

## **Kurt Vonnegut - A critical study**

### **Preface**

The novels of Kurt Vonnegut have attracted critical attention in recent years, but little in the way of in depth study. His novels are often noted as examples of post - modernism and metafiction, but in the main are just listed as such. In addition, the vast majority of critical analysis that has been done is written by American critics.

I hope to provide an objective view of Vonnegut and the America of which he writes.

Vonnegut first found success as a writer of science fiction. Novels such as *Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan* are fine examples of the genre, written in a very distinctive style. He has since found himself pigeon-holed in the science fiction genre and as such was ignored as a writer worthy of serious critical attention for many years. In order to show the scope of his abilities, I am concentrating on three neglected novels from across his career whose subject matter is founded purely on Earth, *Jailbird*, *Bluebeard*, and *Mother Night*, and his most famous work, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

I intend to highlight some of the particular qualities of his writing, his extraordinary characterisation, his imaginative techniques of form and what they combine to produce.

### **Chapter One - America through the eyes of Kurt Vonnegut**

The America in which Kurt Vonnegut finds himself is a country of broken promises. His great grandfather, like millions of other people, emigrated to America to escape poverty, encouraged by the hope of a new way of life, epitomised by the American Dream. This is the dominant philosophy in American society, that if you work hard enough, you can achieve anything that you want to. Vonnegut's novels express a dissatisfaction with this view, a desire for a more realistic and useful approach to life.

when you came over here on a boat or whatever, you abandoned your culture (P282, [Playboy Interview](#), *Wampeters, Foma and Granfaloon*).

Vonnegut points to an intrinsic fault in the structure of America. It is a country composed almost entirely of immigrants, from a vast cross section of cultures. But rather than drawing on all these different cultures, they have been mangled and distorted to form the America of today. The various cultures have been left behind, in favour of a new identity, a strong part of which is the American Dream. Success in America is supposed to be dependent on hard work. Success for characters in Vonnegut's novels is more likely to come about from what he terms 'dumb luck' and life is ruled by more random principles. He sees a country where the desires and needs of people have been taken over by those of business and government; what he desires is a return to the basic needs of people.

In looking at his life, it can be seen that his own life has been strongly affected by the dumb luck of which he writes. He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana on 11 November 1922, the son of a successful architect. His family were badly hit by the Great Depression and were forced to move from a mansion home to much smaller dwellings. This drop in status also meant that Vonnegut did not go to private school like his older brother and sister.

It was this change in fortune that provided his first significant writing opportunity, when at high school he became editor of the school's daily newspaper. He also acquired this position at college, while studying chemistry and biology between 1940 and 1943.

He never finished the course as he spent some time in hospital with pneumonia and lost his draft deferment. He enlisted in the United States army and soon after starting service overseas, was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. As a prisoner of war, he was sent to work in the city of Dresden. This supposed non-military target was firebombed on 13th February 1945 by the allied forces of Britain and America, resulting in casualties of between 135,000 and 250,000. Vonnegut and his fellow workers escaped injury as they were quartered in a meat locker deep underground. They served as corps miners for three months before being discovered by American forces.

On returning to America, Vonnegut studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, before taking a job as a publicist for General Electric. Here he witnessed several of the first American experiments with automation and robotics. Finding this job unsatisfactory, he turned increasingly towards writing. In 1950 he sold his first short story and gave up full time work. 1952 saw the publication of his first novel, *Player Piano*. He gradually crossed over from writing short-stories to novels by the end of the 1950's, building a base of readers during the sixties. His most successful work, *Slaughterhouse Five*, was published in 1969, capturing the mood of an increasingly anti-war public. This success established his reputation as a writer with both the public and the critical establishment. Since then he has published a string of books which have been met with differing critical opinion, but have strengthened his popularity with readers.

Vonnegut's novels constantly refer back to the first half of his life. He had lived through the Depression and experienced at close-quarters the Second World War. These were important events for him to draw on in his writing. He drew particularly on his experiences in Dresden, which formed the background to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It was however, his attitudes towards life, that were formed by these events, that are especially distinctive in his work. They created the lens through which he viewed this and other worlds.

