

Three Novels by Kurt Vonnegut

(Deadeye Dick, Breakfast of Champions, and Bluebeard):

A Survey and Analysis
of Representative Criticism

by

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Abstract

This thesis begins the process of reviewing and analyzing the criticism of three of Kurt Vonnegut's novels: *Breakfast of Champions*, *Deadeye Dick*, and *Bluebeard*. Vonnegut's value and importance as a twentieth-century writer are discussed and defended. Trends in literary criticism and theory in relation to these novels are examined at length using M. H. Abrams' ideas about the basic assumptions that underlie all approaches to literary criticism.

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So it goes.

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Summary

This thesis provides the first-ever annotated bibliography of select criticism dealing with three important novels by the American writer Kurt Vonnegut: *Deadeye Dick*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Bluebeard*. Although Vonnegut is widely considered one of the most important American novelists of the second half of the twentieth century, and although his work has generated much critical discussion, there is, astonishingly, no annotated bibliography dealing with criticism of his works, including these three well-known novels. The bibliographies that do exist often contain mere “checklists” of criticism, if any criticism is offered at all. More often, the bibliographies focus on only listing Vonnegut’s works themselves (see Bracken 535). The best and most recent annotated critical bibliography on Vonnegut (by Pieratt, Huffman-Klinkowitz, and Klinkowitz) is nearly thirty years out of date, and it mainly *lists* criticism rather than summarizing it. My thesis thus begins to fill a significant gap in Vonnegut scholarship and lays the foundation for an even more comprehensive bibliography dealing with reactions to all of Vonnegut’s writings.

Discussion

Kurt Vonnegut (November 11, 1922 – April 11, 2007) was one of the most prolific and celebrated American satirists of the twentieth century. In the course of writing fourteen novels, five scripts, four short story collections, and five essay collections, he won wide popular recognition and extensive critical acclaim. In order of appearance, his fourteen novels are *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Mother Night* (1961), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine* (1965), *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday* (1973), *Slapstick, or Lonesome No More!* (1976), *Jailbird* (1979), *Deadeye Dick* (1982), *Galapagos: A Novel* (1985), *Bluebeard, The Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916-1988)* (1987), *Hocus Pocus* (1990), and *Timequake* (1997). His short story and essay collections are *Canary in a Cathouse* (1961), *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968), *Bagombo Snuff Box* (1999), *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian* (1999), *Look at the Birdie* (2009), *While Mortals Sleep* (2011), *Sucker's Portfolio* (2013), *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon* (1974), *Palm Sunday* (1981), *Fates Worse than Death* (1991), *A Man Without a Country* (2005), and *Armageddon in Retrospect* (2008). Taken all together, these many works comprise a very important contribution to recent American literature. Vonnegut's writing largely focuses on the human condition in the twentieth century, treating subjects as universal as World War II or as individual as one young man's guilt over an accidental shooting.

Most critics agree that Vonnegut's most important novels are *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Player Piano*, and *Galápagos*. His first novels, *Player Piano* and *Sirens of Titan*, were billed as science fiction and, according to the critic

Lawrence R. Broer, contain “the sometimes despairing, sometimes hopeful efforts of [Vonnegut’s] fragmented protagonists to put their disintegrated selves together again” (45). *Player Piano* also introduces Vonnegut’s concept of men as machines – a concept he will continue to develop in later novels, although he eventually debunks this theory in *Breakfast of Champions*. *Mother Night*, another early work, is his first attempt at a novel dealing with World War II. As a prisoner held by the Germans during World War II, Vonnegut witnessed the horrific firebombing of the German city of Dresden firsthand. He would use this experience as fodder for fiction in several novels. In *Cat’s Cradle*, his first critically acclaimed novel, Vonnegut creates a world on the verge of destruction, a topic probably influenced by his first-hand experiences in Dresden. Meanwhile, in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut deals with yet another favorite theme: the distribution of wealth.

Slaughterhouse-Five is certainly Vonnegut’s most famous novel. Most people have heard of it, even if they are under the mistaken assumption that the novel is a horror story about a human slaughterhouse. The novel was groundbreaking, following not simply a non-linear timeline but in fact a completely erratic timeline involving a character who is “unstuck in time” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 23). Vonnegut saw this novel as a sort of exorcism of his own war experiences. The autobiographical main character, Billy Pilgrim, is a World War II P.O.W. in Dresden, Germany. Artist and alter ego Kilgore Trout also appears in this novel, and Vonnegut himself occasionally slips in as a character. A similar non-linear narrative style is used again in the first so-called “Midland City” novel, *Breakfast of Champions*. This work is set in the fictional Midwestern town of Midland City, Ohio. In this work, Vonnegut presents human beings either as badly

programmed robots or as suffering from the ill effects of poisonous chemicals produced by their bodies. The motif of people as machines is thoroughly explored in this novel, and Vonnegut also tells us that the main character, Dwayne Hoover, is sick: chemicals in his brain are making him insane. Dwayne's descent into madness is hastened by the influence of Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's alter ego, who writes science fiction stories that are published in pornographic magazines. One of Trout's stories informs Dwayne that he is "the only creature in the entire Universe who has free will.... Everybody else is a robot, a machine" (*Breakfast* 259). However, after Trout witnesses – and suffers – the violence that Dwayne subsequently unleashes on the "robots" around him, Trout experiences an epiphany: he begins to realize that ideas can be dangerous. Interestingly enough, Vonnegut himself even appears as a character in this novel, and he also (like Trout) experiences an epiphany, although his awakening results from the influence of an artist named Rabo Karabekian. Karabekian explains that at the core of every living being there is a sacred, "unwavering band of light," representing awareness (*Breakfast* 226). Thanks to their parallel epiphanies, Vonnegut and Trout are both purged of their bitterness.

Vonnegut returns to Midland City with *Deadeye Dick* in 1982, but not before writing *Slapstick* in 1976, dealing with loneliness, and *Jailbird* in 1979, again treating the topic of distribution of wealth. Although published nearly a decade after *Breakfast of Champions*, *Deadeye Dick* is set twenty years earlier and is a prequel of sorts. The new novel's main character, Rudy Waltz, becomes infamous after accidentally shooting and killing a woman on Mother's Day. Characters from *Breakfast of Champions* are recycled for *Deadeye Dick*, a common practice in Vonnegut's fiction. This work – which

Vonnegut called his “most life-affirming novel” – confronts pain and loneliness on a more personal level than did his earlier works (Broer 150).

Galápagos (1985) is a futuristic, apocalyptic novel that discusses the extinction of the human race. Narrated by the ghost of Kilgore Trout’s son Leon, the novel follows the journey of a mismatched group of humans who are stranded on the Galápagos Islands and who find themselves responsible for the continuation of the human race. *Bluebeard* (1987) returns to artist Rabo Karabekian and tells his life story, including his own disillusionment and redemption. *Hocus Pocus* (1990) deals with war guilt as well, but this novel focuses on the Vietnam War, rather than World War II. Finally, *Timequake*, published in 1997, questions free will on a grand scale by creating a situation wherein all the characters have to relive the last ten years in precisely the same way they already lived them.

Justification of Project

Vonnegut’s status as a major American writer of the last half of the twentieth century makes it all the more surprising that there exists no annotated bibliography dealing with the very large body of critical analysis his writings have provoked. Hundreds of articles and scores of book chapters have been written about Vonnegut’s fiction, but no comprehensive bibliography describing that work in any detail has ever been published. The present thesis will begin to rectify this problem by presenting an annotated bibliography dealing with three of Vonnegut’s most intriguing works: *Deadeye Dick*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Bluebeard*. These novels will be the focus of the thesis for a number of reasons.

Breakfast of Champions is one of Vonnegut's most popular novels, possibly second only to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It continues to utilize non-linear plot development, telling the story of Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover in a rambling, seemingly impromptu fashion. It is a shock-and-awe sort of book, full of profanity and crude, often vulgar, felt-tipped pen drawings by the author. Key themes in the novel include free will, self-responsibility, environmental awareness, and the sanctity of life.

Deadeye Dick, a less-celebrated novel, is a prequel of sorts to *Breakfast of Champions*. Since it is set in the same fictional town, there are, of course, overlaps of characters and places. However, twenty years earlier, the town is smaller, and the characters' actions tend to affect a greater percentage of the population. Indeed, events of Rudy Waltz's childhood set things in motion for the eventual downfall of Dwayne Hoover.

Bluebeard is the autobiography of artist Rabo Karabekian, the character from *Breakfast of Champions* whose speech on the sacred awareness of living beings inspires the spiritual redemptions of both Trout and Vonnegut. *Bluebeard* echoes many of *Breakfast's* themes about the creation of art and the responsibility of artists. Karabekian is nearing the end of his life, his art has literally disintegrated, his wife has died, and he is left with a codependent friend and an interloping stranger who force him to reveal his greatest secret – a masterpiece painting hidden in his potato barn.

I have chosen these three novels as a starting point for an annotated bibliography because of their connections with one another. *Deadeye Dick* offers the initial presentation of Midland City, *Breakfast of Champions* reveals the effects of *Deadeye Dick*, and *Bluebeard* emphasizes redemption and rebirth. The recycling of characters and

settings allows for the development of different yet similar ideas in each novel. Taken together, these novels allow us to observe Vonnegut's growth and changes as a writer and philosopher. This thesis will focus on *Deadeye Dick* first, although the novel is written after *Breakfast of Champions*, because its setting is earliest. *Bluebeard* will be reviewed last. Because of the nature of Vonnegut's writing – specifically, his oft-recurring themes, characters, and settings – many of the articles annotated will include other novels than these three. Choosing articles relevant to these novels is challenging due to the interweaving of characters and settings, as well as the sheer volume of criticism. For instance, a search in *Literature Online* for criticism on *Breakfast of Champions* results in over a hundred separate entries. Thus, in general and when possible, I have avoided using individual chapters from critical books on Vonnegut written by single authors, such as Leonard Mustazza's *Forever Pursuing Genesis*. Articles included in edited books and critical journals have been my primary choice because of their ability to stand alone. Some pieces dealt more heavily with other Vonnegut novels and were also excluded.

