (even something as trivial as bird calls) can alleviate pain.

A bird far less romantic than the phoenix or the nightingale appears in *Mother Night*, which is perhaps one of Vonnegut's most depressing

books. Here the bird appears in the figure of Harold J. Sparrow (alias Frank Wirtanen). Sparrow is the U.S. secret agent who approaches Howard Campbell and proposes that he lead a double life—one as a Nazi and one as an American spy.

A look at the symbolism surrounding the sparrow will offer a possible explanation regarding how Sparrow fits into the novel. The sparrow is generally not viewed as a positive symbol. According to Rowland, it has a reputation for lechery, and at one time the devil was viewed as taking the form of a sparrow (157). The sparrow, furthermore, is one of the few birds willing to nest within cities. Rowland relates a story about a Lutheran pastor in Dresden in 1559 who wanted to exterminate the sparrows there because of “their incessant and extremely vexatious chatterings, and scandalous acts of unchastity committed during the service, to the hindrance of God’s Word and the Christian Doctrine” (157). Ingersoll writes of one legend which says that the sparrow was the bird which betrayed Jesus’s hiding place in the Garden of Gethsemane, “whereas all other birds tried to entice away the officers who were searching for him” (112).

In *Mother Night*, Harold J. Sparrow could be viewed at the end as one of the more positive characters in the book (which is not saying much), although he first appears to be merely a low-life, sleazy CIA agent. He gives Campbell the chance to become a spy and, as a result, appears to ruin Campbell’s life. The letter he writes offering to help Campbell at the end of the novel instead drives Campbell to commit suicide. Campbell had been told that he will be freed from jail if he can produce proof that there is such a person as “Frank Wirtanen,” and that Wirtanen made him an American spy. Wirtanen sends Campbell a letter in which he reveals his true identity and offers to testify at Campbell’s trial that he recruited Campbell as an American agent and that Campbell, “at personal sacrifices that proved total,” became one of the United States’s most effective agents during the war. Campbell responds to the letter by deciding to commit suicide, “for crimes against himself.” Campbell finds the prospect of being a free man “nauseating” and decides to hang himself after reading Sparrow’s letter and realizing its implications.

Yet is Sparrow really to blame for what Campbell decides to do? He did indeed present Campbell with the opportunity to be a spy, but Campbell accepted that opportunity because, as he says, he was a “ham” and “would have an opportunity for some pretty grand acting” (41). And even though Sparrow’s letter at the end is written because he has “an old

soldier's itch for treason" (192), it does represent Campbell's only hope of getting out of jail.

Sparrow should not be looked upon as unfavorably as he might first appear, because Campbell's fate was in his own hands; his being "tone deaf" (that is, unable or unwilling to hear Sparrow's "song" and respond to it) was his own problem, not Sparrow's. Thus the Sparrow in this book is faced with the same sort of bad image problems as, for example, the Dresden sparrows experienced in 1559. The sparrows themselves were not bad; the way in which people responded to them was. The pastor in 1559 responded to the sparrows by wanting to exterminate them perhaps because he, too, was "tone deaf" and saw their chirping not as beautiful song but rather as "incessant and extremely vexatious chatterings." Campbell also responded negatively to Sparrow's "song" because he had a problem within himself; he had led a double life, serving "evil too openly and good too secretly" (xii). The sparrow, then, despite its negative image, can represent hope and bring comfort, but only if we are willing to listen to its songs. Birdsongs cannot bring comfort if we refuse (or are unable) to listen to them.

One last bird image this paper will deal with is that of Emil Larkin, a minor character who appears in *Jailbird*. I chose to examine Larkin instead of the more obvious Mary Kathleen O'Looney or Walter Starbuck (the *jailbird*) because an examination of Larkin will add a different dimension to the interpretation I have been developing.

Larkin, described as Richard Nixon's former hatchet man, is the religious fanatic whom Walter F. Starbuck, the novel's protagonist, meets in prison. Larkin is singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as he comes up the stairs by Starbuck's room. Starbuck makes fun of Larkin, but stops short of calling him a religious hypocrite. "He [Larkin] had so opened himself to the consolations of religion that he had become an imbecile" (77-78). Larkin's autobiography, *Brother, Won't You Pray With Me?* has just been published, and all of Larkin's royalties are going to the Salvation Army. He seems to be a nice (although misguided and annoying) person until a few pages later when he is talking to Starbuck about the Congressional hearing in which Starbuck was once involved. Larkin has been preaching about how much Jesus is willing to help Starbuck as long as Starbuck will pray. Yet he then says he had, as a child, heard Starbuck on the radio "do the one thing nobody can ever forgive him for . . . the one thing he can't ever forgive himself for, and that was to betray

his best friend" (86). Apparently not even Jesus, according to Larkin, can forgive something like that. Betrayal, then, is a very bad thing to Larkin.