In *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*s, Vonnegut talks about the influence of the Great Depression on him:

(It) has more to do with the American character than any war. People felt so useless for so long. The machines fired everybody. It was as though they had no interest in human beings anymore. So when I was a little kid, getting my empty head filled up with this and that, I saw and listened to thousands of people who couldn't follow their trades anymore, who couldn't feed their families...They wanted to die because they were so embarrassed. I think young people detest that dislike for life my generation often learned from our parents during the Great Depression. It gives them the creeps. (p.282)

This dislike of, and detachment from life is fundamental to both Vonnegut's characters and his attitudes towards their respective worlds. In his first book, *Player Piano*, he tells the story of an America where all jobs have been automated, an obvious simile for the Depression. An early scene has the main character Paul Proteus being asked by a man in a bar what his son could do. After Proteus suggests he opens a repair shop:

The man exhaled, slumped dejectedly. "Repair shop," he sighed. "Repair shop, he says. How many repair shops you think Ilium can support, eh? Repair shop, sure! I was going to open one when I got laid off. So was Joe, so was Sam, so was Alf. We're all clever with our hands, so we'll all open repair shops. One repairman for every broken article in Ilium." (p.34)

This kind of dejection sits as easily in the future as it would in a story of the Depression. It depicts a disillusionment with authority, brought about through broken promises. The man has been a cog in the machinery of a society which he has helped to build, until it reached a point where he was surplus to its requirements, and was accordingly rejected. This is just the same experience suffered by those who were unemployed during the Depression giving them a sense of dehumanisation.

Many of Vonnegut's novels deal with the Second World War. When he first started writing after the war, he wanted to write about his experiences:

I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big.  
(Slaughterhouse Five, p. 10)

It was not that easy. It took over twenty-three years for him to write Slaughterhouse Five, which was not simply a straightforward account of the fire bombing. Whilst some of his novels reflected his strong feelings towards war in general, his first novel featuring World War Two specifically, was Mother Night.

This is the fictional autobiography of Howard W. Campbell, written whilst awaiting trial for war crimes. Enlisted to work for the American secret service whilst a playwright in wartime Germany, the job he is assigned is to infiltrate the Nazi movement and send other agents' reports back to the C.I.A. He is eventually, as a creative man, given the important post of writer of propaganda. He records many speeches which are broadcast to the American people from Germany. These report the war from the Nazi point of view, and re-affirm their views of the Jewish race. These broadcasts are, however, written in such a way that they allow coded messages from the American agents to be sent directly to America and the C.I.A.

After the war he is brought back to America without ceremony or any token of appreciation, and is assigned a new identity. Fifteen years on, his former identity is discovered, and after much harassment from Neo-Nazis, veterans and war investigators, he hands himself over to the Israeli authorities to face trial. His own government denies his existence, and even when evidence to clear him finally appears, he is so exhausted and sickened by life, he commits suicide. Campbell can no longer face life, because of what it has done to him. Perversely, he was treated much better by the Nazis, than by his own government.

Distrust and disillusionment with authority pervades the text, as do the effects of an irrational and ironic fate. Campbell's propaganda work is praised by the Nazis at the highest level, and the Neo-Nazis at home, whilst he is working against them for the American government. He is afforded a luxurious lifestyle, whilst his American home is a small flat in New York city.

Success and failure are random in nature in Vonnegut's worlds. Reason and sense have no part to play.

It was in Slaughterhouse Five that Vonnegut finally managed to deal with his own experiences of war. It was not the straightforward account of the destruction of Dresden he intended to write. Instead it told the story of a soldier, Billy Pilgrim becoming "unstuck in time." He used it to draw together many characters from his earlier books, in such a way that it appeared to be a conclusion to a major chapter in his life. The only character to survive beyond this chapter is the ubiquitous Kilgore Trout, who sometimes serves as Vonnegut's alter-ego. The others are brought together only to be washed away in a cathartic statement of intent to move on from his first period of writing.

In his introduction he proclaims:

People aren't supposed to look back. I'm certainly not going to do it any more. I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun. (p.23)

The act of freeing Billy Pilgrim from the constraints of time is also a freedom for Vonnegut. Pilgrim flashes from moment to moment, achieving an overview of his life by experiencing it without chronological order. This approach also reflects Vonnegut's attitude to war, and his acceptance of the futility of making definitive statements about it. The novel concludes with Pilgrim in Dresden the day after the end of the war.

Birds were talking. One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, 'Poo-tee-weet?' (p.160)

As Vonnegut says himself, "Poo-tee-weet" is all there is to be said after a massacre. It makes as much sense as any other attempt at explanation. Obviously there is also a sense of regeneration to come, but that is to come later, and just as Vonnegut took a long time to find his words to describe Dresden, so the regeneration will take its time.