The model for this annotated bibliography is R. Neil Scott's bibliography on Flannery O'Connor. Scott's bibliography is especially valuable because its annotations are so detailed. While some bibliographies provide annotations that consist of a mere sentence or two, Scott's annotations usually consist of at least a substantial paragraph and often are more than a page in length.

Following the annotations herein, I discuss information revealed in the annotating process, such as trends in Vonnegut criticism, conflicts and consensus in Vonnegut criticism, difficulties encountered during the process, and the kinds of work that remain to be done not only in annotating the works I have selected but also in annotating other

criticism on this important writer of the twentieth century. I hope and expect that my thesis will be of real use to other readers and scholars interested in Vonnegut, and I hope that the thesis will not only be publishable by itself but will also form the basis for a much more extensive project covering many more of Vonnegut's writings.

Breakfast of Champions

Benyei, Tamas. "Leakings: Reappropriating Science Fiction—The Case of Kurt Vonnegut." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 6.1 (Spring 2000): 29-54. *JSTOR*.

Benyei's article centers on a brief excerpt from "the blurb of the Hungarian edition of *Slapstick*" which describes Vonnegut as an author "well known for his science fiction novels" who, while "displaying a scientific imagination in his 'proper' novels as well ... has come out with yet another of his absurd-ironical-bitter apocalyptic fantasies" (31). This sentence (according to Benyei) implies a debate among critics of science fiction: whether science fiction can be part of the canon of "high literature" or whether there is an internal "high" canon within the genre itself. Benyei sees *The Sirens of Titan*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* as "metacritical commentaries on [the] critical interfaces [between science fiction and high literature] and their own location within these critically produced 'common places'" (32). In the introduction, Benyei points to Dwayne Hoover's misreading of one of Kilgore Trout's stories in *Breakfast of Champions*. According to Benyei, Trout, in the writing of this story, and in his response to Hoover's overreaction, "incarnates two models" of potential science fiction authors: the "nondescript pulp science fiction writer" and the "prophet writer" (29, 30). Benyei asserts that "the trope of the prophet is what often stands behind the possibility of co-opting science fiction into high literature in critical discourse" (30). Because Vonnegut is often referred to as a prophet writer, "the name of Kurt Vonnegut will inevitably appear in any discussion of the problematic relationship between science fiction and 'high literature'" (31). Indeed, the question of whether Vonnegut himself is a prophet writer

deserving of critical attention or whether he is merely a “pulp science fiction writer” who has achieved success within his genre is the driving force behind Benyei’s piece.

Ultimately arguing for Vonnegut’s status as a prophet, the article outlines “four of the interfaces between serious literature and science fiction produced by critical discourse.”

Benyei begins his review of Vonnegut’s work by discussing different “interfaces,” the first of which “promotes science fiction as the most adequate expression of contemporary experience” (33). This so-called “interface,” or critical assumption, is attributed to Leslie Fiedler. It implies that science fiction is “a kind of ‘new realism’” (33). The second critical assumption, attributed to Robert Scholes, “declares that ‘the most appropriate kind of fiction that can be written in the present or the immediate future is fiction that takes place in future time.’” Such fiction “abandon[s] the illusion of referentiality in the moment of its inception” (33, 34). The third critical assumption Benyei describes acknowledges the initial question of high canon validity in science fiction. This third assumption proposes that commentary on “science fiction has been able to create ... an internal elite,” yet Benyei acknowledges that this elite may be a result of applying “vaguely defined standards ... of high literature” to science fiction. Finally, the last critical assumption discussed by Benyei supposes that novelists who write so-called high literature would “appropriate elements of science fiction” in a parodic manner, thereby juxtaposing alien and familiar tropes or subversively examining society (36). Benyei asserts that “the quandaries raised by this last critical interface provide the most rewarding context for a discussion of the role of science fiction in Kurt Vonnegut’s work.” Benyei believes that “Vonnegut is an uneasy but inevitable inhabitant of all the

critical models that try to account for the presence of science fiction in postmodernism” (37).

After introducing these four distinct critical assumptions, Benyei uses them to discuss three of Vonnegut’s novels. He treats these novels as “metapoetical allegories” that explore their own “ambiguous relationship with science fiction” (37). Benyei first addresses *The Sirens of Titan*, acknowledging that the world of the novel is “undeniably a science fiction world, complete with creatures from outer space, space travel, and space war” (38). Benyei finds this novel admissible into the canon of high literature “by virtue of the serious questions it addresses” (38). In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the “emphatically clichéd nature” of the plot requires (he thinks) the “reappropriation [of the novel] for high culture” to “take place on the level of plot and on that of the text simultaneously” (40). This approach also “leaves open the possibility of reinscribing the science fiction elements into the order of high literature as psychological reality, as the delusion or escape fantasy of a character who is unable to live with the reality overdose of the Dresden bombing” (40). Benyei also acknowledges that “the science fiction elements are pulp science fiction clichés working subliminally in Billy’s fantasy life” so that the “novel’s attitude to science fiction is one of parody” (40-41). Finally, Benyei argues that the novel shows Vonnegut’s use of “science fiction as a metaphor of his own idiosyncratic mode of writing” (41).

Benyei devotes a large section of his article to an “attempt at critical recuperation by the removal or defusing of science fiction” elements in Vonnegut’s books, making particular use of *Breakfast of Champions*. He finds that “the novel’s world is entirely plausible,” with “all deviations from the codes of realism ... occurring on the level of

narrative discourse and organization” (44). The only science fiction writing present in this novel “is present exclusively as *science fiction literature*, as the oeuvre of Kilgore Trout. There are no extraterrestrials or time travels, only science fiction novels that exist at a certain angle to the primary fictional world” (44). According to Benyei, Trout’s novels “leak” through to Dwayne Hoover’s reality, creating the defamiliarization necessary for science fiction (45). Analyzing the narration, Benyei concludes that “the idiosyncrasies of the narrative voice are accounted for by the choice of perspective: the narrator is obviously talking to ‘extraterrestrials’” who require definitions and descriptions of commonplace things such as walking, flamingos, or lambs (47). Benyei concludes by stating that in “*Breakfast of Champions*, as in some other Vonnegut texts, science fiction does function as a metacritical metaphor that allegorically speaks about the critical quandaries around science fiction ... and figuratively names the ‘postmodern’ difference of Vonnegut’s fiction” (52).

Hughes, Joseph J. “Echoes of Gilgamesh in Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*.”

Publications of the Missouri Philological Association 16 (1991): 93-37. Print.

Hughes draws parallels between the epic of Gilgamesh and Trout’s journey in *Breakfast of Champions*. Trout’s travel to Midland City is a type of *katabasis*, or journey to the underworld, which transports him not only physically but spiritually. Trout is not a clear Gilgamesh figure, however: “Vonnegut skews the interplay between his two alter egos At first, the anti-social Trout plays Enkidu to Dwayne’s Gilgamesh” (95). Later, Trout will be tested by defending a helpless woman against the violently ill Dwayne, a “test of his willingness to work for betterment of the human condition” (95). He then

“undergoes the *katabasis* proper in the hospital basement,” where he has a “symbolic encounter with death” (95). Trout, like Gilgamesh, “is not initially receptive to the insights being passed on by his ersatz god,” but he, also like Gilgamesh, “overcomes his sadness to bestow a ... boon upon his society” (96). Vonnegut’s liberation of Trout reflects not a wish “to dispense entirely with the Kilgore Trout aspect of his personality,” but rather a purging “of his deep-seated pessimism, signifying his spiritual rebirth and readiness to assume a more constructive role with his writing” (96). This journey has also been Vonnegut’s; Trout is “fully analogous to Vonnegut in every stage of his spiritual development” (96).

Kaufman, Will. “Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*: A Comedian’s Primer.” *Thalia* 13.1-2 (1993): 22-33. Print.

Kaufman discusses the sources of Vonnegut’s comedy, including his family, the Great Depression, and World War Two. He also explicates the objectives of the book, which are “to exorcise the ‘junk’ that seemed to define the past, and which threatened to define the present and the future,” as well as to “provide necessary, though temporary, comfort and relief” to the pain of life (24, 22). While providing this relief, Vonnegut also assumes the role of “canary in the coal mine,” calling attention to the failures and dangers resulting from social apathy (22). Like the canary, the novel “permits comedy to act as a disarming magical charm, distracting the reader from alarm while simultaneously sounding it with impressive urgency” (24). The opposition of these roles creates an “intensity of Vonnegut’s comedy [that] is directly proportional to the bleakness and agony of his material” (22).

Kaufman highlights the autobiographical elements of *Breakfast of Champions* and thus illustrates how Vonnegut's family background—"inclusive of sadness while bordering on the tragic" (22)—created a writer who dealt with his gloom through comedy. This gloom and unease, partly the result of being "an American with a German name at the end of World War Two," are compared to Mark Twain's "similar unease" as a former Confederate soldier (23). Radio comedy during the Great Depression helped Vonnegut conclude that Americans are "unified in common suffering," and as a child Vonnegut absorbed the "dose[s] of humor" that this radio comedy provided. As a writer, Vonnegut uses humor as a kind of medicine to alleviate the pain of reality (23).

Vonnegut mourns "the deplorable condition of a nation doomed to fight and bully" by comparing the nation to a tailless dog, who, unable to demonstrate his friendliness through tail wagging—an inability Vonnegut compares to America's renunciation of the tradition of flag-dipping—is also doomed to fight and bully (25). The multiple deaths described throughout the novel are countered by Vonnegut's "playful nonsense, the ironic fiction of the childish narrative voice," which "mak[es] condemnation seem like acquiescence, praise, or in the least, mere reportage" (27). This playful nonsense "further disguises as comic fantasy the dire psychological implications for a society at the mercy of an arbitrary standard, or average" (27).

