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Post-War American Anxiety in the Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut

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Introduction

Just as the fantastical Trojan war shaped the history of the West for years to come, inspiring two of the surviving supposed classics of the ancient world on it, such will the Second World War resonate in humanity's global conscious for decades. As one of the most prolific and horror-inducing world events in a millennium, those who experienced it did not immediately realize the implications of such a global catastrophe and what it really entailed, but anxieties over post-war civilization were widely felt. A certain uneasiness especially plagued the nation which reaped the spoils of war over all the others, the United States of America. While there are many components to the anxieties felt post-World War II, three of them among the most prevalent were the new-found destructive potential of science, the lingering effects of global conflict, and concerns over the ecological devastation of the human and natural worlds. There were also the past woes of United States culture that had been put on hold because of war that post-victory began to resurface; mainly equal rights, and how to address these along with aforementioned effects of World War II.

How to go about dealing with such heavy topics, then? Many post-war authors tried, and while producing prolific literary works, could not sustain careers in the field of literature. The answer, strangely enough, was through a literary genre which many critics abhorred at the time—science fiction. Enter an eccentric Saab dealer in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. This Saab dealer was also a child of war, having survived the fire-bombing of Dresden and wanted his tale, and thoughts on humanity known. This was Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut had a lot to say, but it took him years before he could effectively say it. His first novel, *Player Piano*, while being fairly well-received, has been described as “straightforward and uncreative in its storytelling, cribbed

from action and science fiction tropes.” (Bradley). Despite having an essentially uninspiring start to his career as a writer, *Player Piano*’s moderate success was enough to keep Vonnegut going, although it took him almost ten more years until he finally wrote a novel that intrigued the American public, *Cat’s Cradle*.

The success of *Cat’s Cradle* can be attributed to a number of things the book had going for it over its predecessors; the most obvious being the downplaying of traditional science fiction tropes. While still essentially a science fiction novel, *Cat’s Cradle* deals much more with the raw humanistic aspect of science as well as the anxieties of what science could do, or undo, for humanity. It was here where it will be argued that Vonnegut finally came into his own and found the words he was looking for in regard to his social critique. *Cat’s Cradle* masterfully takes the reader on an adventure to strange but realistic fictional places to address the anxieties of post-war American life head on, and with this novel, Vonnegut found his footing to comment on everything from War to ecology in his stories to come.

Through his fiction, Vonnegut argued that the literary arts have a special place in the national conversation about difficult, anxiety-producing issues. This paper will attempt to dissect the aforementioned anxieties of war found in a selection of Vonnegut works, beginning with the technological in *Cat’s Cradle*, then turning to war in *Slaughterhouse-5*. The anxiety of war will lead to the discussion of *Galápagos* and not only the outside economic factors of war but also the animalistic nature of humans. This human-centric approach will lead into Vonnegut’s most humanistic novel—*Breakfast of Champions*—where the role of the artist will come into question along with American cultural identity. Through this examination of Vonnegut, a better understanding of his motivations for writing, as well as personal thoughts and feelings on modern civilization will become clearer, helping to garner a better understanding not only of

Vonnegut, but of the culture of twentieth-century America.

Anxieties of the Potential of Science in *Cat's Cradle*

Cat's Cradle was Vonnegut's first real success. The book masterfully takes the reader on a journey from the dreary town of Illium, New York, to the equally dreary Caribbean island of San Lorenzo, tackling many topics along the way, such as the place of technology in the modern day, colonialism, religion, and American identity, all culminating with the end of the world. Because of this, the novel is chock full of imagery and themes that lend themselves to the anxieties of post-war America.

Cat's Cradle begins with the narrator John discussing his idea to write a book called "*The Day the World Ended*" (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 1). John states the purpose of this book was to "be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. It was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then" (1). These few lines give an idea of why John ended up where he did, which started with anxiety over the technological advancements that could annihilate an entire city.

With the stage set for a discussion on the book, the first place to examine anxieties of post-war American life is with the reason behind the events of the novel; John wants to write about what important Americans were doing the day of the atomic bomb drop. This is representative of the anxieties of post-war life because titling the book *The Day the World Ended* shows how people felt about government's possessing the means to actually end the world. Insights into these technological anxieties can be seen in the Illium, New York section of the novel. most of which revolve around the stories of Felix Hoenikker and Asa Breed. Dr. Breed is

described as “a pink old man, very prosperous, beautifully dressed. His manner was civilized, optimistic, capable, serene” (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 27). Because of this, Breed is shown to be exactly what people expect when they think of a scientist, someone serenely *capable* of holding the secrets of the natural and man-made worlds. This is countered by Hoenikker, who is described by Breed’s secretary Miss Faust as “an unusual man” and that, “Maybe in a million years everyone will be as smart as he was and see things the way he did. But, compared with the average person of today, he was as different as a man from Mars” (58). The differences between the respective descriptions of Dr. Breed and Dr. Hoenikker are staggering, and certainly lend a lot to the anxieties felt by Americans of technology that can wipe out civilization. While Dr. Breed seems to be the very essence of what a scientist should be, Dr. Hoenikker presents a conundrum as someone who nobody can understand: an uncontrollable force who sees things differently from everyone else. Because of this, Hoenikker is the embodiment of what many people fear a scientist is, that being someone they can never fully understand, and difference—as seen later on with the Crosby’s—is not seen as a positive in post-war America.

Another source of these anxieties is seen in Dr. Breed’s son, who is described when John is talking to the bartender at the Cape Cod Room. The description comes from an interaction the bartender had with Breed’s son the day of the bomb drop. “Another guy come in, and he said he was quitting his job at the Research Laboratory; said anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another. Said he didn’t want to help politicians with their fugging wars anymore. Name was Breed” (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 26). Blatantly mentioned here are the anxieties of science being used for the purposes of war, and that for Breed’s son it was worth quitting rather than continuing on doing bad rather than good. To further the reality of this passage, it should be noted that Breed’s son’s reaction is actually based on a real-life scientist

whose story is detailed in Daniel Zins' article *Rescuing Science from Technocracy*. Zins states: "If the bombing of Hiroshima was required to compel Asa Breed's son to relinquish weapons-related research, Joseph Rotblat, one of the nuclear physicists responsible for helping design the atomic bomb, left Los Alamos earlier (toward the end of 1944) when it became evident that Germany had abandoned its atomic bomb project" (Zins 174).