This kind of helplessness is similar to that of those who suffered the Great Depression. Vonnegut finds himself just as much at the mercy of the indecipherable ways of Government. The horrors of war he experienced were judged "necessary" to win the war, yet he felt no joy in the victory. This atrocity made him as ill at ease with his government as his creation Campbell was with his.

Jailbird chronicles the life of Walter F. Starbuck, whose random success in some ways echoes that of Howard W. Campbell. After a chance meeting with an old girlfriend, he becomes a vice-president in one of America's largest companies, the RAMJAC Corporation. This follows his involvement in the McCarthy trials, where he implicated a friend, and a jail sentence from the Watergate affair. Two high profile events which revealed the essential corruption in American public life and the country's desire to expose its faults publicly.

This novel is a blend of fiction with important real events. Vonnegut uses this as an opportunity to recount the history of the Sacco/Vanzetti trial, which he feels has been ignored for many years. [Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco](#) were Italian immigrants, who became involved in trade unions. After a friend died in the custody of federal agents, they organized a meeting to demand an investigation of his death. They were arrested on the grounds of "dangerous radical activities", which were in fact nothing more than the possession of leaflets

advertising the meeting. They were however also charged with the murders of two guards in a robbery, and Vanzetti with an additional robbery.

During his trial for this crime, [Judge Webster Thayer](#) said of him,

This man although he may not have actually committed the crime attributed to him, is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of our existing institutions. (p.218)

They both received death sentences for the murders. There was a prolonged campaign for their release, both in America and in Europe, but to no avail. In his last statement in court Vanzetti re-iterated his innocence and said,

...if you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already.

(Document of American History, p. 219)

The imagery of the crucifixion is further developed by this idea of resurrection. Just before the two men were executed, another prisoner sentenced to death on the same day, Celastino Madeiros, admitted that he had committed the murders for which Sacco and Vanzetti were about to die. It was to no avail, on August 23rd, 1927, all three men were executed.

When I was a young man, I expected the story of Sacco and Vanzetti to be retold as often and as movingly, to be as irresistible, as the story of Jesus Christ some day. (Jailbird p.212).

In the execution of the three men he finds a reflection of the crucifixion, only on this occasion there were two innocent and one guilty. This miscarriage of justice infuriated many to the point of despair and anger. John Dos Passos wrote,

All right you have won, you will kill the brave men our friends tonight...All right we are two nations (The Big Money)

It is this kind of spirit of desire for change that Vonnegut wishes could be revitalised. He recognises its power, as did Upton Sinclair.

Don't you see the glory of this case? It kills off the Liberals. (Boston)

When such an injustice takes place, the indignation can create no middle ground, no liberalism. It sets the oppressed firmly and even more united against their oppressors, their government. But what Vonnegut can also see with the benefit of hindsight is the loss of impetus, the loss of desire to make the nation great. This story, the motivation and unity which resulted from it have long since been forgotten and superseded by the desire for

individual motivation and success. The need to uphold the justice and liberty that American Dream calls for was ignored.

Vonnegut wishes people could have remembered this too, and seen the importance of the good of the community rather than the advantages of capitalism. Vonnegut's America is one which has had the opportunity to establish itself as a great nation of people, and instead had chosen to establish itself as a great business. His novels reflect some of his frustration at this choice and outline some of his desires.

Vonnegut's reputation as a writer was established in the genre of Science Fiction. He seems to have found the form a valuable means of expressing his desires for the way in which an ideal society could function. In particular, he uses the world of Tralfamadore as one of his utopias.

In both *Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, he presents a society with a different perception of time to our own. Past, present and future are seen as existing concurrently, and fate is seen as the ruling force that determines life. They know that they will end the Universe in an experiment with a new fuel for a spaceship, and that they are helpless to prevent it. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Billy Pilgrim asks them why:

'If you know this,' said Billy, 'isn't there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?' 'He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way.' (*Slaughterhouse Five* p91)

Their society's fatalism is tempered by their attitude towards life. Their perception of time leads them to see life as a randomly strewn collection of moments, rather than a logical series of events following on from each other. To the Tralfamadoreans nobody ever dies, as their moments are ever present. They rejoice in the best moments:

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. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at present moments. (*Slaughterhouse-Five* p. 97)

Clearly Vonnegut is not so much creating a new philosophy which will change humanity for the better, but suggesting a way to deal with the life humanity has created for itself. The Tralfamadoreans' views are shared by Vonnegut, they are at once fatalistic and survivalist. Whilst being able to see the mistakes and horrors, they should be tempered by valuing the best moments. This is how he copes with the America in which he finds himself.