Kaufman frequently compares Vonnegut to Swift, Twain, Bierce, and comedian Lenny Bruce. Kaufman argues, however, that Vonnegut differs from these predecessors because he demonstrates a "seeming willingness, after exposing the past, to leave it where it lies" (24). Trout and his stories demonstrate Vonnegut's desire that the "communicative force of the [narratives'] language" remain "strong and unhindered by

the imposition of irrelevant standards” (28). Furthermore, Trout’s bitterness represents Vonnegut’s “awareness that he must comedically disguise his sense of urgency” (28). This urgency is cloaked by unnecessary explanations that become increasingly frequent as the novel progresses, especially as Rabo Karabekian is introduced. Vonnegut treats Karabekian with a “precarious balance of ... ironic voice,” appearing to “praise Karabekian for his eloquence,” although “it is more likely that he is mocking the artist’s presumptuousness” (29). Kaufman reads Vonnegut’s claim that Karabekian’s speech is the “spiritual climax of the book” as sarcastic and tongue-in-cheek (29). Karabekian is “complacent” because he thinks he has “found the meaning of life through his single painting,” while Trout is a “walking, talking refutation” of this complacency, since he is “*aware* of his impotence as an artist, and he is bitter” (30, 31). Vonnegut thus implies that awareness “is pointless unless one is also aware of a way to improve one’s conditions” (31). Thus, “the best [one] can do with his awareness is to adapt” (31).

Revealing himself to Trout at the end of the novel, the character of Vonnegut as “omnipotent Creator” is “oily, devious, flattering, and [as] two-faced as Mephistopheles or Tartuffe – and cruel as well” (32). This character of Vonnegut is a rebuke to “all those who allow their attention to be diverted from effective action by comedic or artistic seduction” (32). Vonnegut’s novel thus implies the difference between using art and escaping into art: “escapism into art *may* assist adaptation, but it may also amount to self-deception with dangerous consequences” (32). Ultimately, Vonnegut is “warning society of many dangers, including that of taking himself too seriously” (32).

Mendelson, Maurice. "Reading Kurt Vonnegut." Trans. Elizabeth Waters. *Soviet Literature* 8 (1975): 156-159. Print.

A Soviet critic reviews the newly released novel *Breakfast of Champions* and terms it a "satirical encyclopedia" (157). Mendelson praises the "old traditions of social criticism" in the novel and questions descriptions of Vonnegut as an "absurdist" or "black humorist" (157). The book expresses skepticism about Trout's belief that men are machines while allowing Trout, the "hero," to wholly support this view (158). This view is ultimately shown to be inherently evil when Hoover takes it to heart and "turns into a maniac who begins inflicting injuries on everybody around him" (159). Rather than being an "absurdist" or "black humorist," Vonnegut shows "genuine humanism," a "love for humanity," and a "passionate indignation against everything that disfigures human life" (159).

Merrill, Robert. "Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*: The Conversion of Heliogabalus." *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 18:3 (1977): 99-109. *Academic Search Premier*.

Breakfast of Champions is compared to *Slaughterhouse-Five* since both novels feature a fictionalized Vonnegut as a main character. The differences between the novels are highlighted by the differences between the two Vonneguts: one who is an "engaging old fart" who is exorcising his demons regarding the firebombing of Dresden, and one who is "less heroic" and seems to be actively suffering (100, 101). Merrill finds Vonnegut's claim of redemption via Karabekian's speech to be genuine. Similarly, Trout

finds renewal of faith through the novel: Trout's overt pessimism ("We're all Heliogabalus!") is replaced by a return to the "belief that man's capacity to believe anything can be his salvation as well as his cross" (106). Vonnegut and Trout's simultaneous redemption occurs because of their "'faith' in the power of ideas" (104). Merrill also focuses on elements of *Cat's Cradle* in his analysis: Vonnegut and Trout find their pessimism and fears overcome by encountering what Bokonon, the prophet in *Cat's Cradle*, calls a *wrang-wrang*, or "a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line ... to an absurdity" (105). Wayne Hoover, compared to Billy Pilgrim and acting as this *wrang-wrang*, "point[s] up the disastrous consequences of adopting a deterministic view of man" (106). In light of this revelation, Trout "returns to his former talk of alerting mankind to inhumane practices," and Vonnegut tells us to "resist the seductions of fatalism" (106, 108).

Messent, Peter B. "*Breakfast of Champions*: The Direction of Kurt Vonnegut's Fiction."

Journal of American Studies 8.1 (April 1974): 101-14. *JSTOR*.

Messent reviews *Breakfast of Champions* in light of Vonnegut's statement at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "The next [book] I write is going to be fun," but he finds it to be more painful than fun (103). Vonnegut may be "suffering from a loss of inventiveness as phrases appear which are direct repetitions from his previous work" (103). Rather than being a scheme to create a "mod Yoknapatawpha County," this repetition shows Vonnegut's "carelessness" and "signs of tiredness" (104). Vonnegut continues his indictment of American decay, started in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Images of water and water pollution are explored as representative of the corruption of

the American dream. Vonnegut's personal unhappiness and demons are reflected in the state of his characters, and both his and his characters' salvation is found in Rabo Karabekian, who provides a "cure for the human condition" (108). However, Karabekian's and Vonnegut's "celebration of 'awareness' seems just one more of Vonnegut's clichés ... which solve nothing" (109). Vonnegut is at least "able to end the novel on a note of affirmation rather than despair" (110). The form of the novel is "telegraphic ... with short, self-sufficient paragraphs," which serve successfully to cater to an audience taken with television (111). Vonnegut's attempt, however, to create a story in which there are no major or minor characters fails as he is "unable to depart from ... the main centre of interest in the novel, the development of ... Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover" (113). The novel is ultimately a "fictional cul-de-sac" wherein Vonnegut's "stylistic approach basically fails and comes close at times to mere childishness" (113-114).

Morse, Donald E. "The 'Black Frost' Reception of Kurt Vonnegut's Fantastic Novel *Breakfast of Champions*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 11.2 [42] (2000): 143-53. Print.

Morse analyzes the chilly reception by literary critics of *Breakfast of Champions*. He finds it to be, despite numerous negative reviews, "one of [Vonnegut's] most complex, most accomplished [novels] of fantastic fictions in its post-modern comic self-reflexivity" (151). It is "a novel some critics love to hate," and many critics (mistakenly, according to Morse) assume the narrator is in fact Vonnegut, rather than a parody of the omniscient narrator (143). The unease shown by critics is compared to a situation with

“Vonnegut’s literary progenitor ... Mark Twain” (144). Twain delivered a speech that was “entirely satiric and meant to be wildly comic” in which he parodied many literary figures of the time, receiving a “prolonged silence and ... ‘a sort of black frost’” in return for his fun (144). “Twain and Vonnegut both gore some sacred cows and pay for it with poor reviews,” Morse states, asserting that Vonnegut’s offenses lie in the fact that his novel laughs “at several post-modern fictional devices” (144).

One of the fictional devices Vonnegut turns on its head includes “the self-reflexive author who trespasses the boundaries of his own work” (144). The inability of Vonnegut the narrator—the self-aware author and character—to control his characters and settings is important to recognize as a device so that the narrator Vonnegut—a “bungling and inept author”—is not confused with the author Vonnegut. The narrator uses simple, seemingly naïve language to describe situations and surroundings in ways that “startle the reader” by “defamiliariz[ing] what we have come to accept as ordinary everyday truth,” pointing out contradictions that often go unnoticed, such as the irony of naming a moving truck company for “‘buildings which haven’t moved an eighth of an inch since Christ was born,” or the asininity of bombing a country for the purpose of saving the people from communism (146). The innocence of the naïve narrator reflects a desire to reclaim the innocence of America: “once a green and pleasant land, America is now in great danger of being destroyed by greed, lust, and stupidity” (150). America cannot regain that innocence, no more than Kilgore Trout can regain his youth. The narrator’s inability to restore Trout’s youth lies in the narrator being a “single-book author”; Vonnegut does make Trout young again in a later novel (*Jailbird*), but Trout spends this life in jail. The characters and narrator are “stranded in a stagnant, indifferent

American present with no promise of a viable future,” a picture “misinterpret[ed]” as “‘signs of tiredness’ in the author rather than as a satirical, critical portrait” (150). Morse insists that the “exuberant comic dislocation” of the novel allows Vonnegut a respite from “such imponderable questions as why evil appears ubiquitous and how there can be such unmotivated human suffering in the world,” giving both Vonnegut and the reader a “relief,” some “exhilaration that comes with ‘crossing the spine’ of the roof” (150, 151). When some critics take this exuberance at face value, they miss Vonnegut’s “satiric intent,” his “considerable artistic success,” and the “post-modern comic self-reflexivity” of this carefully crafted and experimental novel (151).

Nicol, Charles. “The Ideas of an Anti-Intellectual” [A Review of *Breakfast of Champions* and *The Vonnegut Statement*]. *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut*. Ed. Leonard Mustazza. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994. 137-39. Print.

Vonnegut uses *Breakfast of Champions* to refute his own earlier assertion that men are machines. The novel reveals that men contain “sacred ... unwavering band[s] of light” (138). Vonnegut’s appeal to the middle class is similar to that of Mark Twain. Both authors behave badly to attract attention while hoping to highlight the good in humanity. Analysts of Vonnegut in *The Vonnegut Statement*, a 1973 compilation of essays on Vonnegut’s life and works, are enthusiastically receptive. They accept his claims that his books are “a kind of miracle of insistent language pouring out of its willing container” (138).