In addition to anxiety regarding the role of world-ending technology in the future and of the men who hold this power, another pertinent anxiety seen in *Cat's Cradle* is that of the direction of American society, especially regarding the fear of communism seen through McCarthyism, and the pretentious attitude regarding the American way as the best way. This attitude is introduced on the airplane going to San Lorenzo when John meets the Mintons and the Crosbys. Claire and Horlick Minton are the dissenters in this narrative, and provide important rhetoric directly critiquing American culture. This is seen most clearly when they discuss Claire Minton's letter to the *New York Times* which got Horlick fired from the State Department during the worst of the McCarthy Era. The letter says: "Americans couldn't imagine what it was like to be something else, to be something else and proud of it" (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 97). The letter is referenced again on the next page when John asks what was so awful about that, to which he is told "'the highest possible form of treason,' said Minton, 'is to say that Americans aren't loved wherever they go, whatever they do. Claire tried to make the point that American foreign policy should try to recognize hate rather than imagine love'" (98). The editorial which Claire Minton writes shows an unfortunate truth regarding Americans both then and now—the fact that the US cannot take any kind of criticism. Because of this, Americans cannot differentiate between criticism and outright attacks. This is especially seen before the editorial is discussed when John mentions the Mintons to H. Lowe Crosby.

Crosby has heard of the Mintons before and did not think highly of them: “The Crosbys didn’t know Minton, but they knew his reputation. They were indignant about his appointment as ambassador. They told me that Minton had once been fired by the State Department for his softness toward communism, and that Communist dupes or worse had had him reinstated” (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 96). The above quoted passages show that Claire Minton’s editorial was not communist by any means, however, the fact that H. Lowe Crosby believes this says a lot about common American capitalists—and/or preconceived notions of them—in the early 1960s. Rather than thinking about what exactly Claire Minton was thoughtfully saying in her article, Crosby immediately saw it as an attack on his way of life and that it was communist propaganda—a red-herring argument for any criticism of Americanness at the time. The tension between the Mintons and the Crosbys shows extreme polarity among countrymen, which is obviously a cause for anxiety regarding American culture. This anxiety revolves around a country with the means to end the world, full of people who cannot take any kind of criticism.

Another anxiety that is addressed fully in *Cat’s Cradle* is the questioning of military might bringing about civilizational good. The answer initially seems like an easy ‘no,’ however, when examining what military might had recently curbed—the fascist regimes of Germany, Japan, and Italy—then it can be argued that military might can be used for good. *However*, nothing is ever that clear, and it could also be argued that the development and implementation of atomic weaponry to be used on the unsuspecting and largely innocent populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki Japan presents quite a moral conundrum and was an atrocity on the levels of those the Japanese and Germans committed (as far as the entire history of human kind is concerned, anyway).

This anxiety regarding an over-reliance on the military is all addressed in *Cat’s Cradle* in

the form of the San Lorenzan Air Force gunning down what H. Lowe Crosby calls “practically every enemy that freedom ever had” (Vonnegut *Cat’s Cradle* 256) which consists of cardboard cutouts of Joseph Stalin, Fidel Castro, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, “some old Jap” (229), Karl Marx, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Mao Zedong. This display of the ‘Americanness’ of San Lorenzo does not go spectacularly well, however, with one of the planes crashing into the ‘ice-nine’ riddled castle and bringing about the end of modern society on Earth. The reason this particular scene is a reference to the implementation of nuclear weapons to bring about civilizational good is because the ending of life as people know it. With Ice Nine being developed as a way to help the Marines navigate marshes and swamps (48), this directly references how technology developed for military purposes cannot always benefit society. This passage also serves to show the destructiveness of American culture because even a nation attempting to emulate Americanness brings about the end of life on Earth.

It may appear, given the previous examples of military technology destroying civilization, that Vonnegut is arguing that technology is bad given it freezes all water on Earth and leads to life ending as it is known, and so is military power; however, *Cat’s Cradle* does not argue either of these. While Vonnegut is certainly no military enthusiast (a theme which will be further explored in the next section), he is not opposed to technological advancements; rather, he is opposed to unchecked technological and advancements. Vonnegut knows that technology can bring about great things; however, he also knows it can bring about horrible things, and *Cat’s Cradle* is an argument against the horribleness technology can accomplish. This is explored through Felix Hoenikker’s character in Daniel Zins’ aforementioned article *Rescuing Science from Technocracy*, where it is stated,

Cat’s Cradle suggests that those who work in military research may have a special

responsibility to remain cognizant of how easily, unwittingly this terrible dividing line can be crossed. In his willingness to work on any assignment, in thoughtlessly giving others *carte blanche* to decide how his discoveries will be used, Felix becomes victim as well as executioner (Zins 174).

There is a hard line between what science can and should be used for. Zins gives scientists the benefit of the doubt that they are not in the wrong and are actually among the victims in the game of war along with the many innocent lives that are taken with their inventions.

There is another side to the innocence of the scientists involves in the development of military weapons, however. While Felix may not be a war-mongering psychopath, he is definitely too scientifically wired, which is also explored in Zins' article. Comparing Felix when he encourages his children to "stretch their minds" (Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* 247) to Einstein, Zins states:

It is his constant refrain, but Felix [...] has allowed his own brain to be stretched only in the most narrow, technocratic manner, That the unleashed power of the atom and existence of genocidal weapons might demand "entirely new ways of thinking," as Einstein admonished, seems never to have occurred to Felix. If, 40 years into the nuclear age, Einstein's now not infrequently cited warning remains largely unheeded, *Cat's Cradle* dramatizes that those whose work contributes—directly or indirectly—to the unrestrained militarism that imperils the entire planet may have a special responsibility to ponder its meaning. (Zins 172).

Through this, Zins shows what Vonnegut warns about the science of militarism—or technocracy—that while it is important to stretch someone's mind technologically, it is just as important to stretch it morally so that the implications of military technology are fully

understood.