## **Chapter Two - Heroes, Anti-heroes and Non-heroes - Characterisation in Vonnegut's Novels**

The protagonist is the central character in a novel, around whom its plot concentrates. There are different types of protagonist, as described above. There is the heroic protagonist, whose activities throughout a story portray him or her as great, as of superior quality to most people.

Good examples of heroic protagonists would be characters such as Hercules and King Arthur who possess noble qualities, are great leaders of men, and have powers of strength or intelligence beyond the means of ordinary men.

An anti-heroic protagonist is one who, despite not possessing the qualities of a traditional heroic character, engages our emotions and sympathies, or at least engages the reader through their actions. The reader associates with the character because of their motivation, their actions further the plot of the novel in such a way as to allow the reader to identify with them. Macbeth and Richard III both possess some admirable qualities, such as their leadership and abilities as fighters, though their desires are distinctly unadmirable. Moll Flanders is perhaps an anti-heroine, although she frequently flouts the law, she does engage the reader to follow her. The anti-hero may be lacking in heroic qualities, or may even be morally reprehensible but their position within the novel is established in part from possessing the point of view through whom the reader sees their world, but also from their strong motivation.

The protagonists in Vonnegut's novels, however, possess neither set of qualities. His protagonists do not have heroic natures, or even motivation. Life happens to them, in spite of them. Outside forces determine how their lives progress, they themselves seem to sit back and allow it to happen. Opportunities are not fought or struggled for, they are discovered by accident. Success is determined by what Vonnegut terms "dumb luck", and those successes are supported on foundations of egg-shells, which can crumble in an instant. This is true of most of his protagonists.

David H. Goldsmith writes in *Fantasia of Fire and Ice* that they are modern pilgrims engaged in an uncertain quest along an unmapped route. But this description describes them as pilgrims (suggesting an object or aim) on a quest (giving a destination) along a route (suggesting direction). This still suggests motivation and desire to succeed, a drive that has to be seen as absent.

Walter F. Starbuck has his life planned out for him by his benefactor, Alexander McCone, right down to a change of name, and the details of his conduct with a girl on a date. Starbuck mutely goes along with it all. He is offered a job in the White House because President Nixon feels sorry for him. He becomes a vice-president for RAMJAC because he is recognised by a bag lady. Starbuck has no motivation, he is just blithely fumbling through life, groping his way through the dark. He never learns his lesson, having been taught to succeed, his hapless successes crumble as quickly and surprisingly as they arrive.

His benefactor disowns him when he finds out he is the co-editor of a communist magazine. He is jailed (through no action of his own) after the Watergate affair. He is jailed again for concealing a will in order to keep the RAMJAC Corporation operating after the death of Mary Kathleen O'Looney, the bag lady who turns out to be the owner of RAMJAC. The company collapses after a police officer stumbles across her true identity two years after her death. The foundations of Starbuck's successes are very fragile. Dumb luck gives, and takes away, and he makes no attempt to do anything about it.

Rabo Karabekian in *Bluebeard* is similarly subjected to dumb luck, and reacts with equal helplessness. His benefactor, Dan Gregory is forced to take him on as a favour to his mistress after he had pushed her down a flight of stairs. As an abstract painter, he finds success until all his paintings disintegrate through faulty paint. (Note that as an abstract painter, he is composing paintings in the same random way he tells his story). He then becomes tremendously wealthy after paintings given to him as surety for loans to fellow painters become extremely valuable.

Karabekian, Starbuck and Campbell all seem to be outsiders to society. They seem to function within society by allowing it to function with them as passive observers. They are naked humans, surviving solely on the basest of instincts. This kind of response to life echoes that of characters such as Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Life happens around them, not to them. They sit on their mound to watch life. At the end of the play, they resolve to leave. But the last stage direction is

They do not move (p88).

This haplessness sums up Vonnegut's characters. When given the opportunity, they do not move. This can be seen in the way all three respond towards women.

Rabo Karabekian is perhaps the most perceptive when he talks of how he became involved with his second wife, Edith:

She was a magical tamer of almost any sort of animal, an overwhelmingly loving and uncritical nurturer of anything and everything that looked half-alive...I know what kind of animal she thought I was, because she came right out and said it to a female relative from Cincinnati at our wedding reception... 'I want you to meet my tamed raccoon.'(Bluebeard, p.222)

Karabekian loves women not with passion, but with loyalty. He does not understand them, and in many cases, is afraid of them. Circe Berman intrigues, but scares him, with her passion, vitality and motivation. He stands back and lets her breeze into his world and turn it upside down. Notice the mythological reference in the name Circe. In the voyage of Ulysses, she turned his men into swine. The irony in the use of the name is that although Circe Berman also disrupts his life, she eventually brings so much more out of him.