Sieber, Sharon Lynn. "Postmodern Infundibula and Other Non-linear Time Structures in *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Sirens of Titan*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 17.1 (Spring 2011): 127-54. JSTOR.

Vonnegut, like Borges, explores in his novels the concept of Carl Jung's "interconnectedness of simultaneity and meaning through the life events which the characters in his books experience" (127). The characters in these three novels experience time in a non-linear fashion, providing unique perspectives on life experiences. The infundibula (funnel-shaped anomalies in space that affect space and time) of *Sirens of Titan*, as well as other plot elements that create these non-linear experiences, constitute "a metaphor for human vision as it unfolds in linear space-time" and provide a context for considering circumstances alien to those in the natural world (127). For Billy Pilgrim, this kind of experience creates a "simultaneous awareness of all that will happen within the war [in contrast] with his mundane life as an optometrist" (128). For the reader (rather than the characters) of *Breakfast of Champions*, there is an exploration of "everyday human reality as an alien perspective of nihilistic human and literary values in the context of contemporary American culture" (128). These shifts in perspective are central to Vonnegut's work; he "uses time as a postmodern value-structure to communicate the importance of continued reflection upon the nature and conflict of human value systems" (128). In this article, the effect of these infundibula upon the characters is studied at length, as is the characters' "intra- and extra-textuality" (135).

Vonnegut's writing is described as somewhere between "transreal," a style that "focuses on the everyday mundane aspects of life and reality, and narrates the most quotidian events as though they were fantastic or surreal," and magical realism, which

“presents fantastic events as ... ordinary and commonplace” (130). “Ethical distribution of power” is also explored as a central theme. Finally, the “simultaneous awareness/insertion of ... the creator of the novel ... lays bare the simultaneous structures upon which the narratives rest, demanding a new understanding, indeed a new foundation, for the study of time and simultaneity” (140).

Simpson, Josh. “‘This Promising of Great Secrets’: Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* Or ‘Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World’: Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy.” *Critique* 45.3 (Spring 2004): 261-72. *Literature Online*.

Simpson analyzes Vonnegut’s “Troutean Trilogy” of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*, dividing the article into three focused sections. Vonnegut is “a writer setting out to discover the mysteries of the human condition ... [and] forc[ing] his readers to consider what it means to be human in a chaotic ... universe” (262). Considering the different labels placed on Vonnegut—such as creator of science fiction, social satire, and/or Black Humor—Simpson concludes that “Vonnegut is a writer whose works, when read closely, ultimately warn against the dangerous ideas that exist within science fiction” (262).

In the section on *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, subtitled “Humanity, Compassion, and the Birth of Kilgore Trout,” Simpson argues that Vonnegut writes both parables and character-driven stories (262, 263). In this first novel, Trout is “like the prophets of the Old Testament, offer[ing] truth, wisdom, comfort, and, perhaps above all,

warnings of what is to come” (264). Trout is also closely linked with pornography. “Both science fiction and pornography ... present the reader with blissful images of a world that cannot be reached or achieved in reality” (264). Eliot Rosewater is “psychologically unhinged by Trout’s ideas” and becomes obsessed with “promises for a brave, new love-centric utopian society” (264, 265). Rosewater’s descent into madness is not Trout’s fault, but the ideas in Trout’s stories are ultimately the cause of Rosewater’s undoing. Trout “would rather hide behind his desk and write about what *could be* rather than what *is*,” while Rosewater attempts to create the ideal world and is destroyed by his failure.

In the article’s second section, “Billy Pilgrim, Science Fiction, and the Reinvention of the Universe,” Simpson argues that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not just Vonnegut’s Dresden novel but is “also the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man so tormented and haunted by the burden of the past that he finds it necessary to ‘reinvent’ his own reality” (266). Just as Rosewater found the method for his madness in Trout’s stories, so will Billy find a means of creating a new reality. Overall, the novel “shows two things simultaneously and with equally chilling clarity: what war and bad ideas can do to humanity” (267).

The article’s third section, “Free Will, Bad Chemicals, and the Creation of Conscience,” focuses on *Breakfast of Champions*. Since this novel and *Slaughterhouse-Five* were, according to Vonnegut, originally intended to be part of the same book, “to discuss *Slaughterhouse-Five* at length without considering *Breakfast of Champions* is impossible” (268). Trout is not simply a character in this novel; he is a creative force himself, and “Vonnegut forces Kilgore Trout to examine his work’s influence on humanity” (267). Until now, Trout has seen himself as unimportant and possessing an

“invisibleness” that “allows him to think that who he is and what he does will not and cannot have an influence on humanity” (269). The course of events in *Breakfast of Champions* will lead Trout, however unwillingly, to accept that “he is *not* invisible and that his ideas *do* matter” (269). The key difference between this novel and the first two is the effect that Trout’s stories have on the characters: “the damage [that Rosewater and Pilgrim] receive is self-satisfying.... Dwayne Hoover, on the other hand, is transformed into a ravenous monster, hell-bent on destruction and thirsty for blood” (269). This negative effect is what compels Trout to “examine his role as a science fiction writer” and eventually realize “that as a writer he has a responsibility to the human community” (269).

Deadeye Dick

DeMott, Benjamin. "A Riot of Randomness: A Review of *Deadeye Dick*." *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut*. Ed. Leonard Mustazza. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994. 245-49. Print.

In this scathing contemporary review of *Deadeye Dick*, Benjamin DeMott finds the novel "a cut above *Jailbird* ... and perhaps a cut below this author's best performances, such as *Slaughterhouse-Five*" (246). DeMott seems to find Vonnegut's work childish and shallow, citing as "this writer's norms" that typically "the hero is sweet and hapless and bears a silly-sounding name" and "that strange folk abound" (246). DeMott identifies in Vonnegut's work a characteristic lack of "respect for The Authorities" and thinks the book's "initial targets" are "opinionated parents ... and violence-prone police" (246). Criticizing a "sense of inevitability" that he defines as "a function of the loss of muscle tone," DeMott seems mystified by Vonnegut's popularity amongst young people, something he attributes to "Vonnegut's relaxed, contagious, oddly untendentious presentation of doubt that any of us really can locate the causes of which we're the results" (248). Indeed, in his opinion, "the voice of Vonnegut fans ... tends to be that of people whose life stories to this moment strike the tellers *themselves* as having no more gravity or resonance than a choice of a complimentary beverage" (248).

DeMott acknowledges, however begrudgingly, that although Vonnegut "often dwindles into a mere fabricator of one-liners ... on some days this very odd writer is good medicine" (248). He tempers this tentative compliment by asserting that "Vonnegut's inexplicables are admirably plain, homely, abundant, up front; there's no

epistemological complication, few philosophical conundrums, just the improbable mess of any probable human week,” but DeMott also allows that Vonnegut’s “observing eyes are sad, humorous, *kind*” (248).

DeMott ends with ambiguity: “I predict that many Vonnegutians will grow up and away from their favorite author. I also predict that, a decade or two after they do, many will grow back. The old rule applies: As soon as you put on weight on this earth, you discover it makes a kind of sense to lose it” (249).

Giddens, Gary. “Vaporizing Midland City: A Review of *Deadeye Dick*.” *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut*. Ed. Leonard Mustazza. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994. 251-54. Print.

In an ambivalent review of *Deadeye Dick*, Giddens acknowledges the parallels between Rudy Waltz and Vonnegut (“a father who built the family home and lost the family fortune”), but he finds it “hard to understand what motivates Vonnegut’s undying nostalgia for ‘the American Middle West of [Vonnegut’s] youth’” (251). Giddens finds Vonnegut “frequently capricious” and argues that the novel is “stilted” and that “Vonnegut’s voice ... has soured ... as though he’s allowed his anger to bully his wit at the expense of his imagination” (253, 252). Ultimately, Giddens concludes (vaguely) that “the rest is ‘Foodly yah, foodly yah. Zang reepa dop. Faaaaaaaaaaaa!’” (253).

Hearron, Tom. "Themes of Guilt in Vonnegut's Cataclysmic Novels." *The Nightmare Considered: Critical Essays on Nuclear War Literature*. Ed. Nancy Anisfield. Bowling Green, OH. 1986-92. Print.

In four of Vonnegut's novels—*Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Deadeye Dick*, and *Galapagos*—guilt in relation to disaster is a central theme. Each of the novels depicts "some sort of tremendous disaster," but "the central issue is not so much the horrible event itself, but ... the degree to which one can assign blame to the humans who are the agents for its coming about" (186). Hearron quotes Saint Paul in Romans 7:18-20 for a baseline explanation of guilt, which boils down to knowing oneself to contain evil and being unable to counteract that evil. Much of the guilt in Vonnegut's work can be attributed to Vonnegut's own survivor's guilt resulting from his surviving the Dresden firebombing. Indeed, Vonnegut wrote in *Palm Sunday* that he was the only person to benefit from the firebombing. His own guilt, however, does not necessarily extend to all of humanity, since, in Hearron's interpretation of Vonnegut, "humans are capable of doing great harm to others, [but] they are ultimately too much victims themselves to be held accountable for the disasters which they inflict on others" (187). This inability to lay blame first appears in *Cat's Cradle*.

In *Cat's Cradle*, scientist Felix Hoenikker creates a substance called ice-nine, which "is a form of water whose freezing point is over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit" and "has the property of freezing any water with which it comes in contact, even if that water is contained within living matter" (187). This substance, which eventually brings about the end of life on earth, is left in the hands of Dr. Hoenikker's children. This development is "a clear allegory of the folly of placing powerful forces in the hands of

the military,” or “a clear metaphor for the scientists who put their work into the hands of government officials and generals” (187, 188). The scientists’ motives were innocent, but the eventual implications for humanity are dire. This raises the question, then, “to what extent can the innocence of an individual be compromised by the person’s role in a system which does loathsome deeds?” (188). Hearn suggests that guilt “requires both knowledge of the consequences of the act and the ability to choose” (189).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the guilt of the alien Tralfamadorians is nonexistent. Although one of their own race will ultimately be the cause of the end of the universe, Tralfamadorians’ ability to see all moments of time simultaneously allows them to simply accept the end of the universe as fact without feeling any guilt or need to blame. This escape from guilt—and punishment via guilt—highlights the actual punishment that does occur. One man, “guilty of stealing a teapot from the ruins of Dresden,” is shot by firing squad, symbolically shouldering the entirety of guilt for the firebombing of the city (190). The paradox of this punishment, however, is that if such a small crime is deserving of death, “what punishment should be given to those responsible for burning Dresden?” (190).