From here, it can be inferred that the question of the innocence of scientists, and the worrying of who they really are as people stems from the public's anxieties about the development and use of world-ending instruments. This is because while the politicians and military leaders who call for their use are known public figures, those who develop them are merely salaried employees of the Department of Energy or in the case of *Cat's Cradle* the General Forge and Foundry Company. This question of who is in the right and wrong then presents a civilizational conundrum which is what John sets out to settle at the beginning of the novel in his own novel *The Day the World Ended*. However, the fact that the novel is never written (besides the obvious), is because there really is no easy way to portray any one side positively or negatively. Yes, Felix Hoenikker is a strange man and hard to put down in writing, and yes, science played an extremely important role in the atomic bomb drop; but at the same time, it is unfair to portray the scientists as monsters bent on the annihilation of the species for they are just doing their jobs.

This issue of responsibility leads to the final question: what to do about technology used as a mechanism for war, which is addressed in Jeffrey Foster's article *Historical Uncertainty and Moral Ambiguity in Postwar America*, where he states, "the problem that Jonah [John] (and we the readers) confront is that as much as we want and need to have events happen for specific reasons, the illogical mechanisms at work in postwar America make such desire absurd. Meaning relies on the verifiability of knowledge, which, as I've suggested earlier, is simply unattainable in our postmodern world" (Foster 88). There is no certain way of addressing the morality or otherwise of the technological mechanisms of war. Whether this be from too many factors contributing to these weapon's implementation or whether it would take a more in-depth look at

the psychological effects this has on humans, *Cat's Cradle* shows how the postwar American identity is complicated by nuclear weapons, and how unsupervised science can lead to the end of the world.

From this evidence, it appears that above all else, *Cat's Cradle* is a civilizational warning to the United States. Not only does Vonnegut expertly take the reader through the strange world of science developed for state use, but also through the very problems that plague the United States' population as exemplified in the characters of the Crosbys. One thing that is important to keep in mind when wrapping up any discussion of *Cat's Cradle* is the fact that by the end of the book, the only surviving characters are John, the Crosbys, and Newt and Franklin Hoenikker. That only the sons of a world-changing scientist, two good capitalists, and John—technically the leader of a country—survive says a lot about who Vonnegut thinks will be the ones spared in the event of a real apocalypse. This survival rate is critical, and the fact that both John and Newt find they both lack a sex drive to continue on the species begs the question of if the ones to survive the apocalypse will be the ones who cause it, and will only realize what they have done when it is too late. This theme of the perpetrators versus the true victims will be further explored in the next section on *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The Consequences of War in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Slaughterhouse-Five is Kurt Vonnegut's magnum opus. A thrilling but strange adventure through World War II and the years after. The book is an explosion of imagery and symbolism, and unlike many novels of the same genre, it shows the horrors and absurdities of war in a distinctly daring fashion. The novel follows protagonist Billy Pilgrim, the poster child of the

term ‘antihero,’ on his journey through the trials and tribulations of life, revolving around his experience in World War II—arguably his most important experience because of the trauma induced. The book’s war parts are mostly based on Kurt Vonnegut’s own experience in the war, and in the novel’s first chapter Vonnegut gives a synopsis of the problems he personally had with putting down into words the horrors he had witnessed as a POW during the bombing of Dresden. As Vonnegut states, “when I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. [...] but not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway” (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 2-3). This description sheds light not only onto the strange narrative-structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but also onto just how important this novel was to Vonnegut.

The most obvious theme of the novel, especially as far as the anxieties of post-war United States culture are concerned, is who exactly is harmed from war. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is staunchly anti-war, however, in a different way than most other novels of a similar mindset. Vonnegut weaves his anti-war sentiments into the fabric of his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Billy is a dull, normal, everyman sort of character, and his lack of depth is understandable but oftentimes unbearable through the course of the novel. However, this is purposeful, as stated in Ruzbeh Babae’s article “Dystopian Cybernetic Environment in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*,” “Billy Pilgrim is a man who is deceived by the war machine. He becomes the innocent pilgrim in a cruel and absurd world which controls its people through war” (Babae 239). Because of this deception and possibly because of deeply-rooted (but hypothetical) psychological reasons, Billy does not act but rather reacts to the various situations he finds himself in. The best example of this in the novel is how Billy handles the threats of Paul Lazzaro. For example, when Lazzaro

first threatens Billy, their interaction shows how passive Billy is: “now he pointed to Billy with his one mobile hand. ‘[Roland Weary] died on account of this silly cocksucker here. So, I promised him I’d have this silly cocksucker shot after the war.’ Lazzaro erased with his hand anything Billy Pilgrim might be about to say” (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 179). This shows that Billy is not very assertive, because while Lazzaro did gesture for him to stay quiet, Billy could have easily talked over him but refrained from doing so.

The portrayal of Billy’s character may seem like a very trivial part of the novel, especially considering the topic of war; however, it is essential to understanding the critique of war in the novel. Billy’s strangeness is explained while he is in the hospital bed in 1948 talking to Eliot Rosewater. Here the narrator states, “Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war” (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 128). Billy was scarred mentally by World War II. And, while he is just as complacent as always before the biggest trauma of the bombing of Dresden, the fact that he is unstuck in time helps to explain his passivity to everything which life throws his way. This passivity, then, is because he can never truly put the experience he had during the bombing of Dresden behind him for he never knows when he will be back in the meat locker he took shelter in during the raid (210). This is seen multiple times in the novel, but most notably on page 229, where Billy is describing the bombing of Dresden to Montana Wildhack in the Tralfamadorian Zoo, “‘It was like the moon,’ said Billy Pilgrim.... The guards told the Americans to form in ranks of four, which they did” (229). This quote is interrupted by the signature ellipsis signifying Billy’s traveling in time, in this case back to Dresden. The interruption from Billy’s time on Tralfamadore with time-traveling shows that even when he is the happiest—in the zoo—he can still not escape the horrors he experienced in

Dresden. Not being able to escape the horrors he saw makes Billy exceptionally vulnerable, and by writing a character such as Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut is showing just what war does to people in that it hollows them out creating husks of what were once real humans with emotional depth by putting them through events they can never put behind them.