Merilee Kemp, the mistress of Dan Gregory, sleeps with him after a huge argument with Gregory. He sees it as a sign of her undying love. She views it simply as part revenge, part a need for a little affection on her own terms. He cannot understand this, but offers little resistance when she tells him to go away. Women are incomprehensible, but always right. Obviously he is young and naive at that time, but this view stays with him for life.

Starbuck agrees with this point of view wholeheartedly:

...women were more spiritual, more sacred than men. I still believe that about women...I have loved only four women in my life - my mother, my late wife, a woman to whom I was once affianced, and one other. ...all four seemed more virtuous, braver about life, and closer to the secret of the universe than I could ever be. (Jailbird, p.53)

Both Starbuck and Karabekian are sexually and emotionally naive, almost stunted. They possess virgin/whore complexes, where women are either elevated to a sacred status, or lusted with animal need. They are confused animals, responding with either devoted loyalty or desire.

Incidentally, it must be said that women get a pretty raw deal in Vonnegut's novels. All of his protagonists seem to share a view of women that, whilst not simply misogynistic, does display a narrow understanding. In the main they are not well-rounded characters, and seem simply to serve functions; wife, mother, lover etc., almost as if their destinies depend on a twist of fate. They are often martyrs suffering terrible fates, such as Marilee Kemp, who is abused by Dan Gregory, used as a means of sexual initiation and satiation by Karabekian, and as propaganda by Mussolini. Women are portrayed as good sufferers, to be revered for their powers of endurance.

These men are only able to realise their failings in old age: Bluebeard, Mother Night and Jailbird are all pseudo-autobiographies, written at the end of dramatic but somewhat uninspiring lives Starbuck willingly admits as much:

The most embarrassing thing about this autobiography, surely is its unbroken chain of proofs that I was never a serious man. I have been in a lot of trouble over the years, but that was all accidental. Never have I risked by life, or even my comfort, in the service of mankind. Shame on me.(p.212)

This revelation comes much too late in life for him to do anything about it. It is a confession of waste. Campbell's response to his failures is to commit suicide, to

hang Howard W. Campbell jr., for crimes against himself  
(Mother Night p. 202)

He cannot face the prospect of freedom, having found himself trapped in one form or another for so long, so he frees himself from life. The only one of the three to offer any sort of positive response or evidence of motivation is Rabo Karabekian. He finally uses the skills taught him by Dan Gregory to produce an incredible painting. Sixty-four feet long, it is a painstakingly-detailed representation of the scene of his first morning of freedom after being released by his German captors at the end of World War Two. He, along with thousands upon thousands of other prisoners of war had simply been left there by their fleeing captors in a valley to fend for himself. The picture captured all the ravages of war in its huge dimensions, and he names it "Now it's the Women's Turn."

This suggests Vonnegut developing a more enlightened view of women in his later work compared to Mother Night and Jailbird. He stands out from the other protagonists, as the retrospective view of his life is understood to some extent by him, and rather than sloping off to jail like Starbuck or committing suicide he is motivated to end on a positive note, to actually achieve something. It is an epiphany, a great achievement comparable to Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five, a self-doubting but successful release of frustration, a long-laboured attempt to rationalise the destruction of their emotions by the horrors of war.

Karabekian hides this epiphany away, scared to reveal it, so unsure is he of his abilities. It is only because of the constant badgering of Circe Berman that he shows it to anyone. He possesses the same lack of self-assurance present in Starbuck and Campbell. A sense of uselessness.

Campbell's moments of epiphany achieve a different success. He recorded two years of erotic obsession with his wife Helga in a diary, which he named "Memoirs of a Monogamous Casanova." Campbell is horrified that his most intimate secrets are read as a form of pornography in Russia:

I feel right now...like a pig that's been taken apart, who's had experts find a use for every part. By God - I think they even found a use for my squeal! The part of me that wanted to tell the truth got turned into an expert liar! The lover in me got turned into a pornographer! The artist in me got turned into ugliness such as the world has rarely seen before. (Mother Night, pp. 155-56)

All of his powers have been mutilated and turned against his morals. His abilities as a playwright are used for the purposes of propaganda and spying, fighting for both sides at once in the ugliest of wars. But when his most beautiful memories are distorted into pornography, this is in effect what gives him the desire to be free of life. In some ways, it is this revelation that lays him open as a character to the reader. He is able to play his part in the greatest massacre of the twentieth century, of the Jewish race, but is more disgusted at other people reading about his intimate sexual secrets. It is the revelation of his basest animal instincts that hurts him most. The success of his diary is his greatest failure, as it lays him open for the world to see.