Deadeye Dick is also a tale of a city’s destruction, “for which no one is punished,” set against “a smaller event which is punished severely” (190). The smaller event is Rudy Waltz’s accidental murder of a pregnant woman. Rudy has no intention of harming anyone; he “decides to celebrate what he sees as initiation into manhood by firing one ritual shot at random” (190). Rudy and his family are ultimately ruined by the accident: Rudy is forever known as “Deadeye Dick,” and his family is bankrupted by the widower’s lawsuit. However, when all of Midland City is destroyed by a neutron bomb

accident, “no one is held to blame” (191). Although it is implied that the event might not have been an accident at all, there is nowhere to place blame, and no one to shoulder the guilt for an entire city’s destruction.

Galapagos, one of Vonnegut’s final novels, blames the overly-developed human brain for the near-destruction of the human race. “Vonnegut, the master of bitter irony, sees as the essential paradox of our time that people are equipped with such large brains that they have become extremely stupid when it comes to foreseeing the consequences of their action” (191). Whereas earlier works lay the blame at the feet of society in general, or blame those in power over society, *Galapagos* insists that mankind as a whole is doomed because humans possess such large brains capable of dreaming up such terrible things. It is inevitable that humanity will destroy itself. Harron concludes that “Kurt Vonnegut’s work expresses the same view of humanity: we are too hilariously stupid to survive” (192).

Morse, Donald E. “Kurt Vonnegut’s *Jailbird* and *Deadeye Dick*: Two Studies of Defeat.” *Hungarian Studies in English* 22 (1991): 109-19. *JSTOR*.

Many of Vonnegut’s novels, particularly *Jailbird* and *Deadeye Dick*, include heroes who experience death or defeat. Critics often point to Vonnegut’s own losses or to American social issues of the twentieth century to explain these dark motifs. Morse, in contrast, argues that Vonnegut’s personal losses are “transmut[ed] ... into a[n] ... examination of the fundamental American experience of loss” (110). Morse discusses the defeats of *Jailbird*’s heroes Walter Starbuck and Mary Kathleen O’Looney and *Deadeye Dick*’s Rudy Waltz in terms of psychology, sociology, economics, politics, and personal

failure. He compares Rudy Waltz to Bartleby in Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, since both characters elect not to participate in life. Some critics might see Rudy as an artist who overcomes his situation through creativity, but even Rudy's art confines him to "repeating lines written and directed by someone else" (112).

The defeatism the novel emphasizes extends from individual characters to "leaders of nations, nations themselves, and the planet Earth itself" (113). These defeats on a grander scale result from people choosing wishful thinking over responsible behavior. A local family farm owned by John Fortune in *Deadeye Dick* represents changes in America from the 1930's through 1980's. President Nixon and the Watergate scandal are satirized in *Jailbird*, specifically Nixon's distance from American youth. Political themes are frequently highlighted in *Cat's Cradle*, an early fatalistic novel by Vonnegut.

The novels, with their permeating defeatist themes, "underplay pain and suffering" (114) and are "slightly comic" and "self-deprecating" (115), yet there exists an essentially middle-class, middle-American value system that "undergirds all [Vonnegut's] satire and against which his characters stand defeated" (115). Ultimately, the people depicted in Vonnegut's America are "bereft of a belief in gods, progress, revolution, political wisdom, [or] justice" (116).

Mustazza, Leonard. "Nobody Dies in Shangri-La: Chance, Will, and the Loss of Innocence in *Deadeye Dick*." *Forever Pursuing Genesis*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated UPs, 1990. 157-65. Print.

Mustazza wrestles with Berryman's argument that Vonnegut's characters are "tormented by a sense of paradise lost" and Lundquist's statement that "since man is not at the center of creation, he is not responsible for evil" (157). While agreeing that the trope of a "paradise lost" is a part of Vonnegut's body of work, Mustazza notes that this lost innocence "is almost never ... in memories of the characters' own childhoods" and is found instead in "mythically symbolic ways of life or states of mind" (157). Furthermore, Mustazza finds Lundquist's criticism of Vonnegut lacking since Vonnegut "occasionally does blame human beings for evil in the world" (158), specifically in war and irresponsible technological advancement. "And yet, for all of this critical disagreement, there is a place where Berryman and Lundquist and I can agree on Vonnegut's themes. That place is *Deadeye Dick*" (158).

Mustazza argues that the damaged narrator of *Deadeye Dick*, Rudy Waltz, embodies a longing for innocence and perfection that were lost upon entering adulthood. While similar to *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s Billy Pilgrim in his quest for escape/oblivion/absolution from the evils of the world and as "a man more acted upon than acting," Rudy is also "unlike most of the others" and "he is all too aware of how small a role volition plays in human affairs" (158). According to Mustazza, in the beginning of the novel, Vonnegut provides an interpretation of the major symbols in the novel, but Mustazza contends that "if Vonnegut's 'bad actions' are like Rudy's, then he is suggesting that they were unintentional; the statement itself also suggests the assumption of responsibility for evil" (160-161). Driving Mustazza's commentary is an emphasis on this dichotomy of unintended evil that causes a fall from innocence and a responsibility for evil effects.

Continuing in this vein, Mustazzo presents Celia Hoover, nee Heldreth, of *Breakfast of Champions*, since she is “graced physically and cursed by fortune in every other way” (159). Her eventual death may be the result of her own choice to drink Drano, but the events that led her to this suicidal state are (according to Mustazzo) the fault of fortune’s whimsy. Although Celia was once a young, beautiful woman, her downfall is Vonnegut’s way of reminding us to “bear in mind the failure of the hopeful promise for the postwar world” (160). For Rudy and Celia both (Mustazzo believes), “the passage out of childhood comes with a forced fall from innocence, a fall that, unlike Adam and Eve’s, need not involve volition Rudy becomes, like the mythic pair, a slave to corrosive time and outrageous fortune” (161).

Mustazzo offers some comparisons between Rudy and *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s Billy Pilgrim, noting that “Rudy is similar to Billy Pilgrim insofar as both are tormented souls for whom one can feel pity but not much affinity.” Mustazzo also argues that like “Billy, too, Rudy must search for a place where he can escape from time and fate, a contrived place where he can be at peace with himself and the world” (161). Rudy’s childishness is revealed: the idea that “...cruel social definitions or base but controllable human passion or simple irresponsibility can have caused [suffering, death, racism, etc.] does not enter Rudy’s mind because, like Billy Pilgrim, he does not want to act but rather to acquiesce in the logic of things” (164). However, differences (Mustazzo believes) exist between the two. Rudy tries to recapture innocence through art, whereas Billy escapes through mental illness. Ultimately, “Rudy’s *Katmandu* is, in effect, the artistic equivalent of Billy’s Tralfamadore” and is similar to “Rudy’s personal attempt to escape from the nightmarish world he must occupy while his peephole remains open. It represents his

yearning after stability, inner peace, and the escape from time” (162). Regarding the failure of the play the novel depicts, Mustazzo notes that “...the play was not meant for public performance but psychological consolation” (162). In Rudy’s quest for innocence, he finds that he must take responsibility after all, and when he refuses his Haitian friend’s offer to raise a spirit for him, Rudy is, in his own way, assuming responsibility for whatever suffering he might cause the spirit that De Mille raised up or the world that the spirit might be let loose in. In other words, he is thinking now in future terms and considering the implications of his actions, something he failed to do before Eloise Metzger was killed by his stray bullet, and something he refused to do afterwards. (165)

In conclusion, Mustazzo finds *Deadeye Dick* “too familiar” because it so much resembles *Galapagos* and *Bluebeard*, “both of which also give us some familiar characters and themes but much, too, that is new and brilliantly conveyed” (165).

Persell, Michelle. “It’s all Play-Acting: Authorship and Identity in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut.” *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations*. Ed. Marc Leeds and Peter J. Reed. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 39-50. Print.

Persell examines Vonnegut’s authorial and narrative styles in relation to those of his author-characters, beginning with *Player Piano* and ending with *Mother Night*. To begin such a discussion, Persell takes time to distinguish Vonnegut-as-narrator from Vonnegut-as-author and Vonnegut-as-intrusive-author, noting that rather than “vicariously acting out the anxieties and consequent triumph of his narrative method” on his author-characters, Vonnegut is instead “a master of encrypting failed artistry into his

novels” (39). Continuing the work of other critics who have identified and discussed Vonnegut’s goal of “question[ing] the cultural shibboleths that permeate such standard genres as science fiction, combat stories, and historically set pieces,” Persell is also careful to notice Vonnegut’s warnings against “inherited aesthetics” and romanticized mental illness (40).

Regarding *Mother Night*, Persell finds the main character’s requirement for a “life script” to be “contemptible and dangerous” and a “search [for] a context in which to be a diabolical madman. That is to say, even though [Campbell] is not the embodiment of unadulterated malice ... he would seek to assume that guise anyway” (40, 40-41). This quest for a “life script,” Persell asserts, is continued in *Deadeye Dick* as “the still guilt-ridden Rudy is attracted to the formulaic genre of drama” (44). Rudy’s existence in Midland City as Deadeye Dick is dismantled when his play, *Katmandu*, is taken out of Midland City. Rudy “uses one alter ego, Fortune, to confront another, Deadeye Dick, resulting in the neutralization of both” (45). Rudy’s physical distance from home leads to his “epiphany [which] is in *not* recognizing himself in Fortune because he has become so ‘distanced’ from Deadeye Dick. The price, however, for breaking free of his character is the inability to mount a successful production” (45).