This portrayal of veterans is representative of the anxieties of who is harmed in war because it broadens the notion of the word ‘victim,’ and shows that those who fought it were certainly not the beneficiaries. In fact, it appears obvious in the modern age that Billy Pilgrim is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) because of his continuous flashbacks to World War II. A PTSD argument can be furthered because it is stated on page 78, “[Billy] went home for a nap after lunch. He was under doctor’s orders to take a nap every day. The doctor hoped that this would relieve a complaint that Billy had: every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping” (78). Here Vonnegut is most likely referring to the undiscovered mental disorder PTSD, the effects of which are explained in *Popular Psychology*, “Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder in which the survivor of a traumatic or severely stressful event re-experiences the traumatic event exactly as it happened, both in nightmares and in daytime flashbacks. Unlike dreams, these flashbacks can seem completely real, as though the event is actually occurring again” (Cordón 194). Cordón seems to detail many of the character traits Billy exhibits, and even partly explains his coming ‘unstuck in time.’ Vonnegut’s portrayal of Billy’s war-related mental health issues is exceptionally interesting because PTSD would not become a diagnosable mental problem for another 30 or so years after *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written. However, in 1969 there were already anxieties regarding this sort of behavior, characterized by the term “shell shock,” which became a recognized mental issue as far back as World War I. Through the above evidence, it becomes clear Billy exhibits

many traits reminiscent of anxieties regarding the true beneficiaries and the ones who lose out during war; however, Billy Pilgrim is not the only example Vonnegut provides of a soldier's worth.

Along with Billy, Vonnegut explicitly examines the nature of soldiers in war when Edgar Derby stands up to American-turned-Nazi Howard Campbell. The description that follows is perhaps the best explanation of what war does to those involved,

Poor old Edgar Derby, the doomed high school teacher, lumbered to his feet for what was probably the finest moment in his life. There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters. But old Derby was a character now.

(Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 208-9)

This description, which precedes Derby's moving speech on why the "Americans will never join the Germans," details the aforementioned reduction of character that occurs during instances of war. Describing the soldiers as "sick," and following up with directly referencing that war discourages people from "being characters," shows how numbing war can be. The above quote also serves to cement just why Billy is portrayed the way he is and raises an important question regarding those who fight it. Especially powerful is Vonnegut's description of the soldiers as the "listless playthings of enormous forces." This description offers lots of insight not only of the way soldiers seem, but also as they see themselves, cogs in an indifferent machine.

As stated earlier, Vonnegut based *Slaughterhouse-Five* off his own World War II experiences, and in one of his letters he says to his family, "I'm told that you were probably never informed that I was anything other than 'missing in action.' Chances are that you also

failed to receive any of the letters I wrote from Germany. That leaves me a lot of explaining to do—” (Christies). This letter, written June 5, 1945 to Vonnegut’s parents, is the first correspondence he had with his family for six months—during which he was captured by the Germans, lived in a POW camp, and witnessed the bombing of Dresden. The letter, especially the fact that he assumes his family had no idea if he was alive or dead offers insight to the feeling of being nothing more than a cog in the gears of war. Vonnegut’s country felt so greatly for him that they never looked into why he—or his company—were missing and left his parents to assume the worst with the declaration he was ‘missing in action,’ which is not necessarily a great determiner of life or death. Because of this disregard for soldiers, it becomes even more obvious as to why Vonnegut portrays the soldiers as he does, and it adds lots of insight into the phrase “the listless playthings of enormous forces.” The fact that the above was what Vonnegut personally felt also gives great insights into just what being a soldier does to the young men involved in the war, as Vonnegut states in the beginning regarding the secondary title, where his war buddy O’Hare’s wife becomes angry with Vonnegut regarding his writing of a war novel. He tells her, “‘I tell you what,’ I said, ‘I’ll call it ‘The Children’s Crusade.’”” (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 19). This is an important part of the story, because it shows not only how the veterans themselves felt about the Second World War (or war in general for that matter), but also how their loved ones felt about it, being that they were practically still children when they were chosen to die for their country. All of the above analysis still leaves one large over-lying question though, what is the significance, or point, of Billy’s abduction and voyage to Tralfamaodre?

This is not an easy question to answer, not only because there is a lot of speculation as to the point of this in the novel, but also as to how Tralfamadore ties into the overarching theme of

the anxieties of post-war American culture regarding war. One way of looking at Tralfamadore in the novel is in Martin Coleman's article "The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time," where Coleman describes Billy's embrace of Tralfamadorian philosophy, "the problem with the account adopted by Billy Pilgrim is not merely the contradiction it entails, as if logic were the final authority. The problem is that Billy neglects the conflict in his concrete experience, that is, the conflict between his reasonable attempt to eliminate terrifying situations and his isolating method of doing so. It is a conflict denied, a tension ignored" (Coleman 690). The denial which Coleman is referencing in this passage is Billy's useless attempt at grappling with what he saw in Dresden.

By ignoring the tension in his psyche caused by the trauma he experienced through repeating the Tralfamadorian mantra "so it goes," Billy incorrectly understands what he saw. As Coleman continues in the same paragraph,

His experience and development is frozen, and he is lost in a dream—OR FATAL DREAM—which, as Lawrence Broer points out, is an anagram of the name of the planet Tralfamadore, the origin of Billy's theory of time (Broer 1994, 887). A dream is what Billy Pilgrim opts for in response to his frightful experiences. He adopts an account of time that assumes a mistaken conception of human knowledge and thereby rejects vital aspects of experience for a dream-like state devoid of temporal roots, significant experience, and meaning. He is calm and untroubled, but isolated from his own experience. (Coleman 690)

As Coleman points out, Vonnegut is attempting to show through the Tralfamadorian philosophy that those who experience the traumas of war must learn how to grapple with them. Especially because in the real world, the government—much like the Tralfamadorians—chooses to forget

the bad rather than dwell on it, as seen in this passage from Vonnegut that comes from the Tralfamadorians right after Billy finally speaks freely and eloquently about his experience,

‘we have wars as horrible as any you’ve ever seen or read about. There isn’t anything we can do about them, so we simply don’t look at them. We ignore them. WE spend eternity looking at pleasant moments—like today at the zoo. Isn’t this a nice moment?’ ‘Yes.’