Both Karabekian and Campbell accomplish a great personal epiphany. The former's successful paintings collapsed, self-destructed, whilst "Now it's the Women's Turn" finally achieves what he has been trying to do all along. The latter's epiphany is distorted and exposed to the world, shattering him.

What then is the purpose that these hapless characters serve? Their desire to achieve is minimal, they seem to lack motivation in anything but the satisfaction of base instincts. They see themselves as almost excluded from any form of society, only required as pawns in a much larger game, to be sacrificed at will. They are highly susceptible to the ravages of fate, and leave it to dominate and rule their lives.

As such these protagonists are thus perfect heroes for Vonnegut's America. These mute, passive figures represent a country that has laid itself open to the power of its businesses and government. They are an example of the life that is led under such ruthless control. These protagonists are subject to the same helplessness and despair as those who lived through the Great Depressions, or those who suffered from World War Two. If America is to be praised for what it has become, then these protagonists must be seen as its heroes, as they are the ultimate product of contemporary American society.

Hero however, is not the right term for these protagonists. The term and its antithesis were discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and they meet neither term. They are so removed from, so dysfunctional in society, it is almost as if they are characters on the verge of nothingness. They are non-heroes, completely at odds with their environment.

There are other protagonists in literature that could fit this classification of non-hero. Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, is so at odds with her environment, and is dictated to so much, that she hardly seems to speak at all in the first half of the novel. She too is dramatically marginalised, to voicelessness. Non-heroes sit meekly in the middle of Vonnegut's America, and let life happen around them. They will try not to struggle, and they

do not expect to succeed. They are the mutated products of their environment, Chaplinesque in their ineffectiveness, but unredeemed by his charm and humour.

### Chapter 3 - Stories are Gadgets

Stories are gadgets, and they can be fixed so they really can run  
(Vonnegut, Cheltenham Lecture, 1993)

Kurt Vonnegut is a mechanic who has his own unique way of tinkering with his stories . He has found a way to make them work well, and in doing so he has developed a radical narrative structure.

In his early short stories, and his first novel, Piano Player, the subject matter is just as distinctive, but the structure is straightforward. Some of his first successful short stories were sold to magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Esquire and Ladies Home Journal. In order to sell to such publications, he had to produce relatively conventional work.

Once he had established his reputation , and published a reasonably successful novel, he gained the publishing freedom to experiment with an audience. He began to abandon straightforward narrative structures, placing more responsibility on the reader.

This shift in responsibility is of the kind that Roland Barthes referred to in his essay, "The Death of the Author". He suggested that it is the reader, not the author, who performs the construction of a text:

[The Author's] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.  
(Image-Music-Text,p. 146)

The author is never truly original, he merely finds a way to mix other texts together. This is certainly true of Vonnegut. His novels are a mixture of fantasy and retold history, Second World War, Great Depression and Folk-history such as the Sacco-Vanzetti story. His originality comes from the way in which he tells his stories.

Barthes claims:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost, a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.(p. 148)

It is the reader who makes sense of a novel, constructs the story. The reader brings all of his knowledge together to form and understand the novel. An author sends signals to point them in the right direction, no more. This view of writing is described as post-modernist.

Metafiction is a style of writing that in part acknowledges and in part combats this view.

Particia Waugh in Metafiction describes it as,

fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. (p. 2)

A metafictional text will call attention to the reader that he is reading a text which acknowledges its own unreality. This can be achieved by addressing the reader directly, by using unconventional structures, or even by placing the author directly into the plot. This is perhaps where Metafiction comes into conflict with Post-Modernism, as whilst the latter proclaims the 'death of the Author', metafiction resurrects the author within the body of the text. It acknowledges the unreal nature of the text alongside the authorial role.

Where the two do agree however, is on recognising the importance of the reader. Metafictional texts, rather than attempting to dictate to the reader, ask the reader to engage in and question what they are being told.