Persell acknowledges Rudy’s penchant for dramatizing difficult interactions as a coping mechanism and suggests that Rudy’s infantilization, which occurs away from Midland City, is also “a liberating moment” for Rudy (45). Unfortunately, Rudy must go home, must confront his other identities, must continue adapting, “caught between regulating life into stories to create a space that imbues his life with some coherence and purpose and being held hostage by these spaces” (46). Scarred and stunted by his

accidental homicide, “Rudy must arrest himself into some form of role-playing to have an identity while allowing for mutability” (46). Rudy is not alone in creating his own spaces, but he may be the most sane of Vonnegut’s author-characters. While there is a tendency to assign “inspired insight” to “Vonnegut’s disturbed creatures,” Persell is quick to note that Vonnegut himself found it distasteful “to romanticize mental illness.” According to Persell, such a cliché “is certainly attractive, but ultimately too facile a rationalization for Vonnegut to embrace uncritically” (47).

Discussing authorship and identity in relation to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Persell acknowledges Vonnegut’s “destr[uction of] the concept of linear time,” positing that “these multifarious existences [might] be creative liberation for the self” but finding eventually that “the categories of success or failure [to liberate oneself] have no meaning because the task of authorship is already doomed to deficiency” (47, 48). The very act of recalling events imposes “some form upon them . . . some element that perhaps was not even there to begin with” (48). Persell attacks the author-character of Kilgore Trout, who is “at base, an absolutely terrible writer” (42). Persell assumes that Vonnegut makes Trout a bad writer on purpose so that “when we are ready to sneer at Vonnegut for trumping up this poet-prophet, he sabotages the impulse by calling our attention to it and casting doubt upon it” (42).

Rounding out discussion of the Vonnegutian canon, Persell glosses over *Galapagos* with some thoughts on Vonnegut’s impulse to “give us renewal after the apocalypse” and quickly returns to *Palm Sunday*, noting that Vonnegut, even in his autobiography, “subordinat[es his] experience into readable volumes” (49). Circling back to the problem of imposing form upon experience, Persell asserts that the “purpose of

writing is not ruthlessly to sustain a seamless piece of reasoning or an aesthetically perfect object.... A neat structure is a means, but not an end unto itself. Its very tidiness almost brings it under suspicion” (49). Ultimately, narrative form for Vonnegut and his author-characters is a necessary evil, and experimenting with these forms allows Vonnegut to attempt more honest story-telling.

Rackstraw, Loree. “The Vonnegut Cosmos: *Deadeye Dick* by Kurt Vonnegut.” *The North American Review* 267.4 (December 1982): 63-67. Print.

Rackstraw reviews the (then) newly-released *Deadeye Dick*, comparing it to many of Vonnegut’s earlier novels, such as *Breakfast of Champions*, *Jailbird*, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Rudy Waltz and the novel exude “quiet penance” (63). Vonnegut’s writing acknowledges the pain and chaos of life while encouraging responsibility, primarily environmental responsibility. He encourages a rejection of “false hopes” that arise from “misuse of ... organized religion, love, money, war ... and even language itself” (64). Vonnegut is a “master shaman” who offers “common decency” and “the ability to laugh at ourselves” as antidotes to the evils of these “false hopes” (64). Rudy, as an incarnation of Vonnegut, dispenses “temporary reliefs for life’s pains and congestions,” even as Vonnegut offers “harmless but useful prescriptions [in] his stories” (64). Unable to show another character, Celia, what he thinks is love, Rudy responds with “an old theme about the misinterpretation and abuse of love” by offering “common decency, honesty, kindness” (66).

The Faulknerian connection of *Deadeye Dick* and *Breakfast of Champions* “tempts [readers] to look more deeply for other ties to Vonnegut’s literary past” and helps

highlight trends and themes that permeate all of Vonnegut's work (64). This interconnection centers in "the clusters of multiple ironies" that are "dynamically intertwined with others from Vonnegut's literary and life experience" (67). Ultimately, this novel "could never work in any other genre" because in it Vonnegut has created his "own [genre]" (67).

Fred T. Barry and his aging mother, Mildred, "offer an interesting foil to Rudy's parents" (67). Whereas Rudy's father considered his European journeys vital to his development as an artist, refused to even read Rudy's play, and lost their inheritance through laziness, the Barrys "do not take themselves seriously," "...are the only [enthusiastic] ones in an audience of twenty people [at] Rudy's play," and happened upon their fortune "more or less by accident" (67). The differences between the Waltz couple and Fred T. Barry and his mother are highlighted when Rudy says, "my parents ... thought it would be very wrong if anybody ever laughed at them" (67).

Rudy's approach to life as a "wisp of undifferentiated nothingness" continues Vonnegut's argument against the notion of free will (64). *Deadeye Dick* is a "story about adaptation to chaos," that chaos being the result of the misfired bullet from Rudy's gun (64). The characters are "bound by genetic structures" and must learn to "adapt to the chaos of life ashore" (65). In a moment that foreshadows his next novel, *Galapagos*, Vonnegut dooms Celia Hildreth to extinction since she "substitutes the chemical energy of drugs and the artistic energy of literary fantasy for the adaptive dance of life" (66). Celia's character exemplifies "Vonnegut's view of the destructiveness that can come from living by illusions," as well as echoing Vonnegut's "long-time concern with drug

abuse” (66). When Celia destroys the carousel of sunglasses in Rudy’s pharmacy, she destroys “Vonnegut’s vision into another fictional universe” (67).

Bluebeard

Hearrell, W. Dale. "Vonnegut's Changing Women." *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 22.2 (1996): 27-35. Print.

Characters in Vonnegut's early novels—particularly female characters—are often “victimize[ed] at the hand of a dehumanizing ..., technologically fixated, industrial/militaristic society” (27). The portrayal of these women changes over the course of Vonnegut's writing, however: they go from being “helpless or male-manipulated victims” to strong individuals capable of affecting “positively the awareness and attitudes of male characters” (27). Manipulation and victimization are common themes in Vonnegut's novels. Tralfamadorians, an alien race who represent governing authoritarian powers in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, are revealed to be master manipulators of human society. This manipulation “serves to distance humans from personal responsibility” and “serves to release individuals from personal responsibility for either their actions or the results of those actions” (28). Another manipulator, Anita Proteus in *Player Piano*, is typical of women in Vonnegut's early works. She tricks the main character “into marrying her by faking pregnancy” and later “literally sleeps her way into the arms of [her husband's] second-in-command” (29). Anita uses sex as a weapon; she even attempts to seduce her husband's best friend. “His rejection of her is compatible with an accompanying detestation of those who, in order to cling to their own elite social standing, betray others” (30). Implied satire of this social-climbing behavior is central to “Vonnegut's anti-Utopian message” (30).

Throughout Vonnegut's early work, women are negatively portrayed. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Beatrice Rumfoord is portrayed as cold and emotionless. Mona Aamons Monzano in *Cat's Cradle* is also cold, to the point of being "absolutely hostile toward [her husband]'s amorous forays" on their wedding night (31). More typically romantic behavior is exhibited by Resi North in *Mother Night*, but her conduct is revealed to be "simply part of her Soviet espionage 'mission'" (31). Billy Pilgrim's wife "fantasizes not about her bridegroom ... on their honeymoon night but rather pretends that she is 'Queen Elizabeth the First of England, and Billy [is] supposedly Christopher Columbus'" (31).

In *Jailbird*, however, a change appears in Vonnegut's portrayal of women. Mary Kathleen O'Looney, born low class like Anita Proteus, has been victimized "both by males and by big-business capitalism," but she continually rises above her circumstances to succeed (32). She has accumulated "enormous power," and with it she "positively effects [sic] as much of the world as she can" (33). Her achievements are "Vonnegut's testimony to the native abilities of this ... woman" (33).

Like Kathleen, Marilee Kemp of *Bluebeard* survives being "beaten daily by her father, gang raped by her high school's football team, forced into prostitution ... thrown down a flight of stairs ... and [being] abandoned" (34). She marries Mussolini's Minister of Culture and inherits his vast wealth and employs women who suffered during the war. Her most powerful moment in the novel is when she "calls Karabekian to task for exhibiting a typical male attitude toward women," rejecting his presumption that they would resume their sexual relationship (34). She reveals "an awful truth" to Karabekian: "all the years that he has deluded himself into feeling proud and heroic for his sexual exploits and heroism in the ward, he has really been reveling in his abuse of women—all

men have” (34). This revelation produces introspective guilt in Karabekian, culminating in the creation of his masterpiece painting wherein he symbolically turns the world over to women, hoping they can do a better job with it than men have.

Hume, Kathryn. “Vonnegut’s Melancholy.” *Philological Quarterly* 77.2 (1998): 221-38.

Print.

In a lengthy and detailed article, Hume analyzes the “corpus” of Vonnegut’s work to-date. She acknowledges the difficulty of placing Vonnegut works in any specific genre, but she carefully draws parallels and outlines differences amongst Vonnegut’s novels and those of other contemporary authors, such as Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Toni Morrison. Vonnegut is a “novelist of ideas” who “tackle[s] problems” (221). These ideas are suggested in the problems his characters face, but the characters are often as much at a loss for solutions as Vonnegut seems to be. “His presuppositions about people and about the nature of reality create impasses, preventing him from considering solutions that might seem logical to someone not sharing those presuppositions” (222). Hume seizes upon these presuppositions and the effects they have on Vonnegut’s works, calling them “the unseen pattern that characterizes Vonnegut’s fiction” (222). She further states that “Intellectual quest is derailed by presupposition; the forward motion dissipates into stasis, and what supplants it is melancholy emotion” (222).