‘that’s one thing Earthlings might learn to do, if they tried hard enough: ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones.’ (Vonnegut *Slaughterhouse-Five* 150)

The Tralfamadorians cannot understand why Billy would focus on wars when he could focus on the good times, and this is very reminiscent of the attitude of many post-war Americans—when so much good came out of World War II, why focus on the bad things about it? Vonnegut shows though that this is plainly not a logical way of looking at war from a philosophical standpoint because as the Tralfamadorians state, they cannot prevent wars. It is hard though, because Vonnegut also states at the beginning of the novel what Harrison Starr told him comparing wars to glaciers, “there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that too” (4). Through this quote, it seems as though Vonnegut aligns with the Tralfamadorians, and that people should just focus on the good things. However, the Tralfamadorians specifically say that there are always wars, and seem to have a powerlessness to stop anything because of their view of time. This is countered by Vonnegut, because he mentions in the above quote that wars are as *easy* to stop as glaciers. This is obviously not a hopeful way of looking at things, but just the fact that Vonnegut alludes to how they can be stopped, just difficulty, makes him diverge lots from the Tralfamadorian mindset, who know they end the universe but can never stop it from happening (149). Because of all the above evidence and discussion, a conclusion can be drawn as to how Vonnegut applies *Slaughterhouse-Five* to the anxiety of post-war America.

As Vonnegut states early on in the novel, writing about his World War II experience is no small feat. Thusly, he finds a way in which to indirectly go about it, by constructing a fictional but painfully real character through Billy Pilgrim, whose reactionary way of life explains what the traumas of war do to the young men who fight. While staunchly anti-war, it is important to keep in mind that Vonnegut only once—through Billy’s aforementioned monologue on the horrors he experienced in Dresden—says anything directly negative about war. The majority of the anti-war rhetoric of the novel is sprinkled throughout in the very unglamorous portrayal of the armies of both the United States and Germany, which serves to show just how unprepared and honestly unheroic the boys who fought the war really were. While the fascist regimes were unnaturally evil, the allies were not free from atrocity, either, something front and center in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Finally, one must wonder after reading the novel as to who really won the war, and whether a strong economy was worth the human cost, a question that will be furthered in the following discussion of *Galápagos*.

Economic and Ecological Anxieties in *Galapagos*

If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut’s magnum opus, then his eleventh novel, *Galápagos* is the exact opposite. While not an especially famous or loved example of Vonnegut’s work, *Galápagos* is nonetheless critical to examining his fiction based around the anxieties of American culture and civilization post-World War II. However, unlike *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*; *Galápagos* is not directed specifically at the United States, and actually is much broader in its criticism of the 20th Century culture of most developing and developed nations.

The book is set entirely in Ecuador during the outbreak of a fictional war with neighboring Peru, and the novel's characters encompass a wide range of people: rich, middle-class, poor, Ecuadorian, German, American, Japanese, blind, starving, and suicidal. All these different characters serve to break down the assumption that only a few countries are to blame for the world's problems. The novel is a critique of human civilization in the largest sense, showing that trivial and unnecessarily complicated man-made institutions can lead to social unrest, and how while humans can subject each other to atrocities, in the end, humans are animals just like the rest of the beings on Earth. Vonnegut shows this animalistic nature in the novel by having the unknowing passengers of the *Bahía de Darwin* become the next cradle of civilization because they narrowly miss a global crisis involving a disease that makes all women sterile.

It is obvious that *Galápagos* is chock full of social and political critique, so to begin a discussion of the novel one must start from the beginning. The book is set in 1986, the time of a fictional global financial crisis. As Vonnegut states, "Whole nations were suddenly [...] unable to buy with their paper money and coins, or their written promises to pay later, even the barest essentials. Persons with anything life sustaining to sell, fellow citizens as well as foreigners, were refusing to exchange their goods for money" (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 15). This is the first mention of the financial crisis in the book which eventually becomes a key component to the plot of the novel. This financial crisis plays an extraordinary role in the survival of the human race, as Vonnegut states a few pages later on that "This financial crisis, which could never happen today, was simply the latest in a series of murderous twentieth century catastrophes which had originated entirely in human brains" (17). This passage is a not-very subtle way of saying that while the financial crisis is causing real people real harm, it is a man-made phenomenon that has

“originated” from humans more or less over-complicating things. This over-complicating of things sets the theme for the rest of the novel, that perhaps humans are better off without such big brains.

While a somber point, Vonnegut embraces human devolution full on, stating in reference to a masturbating prince that “And there was something prophetic, too, in those millions of royal tadpoles on a satin sheet, with no meaningful place to go. The whole world, as far as human sperm was concerned, with the exception of the Galápagos Islands, was about to become like that satin sheet. Dare I add this: ‘in the nick of time?’” (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 101). With the addition of “in the nick of time,” Vonnegut shows that as far as the history presented in the novel, if it were not for the “ship of fools” (154), human life would not have continued on. Vonnegut later on states that “Almost everybody was sane back then, [...] the big problem, again, wasn’t insanity, but that people’s brains were much too big and untruthful to be practical” (115). Vonnegut’s argument here is that humans are deceived by their own intelligence, and that the evolution people experienced after all life ended besides that on the Galápagos Islands where brains became smaller was the only way humans could continue on as a species.

While the narrative of the novel is pessimistic for the reader regarding the future of humanity, for Vonnegut it is the exact opposite. Robert Tally’s essay details Vonnegut’s perspective “*Galápagos* shares with Vonnegut’s other works a poignant critique of the follies of man, a sense of the absurdity of life, but adds an element only hinted at before: hope.” (qtd in Simmons, pg. 113). Tally claims that rather than feeling dreadful about the evolution of humans into fish-like creatures, Vonnegut is showing how this is a positive thing. Tally goes on to say, “*Galápagos*, however, embraces a process both random and superior to any human intelligence, the ultimate laissez-faire philosophy applied to the suprahuman process of natural selection

itself" (113). Because of this rather passive approach to the problem's humanity faces, Vonnegut makes the point in the end that everything in human civilization is man-made, and mother nature will inevitably make the final decision of what becomes of the human race.