Vonnegut uses several different ways of writing which fall within the category of metafiction. He does this, in part, to encourage such questioning of the text. *Bluebeard*, *Mother Night* and *Jailbird* are all pseudo-autobiographies. They all have introductions which make the reader aware of this fact. In an author's note in *Bluebeard* he points out that

This is a novel, and a hoax biography at that... It is a history of nothing but my own idiosyncratic responses to this or that(p5).

This is a plea to the reader to consider the novel in its context, not to simply believe, but to examine and question. It also alerts the reader to the fact that, as an author, he is able to alter and shape reality as he chooses. In stating that

Rabo Karabekian never lived, ...(nor) any of the other major characters in this book.(p5)

he helps to establish a three-way relationship between author, reader and protagonist, similar to that found in dramatic monologue. The reader is encouraged to separate and distinguish clearly between the views of author and protagonist.

Another technique that is utilised is the non-sequential narrative structure. Instead of progressing from beginning to end, in the order that the events occurred in time, the events are related in an order which allows the nature and fate of the protagonist to be revealed gradually and to most effect. This is the "coming unstuck in time" which happens to Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse Five*. It is the idea of trying to see the whole picture at once, like the Tralfamadorians. Vonnegut describes Tralfamadorian novels as

brief clumps of symbols separated by stars (p. 70)

When Pilgrim asks how they work, he is told,

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. (Slaughterhouse Five, p. 71)

This could be viewed as Vonnegut's chief aim in his novels. Obviously he cannot ask his readers to comprehend a whole novel at once, but the non-sequential narrative asks the reader to produce in his mind the whole image.

In *Bluebeard Karabekian* floats about in time. The reader is asked to picture this process:

let us hop into our rusty old time machine, and go back to 1932 again. (p. 80)

The hops in time move backwards and forwards from several veins of narration, the present, his youth, the war, his part in the development of Abstract Expressionism. The novel is simultaneously an autobiography, and a diary of the writing of the autobiography. When he has completed the process of recalling and evaluating his own life, the perspective he receives from both that process, and the encouragement and interventions from Circe Berman gives him the confidence to reveal the epiphany which is a result of that life, the painting "Now It's the Women's Turn".

Having been guided through his life, the reader is ready to accept the epiphany. He has been a non-hero, and in the main his actions in the present reaffirm him as such. But the death of his wife Edith allows him to see what he must do, to present a vision of man's horrific nature so huge that it cannot be ignored. The reader's guided tour of his life allows them to accept the fulfillment of this "heroic" notion by an essentially non-heroic protagonist, to see this horrific picture for themselves, and to see that not even someone as unheroic as Karabekian could ignore it.

Vonnegut allows the strands of narrative to stretch beyond the confines of a single novel. Characters from one novel often crop in another. Karabekian gives a speech about his paintings in *Breakfast of Champions*. It has already been mentioned how Campbell, along with several others, makes an appearance in *Slaughterhouse Five*. But the character who, above all, appears in many of his books is Kilgore Trout.

Trout is a very prolific writer of science-fiction, and he appears in many shapes and forms. In *Jailbird*, he is the alter-ego of Robert Fender, a fellow convict of Starbuck. In *Slaughterhouse Five*, he is an old man in charge of a group of paperboys. Each appearance is different, and not necessarily in keeping with the others. As many of his appearances are in the 'autobiographical' novels, he serves as a reminder of the unreliability of the writer. Several characters experience Trout in different ways, and have their own interpretations of events. Trout is a writer whose novels have an extreme effect on his devotees. Amongst these devotees are the hapless Billy Pilgrim, the mad Eliot Rosewater, the criminal Starbuck, and in

the case of Breakfast of Champions drive a man to murder. To some of these readers he is viewed as a messiah, the only man who can really see our world as it is.

Trout's stories are presented in synopsis form, sometimes not more than a paragraph in length. These give thumbnail sketches of Trout's utopias and dystopias. Worlds where ingratitude is a crime with the death penalty, where Einstein meets God in heaven and accuses him of cruelly deceiving people as to their opportunities on Earth, where a time traveler finds a twelve year old Jesus helping his father to make a cross for the Romans. Trout's perverse logic gives Vonnegut an alter-ego through which he is able to present some very radical ideas, sometimes in jest, sometimes in all seriousness. Sometimes he has a very close affinity to Trout; after all they are both aging writers of science fiction. On other occasions, however he denies that affinity, and attempts to distance himself from Trout. In Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut appears in person to watch his characters in action. He says of them:

Here was the thing about my control over the characters I created. I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals. There was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as though I was connected to them by some rubber bands.  
(Breakfast of Champions p. 234)

In the context of the novel, this includes Trout, who has previously been a facsimile of himself. He can't even control his alter-ego. This, surely, is an acknowledgment of the "death" of the author. The writer's hand is guided by linguistic, prosaic, artistic and cultural conventions of his society. He is simply a channel through which they pass. He is as in control of his novels as he is of his reader.