Vonnegut’s presuppositions are critical to his work: “his fictive worlds rest upon them, and he treats these presuppositions as universals rather than as contestable

assumptions about the nature of reality” (222). There are three central presuppositions, Hume asserts: “the random nature of the world and life in it; people’s helplessness and lack of control; and each individual’s isolation and inability to collaborate fruitfully in larger social organizations” (222-223). These central tenets are explored in relation to nearly all of Vonnegut’s novels so as to highlight the ways in which main characters are affected.

Hume states that the “absurdity for which Vonnegut is famous derives from the randomness he projects upon the world,” such as the “offhand kindness” that Rudy’s father shows to Hitler in *Deadeye Dick* or the detailed narration of a particular dog’s life in *Breakfast of Champions* (223). The helpless feeling created by this randomness creates feelings of inadequacy in Vonnegut’s characters. In *Bluebeard*, for example, Rabo Karabekian “feels inadequate to his calling, for his soul and his unfashionable artistic abilities combine to deprive him of a viable artistic vision” (224).

Another key element of Vonnegut’s “corpus” is that he is a novelist of ideas. Hume states that “Vonnegut had spent the interest from [his Dresden experience] in earlier novels” and that “he needed new ideas, and found them [in *Breakfast of Champions*]” (226). In this novel of new ideas, Vonnegut explores ways to avoid pain and guilt by “interpreting life in a mechanistic fashion,” as seen in his classification of humans as different types of machines at the mercy of “bad chemicals” in their brains” (226). Later, in *Deadeye Dick*, he returns to Midland City and describes a boy living with guilt who “deadens himself and renders his life useless” while the nation “represses the memory, and returns to the crime and commits it again and again” (226). Loneliness and

emotional damage caused by distant parents are also key ideas explored in detail in this novel.

Hume finds that “man’s relationship to the machine ... comes up abruptly against Vonnegut’s presuppositions”, and she explores this theme in relation to *Player Piano*, *Galapagos*, *Hocus Pocus*, and *Timequake* (228). Disease is used to “generate random catastrophes” in *Galapagos*, *Slapstick*, and *Breakfast of Champions*, although the disease in the latter is primarily mental and limited to Midland City. The theme of disease is expanded to include “big brains,” which are responsible for dangerous ideas, such as when a boy “thinks of firing the bullet from the cupola at random in *Deadeye Dick*” (229).

Hume notes that among all of Vonnegut’s novels, the only one that ends with some resolution is *Bluebeard*, saying “only *Bluebeard* offers the relaxation of a happy ending, in that the artist manages to paint the one huge picture that joins his skills and his soul into a sum greater than the parts. His soul and his ‘meat’ end up shaking hands in reconciliation” (231). Vonnegut’s final novel, *Hocus Pocus*, has none of this reconciliation, however, and is “among his most depressive and depressing” (231). In response to this lack of happy endings, Hume claims that “Vonnegut is too honest to produce false happy endings, and his bleak results challenge readers to consider whether or not happier philosophies are built upon strictly imaginary foundations” (231). She further states that “his inability to find premises other than his presuppositions does produce undeniable limitations in the intellectual and emotional parameters of his work” (231).

Hume finishes her analysis by looking at the “core elements” of Vonnegut’s novels, such as “the relationship established between reader and an authorial voice” (231). Vonnegut “crosses over from existence in an introduction to character in the novel” in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and “keeps that position in *Breakfast of Champions*,” an intimacy that, along with references to other novels interspersed within his works, “rewards his fans” and “makes readers feel personally intimate with the work” (232). This “note of continuity that helps unify the corpus” makes similarities amongst the novels apparent. For example, “nearly all the plots contain utopian or dystopian features, or a massacre, or that extention [sic] of a massacre, an apocalypse” (233). Another “Vonnegut trademark” is “a mixture of fantasy and realism,” ranging from the extreme fantasy of *Sirens of Titan* to the realism of *Bluebeard*” (233-234). Hume finds that “a realistic base (needed for relevance) and a fantastic distortion that distances us from a specific period ... encourage[s] new perspectives” (234).

In company with the writings of many other contemporary American fiction writers, Vonnegut’s work also embodies a search for community, but Vonnegut “is able to muster less faith than [other writers] in human relationships” (235). Hume finds that “such absence of community is one of the many causes for Vonnegut’s melancholy,” along with his inability “to believe in [people] or work up strong emotions over them,” which is evidenced in the lack of true heroes or villains in his work (235). However, despite all the melancholy and despair present in the corpus of Vonnegut’s work, there is still some humor: “The books are smart and funny. They show sensitivity to human pain, and intelligent sympathy for failure” (236). Vonnegut’s own pain is balanced by his gentleness: he wounds “no sensitivities while maintaining his sardonic attitude towards

all humans,” and he is careful to “never allow [him]self to be funny at the cost of making somebody else feel like something the cat drug in” (236). Finally, Hume sums up Vonnegut and his work by saying that “what gives the novels their power is their humor and the friendly relationship that grows up between the reader and author, with his wry gentleness and melancholy sensibility” (237).

Conclusion

As this thesis has shown, criticism dealing with Kurt Vonnegut's work ranges from the unabashedly admiring to the scathingly disapproving. The articles vary from superficial, cursory reviews to in-depth, probing research. The novels themselves are cross-sections of American life, and as the United States is a melting pot of cultures and beliefs, so Vonnegut's novels share insights on many facets of wealth, economy, society, race, and responsibility. When examining articles on *Breakfast of Champions*, *Deadeye Dick*, and *Bluebeard*, interesting patterns emerge—even more so when the novels and the criticism are analyzed in conjunction with Vonnegut's own timeline of life events and other publications.

While Vonnegut began his writing career after his thesis was rejected by the University of Chicago (an irony not lost on this student), many biographers and critics fail to note that two of his children were born before he even published his first short story. The publication of *Player Piano* in 1952 was followed by a seven-year hiatus before his next novel's publication. The death of Vonnegut's sister Alice in 1958 and the subsequent adoption of her children by Kurt and Jane, his first wife, seems to herald a sudden burst of productivity—seven publications in eleven years. In 1970, when Kurt and Jane separated, another lull occurred, but it was much shorter—only three years. *Breakfast of Champions*, the so-called other half of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, was published in 1973, followed by additional publications in 1973, 1974, 1976, and 1979. Kurt and Jane officially divorced in 1979, and Kurt married Jill Krementz the same year. Three more publications in the succeeding three years, including *Deadeye Dick*, would suggest another spurt of creativity, but Kurt and Jill adopted a baby girl in 1982, and Kurt

attempted suicide just two years later. His most apocalyptic novel, *Galapagos*, appeared in 1985, and *Bluebeard* followed in 1987. His final works included *Hocus Pocus* (1990), a short story collection (1991), *Timequake* (1997), and *Bagobo Snuff Box* (1999).

Keeping these dates in mind, the relative critical silence on *Breakfast of Champions* prior to 1991, and particularly prior to 2000, is surprising. Discussion of both *Breakfast of Champions* and *Deadeye Dick* is largely relegated to comparison with other novels until 1990. The same is true of *Bluebeard*; works that deal with this novel specifically are rare until the mid-to-late 1990s. As is common with many writers, Vonnegut's death in 2007 sparked a resurgence of interest in his novels, particularly *Slaughterhouse-Five* and its tangential companion novels.

Literary Theory: A Helpful Key

How does one make sense of the many different interpretations and kinds of criticism discussed in this thesis? How does one find any common threads that run throughout the criticism? How does one sum up the kinds of basic issues the critics explore?

One way is to employ some key ideas formulated by an important modern literary theorist named M. H. Abrams. Abrams' views have been widely adopted as ways of explaining the basic assumptions that underlie different literary theories. For that reason, it may be useful to sketch his ideas briefly here.

Basically, Abrams argues that any literary theory, if it hopes to be comprehensive, must deal with four basic aspects of literature. These are (1) the writer of the text; (2) the text itself; (3) the audience for the text; and (4) the ways the text relates to "reality," however one chooses to define that term. Perhaps a fifth focus can be added the Abrams' four: the function of the critic or interpreter.

Abrams argues that each theory will tend to say something about all four of the very basic issues that he mentions. He also thinks that each theory will tend to emphasize *one* of the four basic issues as the key issue. This emphasis will then color what a theorist thinks about all the other issues. For example, if a theorist assumes that the need to appeal to an audience is the key component of literature, then that assumption will affect what the theorist has to say about the work, the text, the critic, and the work's relationship with reality. The basic assumptions a critic makes will determine how that critic interprets any particular work.

Abrams' views can help us understand the basic assumptions underlying the various interpretations of Vonnegut's works summarized in this thesis. If we review a representative sampling of those interpretations and use Abrams' ideas to try to understand them, we can see what they have in common, how they differ, and how they are part of a fascinating critical conversation.

Basic assumptions about the writer

The individual critics surveyed in this thesis make a variety of assumptions about the role of the author in creating literature. Benyei, for instance, wants to determine whether Vonnegut is a kind of prophet or merely a writer of pulp science fiction. He seems to think that the kind of writing Vonnegut does reflects the kind of mind he possesses – either lofty or low. Or, to put it another way, he thinks that a person with a lofty mind will produce a prophetic work, while a person with a low mind will produce cheap pulp fiction. Ultimately, Benyei concludes that Vonnegut is indeed a prophet. This basic assumption affects the way Benyei then interprets Vonnegut's texts, the kinds of audiences those texts attract, and the kind of reality those texts describe. Benyei assumes that Vonnegut is a serious writer who produces serious texts that appeal to serious readers interested in a serious depiction of reality.