This mother nature outlook is obvious in the fact that humans naturally developed a disease that makes all women sterile, which is the reason that life ended. There is another piece to this puzzle in *Galápagos* where Leon—the narrator of the novel—describes one of Kilgore Trout's stories where humanoids destroy their planet and then begin evolving different traits, "children with wings or antlers or fins, with a hundred eyes, with no eyes, with huge brains, with no brains, and on and on. These were nature's experiments with creatures which might, as a matter of luck, be better planetary citizens than the humanoids" (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 51). This reference to mother nature both in Trout's story and in reality, provide insight into the ecological implications of the novel, as well as the fact that indeed perhaps a higher power was at play in curbing humanity's proliferation and sending the *Bahía de Darwin* off as the modern-day Noah's Ark. At this point, it seems all too obvious that Vonnegut is in favor of humanity reverting back to a less-intelligent state; however, this is not necessarily the case.

Based upon the above evidence, it seems that *Galápagos*, one of Vonnegut's rare "hopeful" novels, is a proponent of humans evolving away from being too smart for their own good and is advocating for humans to become less smart. This is not necessarily the case though. While the narrative tells one story of how humanity is wiped out by a disease and only those stranded on the Galápagos Islands survive and evolve to have smaller brains, Leon Trout, the ghost and narrator, tells a different story. While he is the one who consistently mentions that people's big brains were too untruthful, there is still a sense in much of his dialogue that says the opposite, and even laments the loss of human civilization. For example, in regard to animals such

as the marine iguana living on the Galápagos Islands Vonnegut says, “it has no enemies, so it sits in one place, staring into the middle distance at nothing, wanting nothing, worried about nothing, until it is hungry” (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 56). The repetition of the word “nothing” is very powerful in this passage, and what Vonnegut is doing by repeating it over and over again is saying that most other life forms, besides humans, really do not do anything. This is furthered later on when he describes the blue-footed boobies mating dance, stating, “the male stopped doing what he was so busy doing, which was nothing” (63). As with the marine iguanas, Vonnegut uses the blue-footed boobies to show that they as well serve no real purpose and just do nothing all day. Through this, Vonnegut alludes to the fact that humans in the present day 1 million years in the future (as far as the narration is concerned), just like their fellow Galápagos Island inhabitants, also do nothing all day—however this is never directly stated, but instead is inferred through phrases such as this quote which follows a discussion of 20th Century weaponry: “Nobody today is nearly smart enough to make the sorts of weapons even the poorest nations had a million years ago” (89). By saying that no one is smart enough is very melancholy and implies this passivity of other animals. Another way Vonnegut laments human’s evolution is by their loss of culture which he does through the quotes from Mandarax.

The handheld supercomputer (for 1986, that is) Mandarax, developed by Hisako Hiroguchi’s husband Zenji, is a “simultaneous voice translator” (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 32), which “knew the rules [...] for two hundred games, and could recite the basic principles laid down by masters for fifty different arts and crafts. It could moreover recall on command any one of twenty thousand popular quotations from literature” (38). It is using Mandarax’s quotations throughout the book that serve as the next reminder to all that has been lost with the evolution of humans away from their big brains. Among these quotations are examples from Tennyson,

Kipling, Masfield, Bryant, Dickens, and many others that allude to the culture of humans that has been lost.

While this paper sees the inclusion of the Mandarax quotes as a lamentation to the loss of culture, this perspective is not a mutually shared reading of the novel. Many critics see Vonnegut as a wacky satirist who in *Galápagos* is not afraid to take on Darwin. For example, in *Kurt Vonnegut and the Centrifugal Force of Fate*, Gary McMahon contradicts the earlier discussion of Mandarax:

In *Galápagos*, a pocket-size computer called Mandarax offers historic quotations from big thinkers of the past, posted in comical counterpoint to situations in the text. The big situation is that all big thinkers throughout history are destined to become entirely redundant: human intellect will be as dead as a dodo in a million years. All prestigious quotations from Mandarax are epitaphs on the futility of the age of enlightenment. All those heavyweight quotations turn out to be as ephemeral as hot air. (McMahon 202).

While this is an accurate summary of the novel's feelings toward human futility it seems to ignore the larger political point Vonnegut is trying to make. Using words like "comical," to describe the Mandarax quotes, and pushing-back the institution by describing them as "prestigious" and "heavyweight," disserves Vonnegut's efforts in *Galápagos* for political commentary by seeing that because *he* wrote it, it must be a commentary on how humans should die.

The fact remains, though, that *Galápagos*' motivations run deeper than what is quoted above. As stated before, Vonnegut, while retaining a certain sense of humor, is lamenting the loss of culture and not laughing in its face. As he states on page 181 through the narration of Leon Trout, "does it trouble me to write so insubstantially, with air on air? Well—my words will

be as enduring as anything my father wrote, or Shakespeare wrote, or Beethoven wrote, or Darwin wrote” (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 181). This quote, while easily read as a way of referring to all art and culture as meaningless since it will inevitably dissolve, and while directly referring to this inherent meaninglessness, is lamenting that humans became mostly extinct and their knowledge, culture, and art is lost. This sad mentality is indirectly referenced many times over though the course of the novel in the form of Mandarax; however, there is a specific point where it is referenced directly by Leon.

In chapter one of book two, Leon details the story of how Mary and Roy Hepburn (Mary’s late husband as of the setting of the novel) met. The story is very touching and believable; and could even be some of Vonnegut’s romantic best. While the story is moving, the end is what to focus on for Leon states, “some automatic device clicked in her big brain, and her knees felt weak, and there was a chilly feeling in her stomach. She was in love with this man. They don’t make memories like that anymore” (Vonnegut *Galápagos* 138). This is the end of the chapter, and one of the most powerful parts of the novel; not only because of how moving the story is, but the line that “they don’t make memories like that anymore” is such a dejected end to things because Vonnegut full-on admits to what has been lost with the evolution of humans away from intelligence. Through the above evidence, a conclusion can be reached to sum this up.