It is interesting to note that in legends dealing with the lark, it is seen as a holy and religious bird. It is believed to sing hymns and hallelujahs at the gates of heaven. Yet, as Rowland notes, "these religious connotations accrued as a result of false etymology" (97). Apparently some medieval writers misunderstood the Latin name for lark, translating it to mean "praise" when in reality it meant "high" or "great" (97). A more interesting story which is perhaps less widely known or accepted links the lark with a royal maiden named Scylla. This legend, described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "made the lark the symbol of treason," according to Rowland, because Scylla betrayed her father (101). In the story, Scylla is the daughter of King Nisus, who is at war with King Minos. Scylla is in love with Minos and the only way for her to prove her love is to cut off a lock of her father's hair and give it to Minos. She does this, at which time Minos betrays her and banishes her. She jumps onto a ship and, presumably because of her betrayal, is turned into a Ciris bird.

The lark, then, presents mixed imagery, just as Larkin in *Jailbird* does. Many may perceive Larkin to be a "Christian" figure (just as the lark is associated with Christianity and heaven), yet he might just be a hypocrite. He says he detests betrayal, yet he in a sense betrays "Jesus" by saying he cannot forgive Starbuck for betraying his best friend (who, Starbuck says, was never his best friend anyway, but that is another story). Those who wish to see Larkin as a nice, honorable Christian may do so, just as those who want to see him as a "blubbering Leviathan" (77) may also do so. If Larkin wants to blubber and if praying "to what he believed to be Jesus Christ" makes him happy (77), who are we to interfere? But when he tells everyone who doesn't blubber and pray along with him that they are doomed to hell forever, he had better watch out.

The danger is in trying to pin down one meaning and insisting that it is the only meaning possible. This is, in a sense, what Larkin does with his religious beliefs. Instead of using his religion as a "birdsong" to give him comfort in his life, he uses it as a trap to lure in others and to get them to believe what he believes—to pray along with him. And when they decide to reject his beliefs, he says they are going to hell in a handbasket.

This is dangerous behavior, whether it is Larkin saying it about his religion or anyone saying it about Vonnegut's books. To insist that there

is only “one way” of viewing the world (or Vonnegut’s books), and to imply that anyone who sees things differently is going to hell, is very dangerous because it denies freedom and tries to impose complete order—which, by the way, is just a fancy term for death (see the “perfect” order of Ice-nine in *Cat’s Cradle*).

Vonnegut makes many more references to birds than the five mentioned here, and some of those references, if interpreted, might contradict ideas asserted in this essay. Does it matter? Not really. What matters is that even though the world is filled with hypocrites, murderers, phonies, imbeciles, malingerers, traitors, liars, cheats, thieves, quacks, dolts, betrayers, censors, blockheads, ignoramuses, sleazeballs, republicans, narrow-minded-sexist-racist mental midgets, idiots, simpletons, blubbering Leviathans and morons, and is chaotic and nonsensical at times, some salvation or grace (or whatever you want to call it) does remain. Although not always apparent or obvious, it is there if we will only look for it. Grace can soar above the chaos and, while not necessarily justifying it or providing a reason for it, can at least make that chaos bearable. Vonnegut says in *Breakfast of Champions* that “it is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that; it can be done” (210). Perhaps his way of doing that is to write the books he writes and to refuse to see any order or meaning or reason in much of anything. (After all, “All people are insane . . . they will do anything at any time, and God help anybody who looks for reasons” (*Mother Night* 90). Vonnegut creates a chaos of his own and foolish college students and others attempt to find meaning. Perhaps the goal should not be to find meaning but rather to invent it and thus live by the *foma* (harmless untruths; see *The Books of Bokonon* in *Cat’s Cradle*) that make us “brave and kind and healthy and happy.”

Returning, then, to the original question: “What does *Poo-tee-weet?* mean?” Probably many different things to many different people. It is not something which can be defined or limited to strict terms, because to understand what it means requires more feeling than thought. But I’ll try anyway. It is taking what is left and living with it. It is laughing in the face of disaster, betrayal and sleaze. It is facing the inevitable and knowing, deep down, that if you don’t laugh, you’re going to cry. It is being reborn from your own ashes.

The chaotic, paradoxical, and sometimes nasty nature of this world will always exist and about all we can do is accept it and try to find something that will help us get through life. As long as it helps us and does not harm anyone else, it does not really matter what that something is—it can be

listening to (or singing) songs, writing, wandering around in the woods, engaging in some serious time travel, or any number of substitutes. Life and the world treat us pretty badly sometimes, but our only choice besides suicide is to deal with whatever life hands us. Vonnegut suggests one way to deal with it: to seek out those birds and listen to them—to try to find something to laugh about and to enjoy in life, however “trivial” or “insignificant” it may be. Because without that, little else means much or makes much sense. We, like the black jailbird in *Breakfast of Champions*, must adapt to what there is to adapt to and, if all else fails, learn how to imitate bird calls.

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