Morse, in his "Black Frost" article on *Breakfast of Champions*, finds Vonnegut more complex and introspective than do many of his fellow critics; he therefore seems to assume that complexity and introspection are important and valuable qualities in a writer. Morse finds that Vonnegut the author is separate from Vonnegut the narrator in this and other novels, thus implying that it is important to make such distinctions when reading a

work of literature. The difficulties and failings of Vonnegut the narrator, Morse believes, are the triumph of the skilled wordsmith that is Vonnegut the author. Morse thus takes for granted the idea that craftsmanship is key to any author's worthiness. Morse furthermore supposes that Vonnegut as a master craftsman has created a world within the text that relieves him from dealing with heavy existential questions. This supposition implies, again, the importance of a writer's literary skill to his success as an author.

Hughes, in his discussion of the intertextual dialogue between *Breakfast of Champions* and the epic of Gilgamesh, assumes that Vonnegut, as an educated and well-read writer, cannot help but reflect ideas found in similar writings. Kaufman's evaluation of Vonnegut's comedic sources suggests that a writer is deeply influenced by life experiences. Furthermore, Kaufman's supposition that Vonnegut is aware of his role as an author implies that Kaufman values the responsibility and skill of an author as craftsman. Similarly, Mendelson focuses on the humanist vein of Vonnegut's work, demonstrating a reverence for writers who carefully craft their work to achieve a specific goal. Sieber's article reveals the similar assumption that writers use specific themes, tropes, and devices purposely to communicate ideas and opinions. Persell in particular seems concerned with the conscious involvement of an author with the author's respective texts. Her article, like many others, values Vonnegut's role as an active participant not only in the text but in interacting with the reader as well.

Basic assumptions about the text

The individual critics surveyed in this thesis make a variety of assumptions about the nature of the literary text. Benyei, for instance, immediately begins his article by

discussing the relations between Vonnegut's texts and other works of science fiction. In other words, Benyei investigates issues of *genre* – the idea that literature can be divided into different *kinds*. Benyei is also interested in whether various kinds of literature are “higher” than others – more serious, more enduring, more prestigious. Good works, he assumes, become part of an enduring “canon,” while inferior works eventually are forgotten. Benyei's goal is to evaluate whether Vonnegut's works are worthy to be included in the canon. Hughes, on the other hand, is more interested in how the text is related to other texts, specifically the epic tale of Gilgamesh. He finds that *Breakfast of Champions* uses literary devices common to stories of heroes such as a descent to the underworld, an encounter with death, and a rebirth to a more meaningful life, thus supposing that a good text has clear relationships to other valuable texts.

Morse finds *Breakfast of Champions* to be a carefully crafted satire of post-modern science fiction. He assumes that the text's intentional use of hyperbole, awkwardness, naiveté, and self-awareness makes it a much more valuable work than if it is read as anything other than satire. Merrill, by comparing and contrasting two of Vonnegut's novels, similarly values how a text functions in relation to other texts. Messent's disappointment in his review of *Breakfast of Champions* suggests that he, too, anticipates connections between multiple works by one author. Sieber further illustrates this assumption by highlighting tropes of time-manipulation that transcend the borders of individual Vonnegut novels. Simpson's focus on the development of Kilgore Trout over three different novels implies his belief that texts can and should be read in light of other works; similarly, Rackstraw focuses on how Vonnegut's works form a dialogue with each other, creating a genre all their own. Persell sees the form of a text as a conscious

choice on the part of the author. All these critics, then, make basic assumptions about the importance of the text itself and how the text affects, and/or is affected by, its relations with the author, the audience, “reality,” and the role of the critic.

Basic assumptions about the audience

The individual critics surveyed in this thesis make a variety of assumptions about the ways audiences respond to literature. For instance, Benyei seems to assume that readers with cheap, unsophisticated tastes will be interested in simple, unsophisticated literature. People with lofty, elevated tastes will be interested in lofty, elevated literature. Thus Benyei is very interested in the kind of audience that finds Vonnegut appealing. Their tastes (Benyei assumes) can tell us a lot about the nature of Vonnegut’s texts. Hughes acknowledges that not all readers may be familiar with the tale of Gilgamesh, but he strongly suggests that familiarity with the story can enrich the experience of a reader of *Breakfast of Champions*. Morse seems hopeful that readers recognize Vonnegut’s skill as a writer and recognize the occasional awkwardness of the text as a conscious choice – deliberately fashioned by Vonnegut – rather than as an unfortunate mistake. DeMott supposes that devoted fans of Vonnegut’s writing are young rebels, while Hume implies that the loyalty of Vonnegutians comes from the emotional appeal of not only the novels’ first-person narratives, but Vonnegut’s admissions of faults and guilt. As Abrams suggests, then, every serious critic of a work of literature makes fundamental assumptions not only about the author and the text but also about the audience.

Basic assumptions about “reality”

The individual critics surveyed in this thesis make a variety of assumptions about the ways literature relates to “reality” and about how to define “reality” itself. Benyei, for instance, discusses the common recent claim that science fiction is a new kind of realism that accurately reflects the realities of modern life, including the realities of modern ways of thinking and feeling (modern psychology). Benyei himself thinks that *Breakfast of Champions* is in fact a more traditional piece of realistic writing than is often realized. In other words, he thinks that the novel reflects common perceptions of reality far more faithfully than is sometimes assumed. Kaufman, on the other hand, values the ability of a text to provide an escape from reality. Sieber seems to be interested in how manipulation of time provides a new point of view from which to experience life. Her explicit categorization of Vonnegut’s work as “transreal” reveals how much importance she places on how authors and texts present the concept of reality. Simpson observes that Vonnegut creates parables and new worlds for his characters, suggesting that he is concerned with how authors and texts deal with difficult realities. Hume is especially focused on the randomness she finds in Vonnegut’s work, the absurdities that preclude sensible worlds for his characters, and the helplessness his characters show in the face of such bizarre realities. Her investigation of Vonnegutian realities reveals her close attention to the complexities of texts as reflections of the complexities of life.

Basic assumptions about the role of the critic

The individual critics surveyed in this thesis make a variety of assumptions about the role and responsibilities of the literary critic. For example, Benyei thinks that one role

of the critic is to discuss a work's *genre* – the kind of literature it exemplifies. Hughes, Merrill, Sieber, Simpson, Rackstraw, Hume, and Messent, however, find a critic's work to be in identifying how a specific text relates to other texts and to its audience. Kaufman, Morse and Hearron find it important for a critic to have knowledge not only of the author's own history, but the historical period to which the author belongs. Morse also believes it important for a critic to have a thorough knowledge of the genre and author of a text in order to make judgements. Nicol suggests that a critic must be able to maintain a professional distance in order to clearly analyze a work. Simpson and Persell place emphasis on a critic's ability to observe how much self-awareness a writer reveals in his work. DeMott feels that a critic should point out potential shortfalls or errors in a writer's works. Mustazza is particularly drawn to the role of a critic in evaluating human psychology as it is revealed in a text. Hearrell's analysis exemplifies a critic's awareness of societal assumptions regarding gender and gender roles.

Summation

When one reviews criticism related to Vonnegut's works, critics' emphasis on the autobiographical nature of Vonnegut's work is obvious throughout the decades. However, criticism of the 1990s and 2000s tends to draw more distinctions between Vonnegut as actual author and Vonnegut as character-narrator. An awareness of mental illness becomes more common in later criticism, as do other themes of psychology such as guilt and fantasy. Topics such as responsibility, the trope of the poet-prophet, and punishment are repeatedly popular in the 1980s and 2000s.

Some contemporary critics of Vonnegut have often been disparaging, harsh, and less accepting of this writer who breaks convention and writes in disjointed, circling, skipping narratives. It seems, on the other hand, that readers who encounter Vonnegut as young readers find him entrancing, enchanting, enthralling. Critics who are not natural readers of science fiction often find him irritating, while science fiction enthusiasts not only welcome Vonnegut's work but often seek to elevate it to "high literature" within the genre.

Although critics do often agree with one another about various matters, it is difficult to divine generational trends from one decade to the next. Likewise, it is difficult to limit the reach of Vonnegut's work to different literary schools of thought. In other words, critics of all kinds tend to find him a writer worth discussing, even if their comments are sometimes unfavorable. Certainly psychoanalytic and Freudian criticism is evident; Marxist, Platonic, thematic, and formalist elements are also readily apparent in much of the criticism covered in this thesis. Overall, the Deconstructionists and Postmodernists probably have the most material to work with since Vonnegut often seems controlled by the text rather than controlling and guiding the text himself. Dialogical criticism seems relevant as well as Vonnegut speaks not only to the reader but to his characters as their author. New Historicists and Multiculturalists appreciate the social and cultural exchanges implied in his work. If pluralism is a kind of criticism that welcomes many different insights into an author's writing, one might say that Vonnegut's work is a Pluralist's dream come true.

Indeed, in 2016, as Americans are fiercely divided between Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, socialist and humanist leanings are experiencing a

revival that would probably bring a wry smile to Kurt's face. Vonnegut, as a writer who insists can never accurately reflect true "reality" (if any such thing exists) and as an author skeptical of his audience's ability to be rational, would likely applaud the efforts of the left-leaning portions of American society that seek to do the best, the most humane, the least harmful things that can be done.

Literary criticism and theory is an ever-changing, ever-growing, increasingly dynamic animal. Any annotated bibliography that presents itself as "definitive" automatically fails as soon as a new article is written, but to leave an influential writer like Kurt Vonnegut un-annotated would be a travesty. Drawing on experiences that occurred during the period from the Great Depression through World War II, Vietnam, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and into the revenge-fueled wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Vonnegut created texts that spoke to the multifaceted American experience, never shying away from guilt or confrontation. Vonnegutian criticism will continue to evolve, just as literary criticism in general continues to evolve, but it is my sincere hope that this thesis provides a starting point for serious readers of Vonnegut's work. No other work like it presently exists, but I hope that my thesis will not in any way be the final word.

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