While an obvious warning to the way humans in the 1980s are behaving in regard to the economy, war, and nature, Vonnegut’s critique in *Galápagos* runs deeper than saying people would be better off if they evolved away from having such big brains. Instead, he uses the novel to show that because of the way people act in the modern age humanity could hypothetically end at any time and that there are costs and benefits associated with each state, and Vonnegut shows what would be lost as consequence of this devolution. Through this notion, then, it seems that

Vonnegut is saying people are destroying the planet and Earth would be better off without humans. However, humans have to realize they too will be wiped out by their own actions, and they should think of what will be lost if they continue to treat each other with disrespect and contempt, a theme much explored in Vonnegut's works, especially in the last section of this paper on *Breakfast of Champions*.

Human and Artistic Anxiety in *Breakfast of Champions*

Not many authors can take something as trivial as an early-70s midwestern town's art festival and turn it into a full-length novel that tackles such topics as ecological devastation, racism, mental disorder, penis-length, politics, automobile sales, the challenge of being an individual and art all wrapped up in the trivialities of American life, but in *Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut does all this. It becomes difficult to pin-point an aspect of the text to begin with, so to find an entry point into the text one must turn to the overlying theme: the role of the artist in post-war America. This is seen a number of different ways in the novel, especially considering the entire plot revolves around Midland City's new center for the arts' grand opening. Therefore, for the final section of this paper Vonnegut's skepticism and defense of the arts will be examined, as well as the blatant portrayal of the trivialities of American life and how this all ties in to Vonnegut's rhetoric on post-war social anxiety.

To begin a discussion of *Breakfast of Champions*, one must first turn the reader's attention to the strange mode of storytelling in the novel. The meaning of the narrative structure is best summed up in Gary McMahon's book *Kurt Vonnegut and the Centrifugal Force of Fate* where it is stated, "the naïve narrative is an exposé of every absurdity and atrocity that passes for

a modern lifestyle and makes chumps of every taxpayer who supports such insane depictions of morality. Embarrassment, Vonnegut will suggest before his work is done, sums up the human condition” (McMahon 69). Absurdities and atrocities are sprinkled throughout the novel and are often found in the descriptions of characters as well as aspects of the plot. One of the best examples of this is the introduction of Kilgore Trout on page 19, “in 1972, Trout lived in a basement in Cohoes, New York. He made his living as an installer of aluminum combination storm windows and screens” (Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions* 19). Directly after the above quote it is revealed that within the next ten years Trout would become “a pioneer in the field of mental health. He disguised his theories as science-fiction” (15). Given the context, it becomes absurd and amusing that Trout begins as an installer of aluminum combination storm windows. This absurdity is for a number of reasons: first that something such as an aluminum combination storm window exists, and second that a character who Vonnegut states will be so prolific someday concerns himself with this menial work. Descriptions such as the above is how Vonnegut is able to write in these absurdities of modern life, by taking an approach that through over-describing everything he allows the reader to take a step back to realize how strange modern existence really is. What does this have to do with post-war anxieties of American life, though?

As seen in *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, and *Galápagos*, Vonnegut attacks the United States' inflated sense of nationalism and how Americans will not believe their way of life is anything short of the best the world has to offer. McMahon tackles this part of the novel as well, stating, “the book blows the whistle on a poisonous culture whose time is up” (McMahon 72). Interestingly, the novel's attack of post-war American society is not the only content showing Vonnegut's critique of Americanness. As McMahon states regarding reviews of

Breakfast of Champions contemporaneous with the novel's release,

Partisan Review [...], acknowledged the risk and noted some attractions in the naïve worldview. But the reviewer, too, misconstrues the 'schoolboy bathroom jokes' and suggests that the naïve voice is too anonymous in its address for pointed satire. Yet Vonnegut is preeminent in recognizing *you* in his style, moving beyond the introspective voice of many writers to establish a rapport with his readership (71).

McMahon is not wrong here, and makes a good point about how the reviewers miss the mark of *Breakfast of Champions* and is also not the only person to have written on the structure of the novel, so it goes.

A further exploration into the novel's narrative trivialities is found in Adam Kaiserman's article "Kurt Vonnegut's PBS Style," where it is stated,

Linda Hutcheon writes that postmodern fiction, much like the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht, produces a distancing or 'alienation' effect (35). As a result, she argues, post-modern fiction draws on both 'distancing irony ... and technical innovation in order both to illustrate and to incarnate its teachings' (181). *Breakfast of Champions* produces this parodic effect not only through its title—itsself taken from a Wheaties breakfast cereal slogan—but by deploying the conventions of television aesthetics and advertising (Kaiserman 333).

In his analysis, Kaiserman is arguing that Vonnegut takes this overly descriptive approach because he wants to make the novel a kind of sensory-overload similar to what American's are so used to in their consumption of media; but rather than advertisements, apply it to real life. What is gained through this narrative structure then, is the overly-descriptive nature of the novel, which is not the same as what McMahon said is Vonnegut's way of connecting with the reader

through vulgarity. Instead, Vonnegut uses this immaturity to portray American commercialistic consumerism; something which is further analyzed by Kaiserman in the realm of Vonnegut's drawings sprinkled throughout the pages, "one of the principle ways that Vonnegut's novel 'illustrates and incarnates' the commercialized television culture it criticizes is by replacing the act of reading with the act of viewing. Vonnegut frequently interrupts his prose with his own felt-tipped drawings, 116 in all" (334). Because of the way Vonnegut constructs the text, he is insulting the reader by showing that this is the culture that they have bought into, and he shows how tv culture has even liberated literature. With the more obvious narrative structure properly analyzed, the deeper all-encompassing theme of the role of the artist will be analyzed.

In the pre-World War II era, art was something that was used for social critique, to take society or the abstract components of it and expose their absurdities, whether people wanted to see these facts or not. However, after World War II this became tricky; not impossible, but exceptionally difficult. The difficulty of post-war art is summed up nicely in Theodore W. Adorno's popularly misquoted book *Prisms* in the section "Cultural Criticism & Society," where he states,

The more total society comes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today (Adorno 34).

This quote presents a lot to unpack but is saying that through reification—the process of making something abstract more concrete or real—the line between civilized society and barbarism

begins to blur. The example of Auschwitz is not only exceptionally good but also relatively famous because Adorno is saying in layman's terms 'how could someone make art critiquing civilization when civilization has already critiqued itself?' Making art becomes barbaric because it requires regression to create art about a culture that has become aware of itself and the atrocities it can commit. So, how does Vonnegut get around this metaphysical artistic barrier?