Paradoxically however, he is also able to reassert the author's existence, through his very appearance. Vonnegut takes his authorial intervention a step further when he approaches Trout and tells him:

I am a novelist and I created you for use in my books (p. 235 )

This completely shatters any illusions the reader could possibly have. Trout the messiah asks his own creator to give him back his youth. In refusing, Vonnegut acknowledges both a refusal to claim total control over his characters, and an inability to control himself.

Vonnegut blurs the line between illusion and reality in another way. He includes real people in his books, both important personalities and ordinary people. Karabekian meets W.C. Fields and is friends with Jackson Pollock. Starbuck works with Richard Nixon and has good luck messages sent to him from Salvador Dali and Robert Redford. His lawyer is based on a real person, [Roy Cohn](#). Campbell works for and meets Hitler. These are always brief cameos, and are used to add a sense of truthfulness, a feeling that his protagonists are loose in the real world. But it also serves to blur reality, as these people are shown interacting with fictional characters.

As well as setting the reader loose in time, Vonnegut alters their reality, asking them to question it. In Bluebeard he states in an opening note that it is a hoax autobiography, and then

proceeds to assert its reality by drawing in the real world, a kind of super-realism where reality itself is altered for the needs of the novel. As soon as a fictional character such as Starbuck or Karabekian is shown to be interacting with a real person like Nixon or Pollack, it must encourage the reader to question the honesty of the author, and also the boundaries of reality.

In *Galapagos* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut uses a little technique to ask the reader to ignore some details and emotions, and to concentrate on the wider picture. He attempts to minimalise the effect of death on the reader. After each death in *Slaughterhouse Five* he writes "So it goes". He observes in the beginning that there is so little to be said after a massacre. To him, when someone dies, nothing can be said that will achieve anything. He prefers the Tralfamadorian view, where all time exists at once, so nobody is ever dead. They ignore the awful moments, and concentrate on the pleasurable ones.

This is Vonnegut asking for a limiting of emotional response by the reader. He achieves the same effect in *Galapagos*, by starring the names of the characters who are about to die, in order to prepare the reader for their deaths. He desires the reader's assistance in achieving a true construction of his novel.

Seen overall, what Vonnegut is trying to provide is a new kind of reading experience. He constructs his narratives in complex interwoven strands. He uses introductions to slip the reader into a novel, warm them up for the transition from reality to fantasy, whilst reminding them of that process. He shares things in confidence with the reader, without telling his characters. He warns them of the falsehood of the novel, whilst drawing on reality to establish associations for the reader. He asks the reader to learn to view the book as a whole, collecting the moments along the journey through time and space, to produce a total greater than the sum of the parts.

In a 1973 interview, Vonnegut said of writing:

No other art requires the audience to be a performer. You have to count on the reader's being a good performer, and you may write music which he absolutely can't perform...it's a learning process.  
(*The New Fiction*, p. 204).

Vonnegut has always tried to help the reader with that learning process. Just as he has found the tools to make his stories really run, he has helped the reader learn to work those stories, his gadgets.

## **Conclusion**

Kurt Vonnegut's novels derive from his experience of a country that has broken down and is in need of mending. He would like to see the country revived by placing more emphasis on the needs of people, but he possesses a sense of doubt that it will happen.

That doubt, added to a sense of distrust in the powers that rule his society, has led him to write about the non-heroes suitable to exemplify that society. Like him, they feel lost in it, and are strongly susceptible to its irrational influences.

The doubt has also helped to form the fragmented way in which he expresses himself. It has also allowed him to express vividly his desires and ideas, and to create a new reading experience in which to do so.

In his lecture in Cheltenham in 1993, Vonnegut stated his wish to:

make people care with just twenty-six letters, ten numerals and eight punctuations printed on wood pulp.

The ways he has found to re-arrange these marks on wood pulp have given him a distinctive way in which to try to achieve this.

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Useful Kurt Vonnegut links:

- [Wikipedia entry](#)
- [Official Kurt Vonnegut website](#)
- [Vonnegutweb](#)
- [Marek Vit's Kurt Vonnegut Corner](#)