First of all, Vonnegut uses this self-awareness to his advantage from the very beginning of the novel, where he explicitly states that he made certain decisions regarding Kilgore Trout's character because he made him up, "I do know who invented Kilgore Trout. I did. I made him snaggle-toothed. I gave him hair, but I didn't let him comb it or go to a barber. I made him grow it out long and tangled" (Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions* 32). This fictional-awareness is interesting because through this Vonnegut is able to escape the reification of art and modern society by taking something that is concrete, a novel, and then making it abstract by increasing the meta-awareness through admitting that he made up Kilgore Trout. Vonnegut furthers this in the epilogue to *Breakfast of Champions*, when he inserts himself into the novel, when Kilgore Trout is walking from the emergency room to the arts festival "I was waiting to intercept him, about six blocks away. I sat in a Plymouth *Duster* I had rented from *Avis* with my *Diners' Club Card*" (292). At this moment, Vonnegut breaks the barrier between the novel being concrete and abstract because he stages a conversation with Kilgore Trout and himself on page 299. Through this, then, Vonnegut himself is able to avoid Adorno's notion that there can be no more art via reification because he de-reifies *Breakfast of Champions*. There is more commentary on art in the novel, though.

Vonnegut is able to escape the artistic black hole created by World War II by taking a seemingly concrete book and making it abstract; however, this is not the only commentary on art

in a novel that revolves around an arts festival. One of the most important things to keep in mind when reading *Breakfast of Champions* through the lens of the role of the artist is the fact that although the events of the book takes place because of an arts festival, the festival never happens, at least not in the novel. Because of this striving for a seemingly unreachable goal Vonnegut could be saying that the artist has no role in post-war society, and there is ample evidence of this in the novel. Take, Rabo Karabekian, whose painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* was \$50,000, and is described as such, “the field was *Hawaiian Avocado*, a green wall paint manufactured by the O’Hare Paint and Varnish Company in Hellertown Pennsylvania. The vertical stripe was dayglo orange reflecting tape” (Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions* 213). From this passage it is obvious how seemingly little effort went into Karabekian’s painting, and Vonnegut uses his over-explaining style to undermine the work by reducing it to the trivialities of the goofy consumeristic names of the materials, and the fact that the orange stripe is not even paint but is actually tape. From this alone, then, it would appear that Vonnegut finds the role of the artist, whether it be Karabekian, or Trout, or himself, to be swindlers. However, he adds a layer of complexity to this through Karabekian’s argument on page 226,

‘I now give you my word of honor,’ he went on, “that the picture which your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal—the ‘I am’ to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us—in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else

about us is dead machinery' (226).

Here it is explained in full detail what Rabo Karabekian was trying to set forth in his painting, and the passage is one of the most powerful in the novel. For one, his monologue has the kind of unbridled passion that he has either given a lot of thought to this, or is totally making it up as he goes, but to the same effect.

Breakfast of Champions is a symphony of bad taste run amok in the 1970s, and Vonnegut uses the vulnerabilities of American culture to flesh out the poor motivations of all people, artists alike. Because of this, though, *Breakfast of Champions* is perhaps Vonnegut's most humanistic novel. Nowhere else up to the point of writing it had Vonnegut so fully captured the true human experience in all of its absurdities, deceits, and trivialities. Because of this, the novel provides the reader with a seemingly unhopeful view of humanity. One of the greatest scenes in *Breakfast of Champions* is where Kilgore Trout is released from the Midland City Medical Center and begins his slow trudge toward the glowing orange orb on stilts that is the new center for the arts (Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions* 292). This passage is a return to humans primal instincts, and serves as a reminder to the events of the rest of the novel that much like in *Galápagos*, humans are animals, and Kilgore Trout was determined to make it to the center for the arts only because "there would be food inside" (292). The fact that Trout never makes it to the center for the arts though—his goal in the entirety of the novel—serves as metaphor, showing that no matter how far humans get, and no matter what trials and tribulations they go through, they will always be striving for that terminal, unreachable goal. There is a certain sense of beauty in this metaphor, though, and even some hopefulness, because Vonnegut is saying that humans are still striving toward something, and whatever that may be, it gives us a fundamental purpose in a life that most times feels aimless and utterly absurd.

Conclusion

Kurt Vonnegut went a long way from his humble beginnings as a struggling writer and car dealer in the mid-1950s to eventually becoming a successful and prolific author by the time of his death in 2007. The late 1950s through 1990s were a tumultuous time in world history for a number of reasons, and while many artists focused on one specific aspect of this new post-war culture, few decided to narrow in on the cultural anxiety that encompassed all. This makes Vonnegut somewhat of a niche writer, because he does not conclude his novels happily, nor realistically. Vonnegut presents the reader with a catalogue of anxieties—war, technology, ecology, and begs the question: what is the link to all these? After World War II things were changing quickly, and in the rapidly industrializing economic superpower of the United States people really did not know who they were. Macroscopically, the anxiety was what really is America? We had defeated the fascists; but after winning, were confused over values. America still has this problem, and it is dangerous because it should be known in the name of what are we destroying the environment and waging wars?

All these novels are about people acting crazy and afraid. People are afraid that in a highly industrialized world, with progress mounting on progress, they will get sucked into jobs that are torments or tedious irrelevances, and even though they have ‘made it,’ realize that sometimes life is more than a low-slung ranch style with an acre of land and aluminum siding. Vonnegut shows that there are larger, more fundamentally human issues than a marginal tax rate, and unlike John in *Cat’s Cradle*, Billy in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Captain Von Kleist in *Galápagos* or Kilgore Trout in *Breakfast of Champions*, people must be the protagonist of their stories, whether the story will be told or not. Vonnegut does not call for drastic change but recognizes

that people are anxious because they do not know what to do about life in a culture that seemingly does not care about them, but they dedicate their lives to. Unfortunately, Vonnegut does not have a direct answer to this; however, he always keeps in mind that humans are but one variable at play in an otherwise natural and absurd world, and perhaps there is some comfort in the fact that in the end, cultural anxiety is a man-made construct.

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