

THE MORAL EGOTIST:
EVOLUTION OF STYLE IN KURT VONNEGUT'S SATIRE
by
Sarah J Griffith

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Abstract

The depth of Kurt Vonnegut's power to affect and stay with readers seems intangible and enigmatic. The aim of this study is to analyze the works at the crux of Vonnegut's rise and fall in both satirical effectiveness and popularity. Through this analysis we may discover textual cites of the rhetorical techniques and characteristic tone at the heart of the author's evolution and consequent devolution.

A slew of rhetorical techniques move in and out of Vonnegut's writing between *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *Breakfast of Champions* (1971), with the author's steady, driving moral egotism at the center. Vonnegut finds himself determined to affect human morality in reality through fictional comedy, and in doing so, to never lose sight of an essential shared humanity. Using bare language, a secondary narrator in the form of his own Persona, and the building of a partnership between his narrators and readers, he provokes readers to a heightened awareness of humanity's moral obligations. Revolving around his moral egotism, readers can measure Vonnegut's effectiveness and popularity by the unification of his satirical targets, the changing attitude of his implied author, and the mode of redemption that his novels offer to readers.

The Introduction lays out the style and tone that define Kurt Vonnegut as a satirist, including his unique narrative strategy featuring both a primary author and a secondary narrator in the form of his own Persona. Vonnegut's relevant biographical information aims to show how he progressed from a science fiction short story writer to his popular public figure as a satirical novelist.

Chapter one focuses on the novel *Cat's Cradle's* dramatic irony created by overarching tension between two triads that demonstrate religion's attempt to make life conform to art. This includes a study of the value of pretenses and how one ought to make sense of life's greatest unanswerable questions. The significance of Vonnegut's decision to leave the novel and readers in a state of redeemed stasis will become clear through inter-novel analysis.

Chapter two moves to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, focusing on the novel's shift to a faster-paced verbal irony. This irony maintains a tone consistent with *Cradle's* while the newly-jaded attitude of its implied author finds various rhetorical manifestations. The Vonnegut Persona debuts in this chapter, allowing the author to adopt a fresh manner of moral provocation that diverges from the self-contained redemption of his previous novel. This Persona incites analysis of the essential value of lies as contrasted with fiction.

The third and final chapter presents the decay of these evolving rhetorical strategies with the increasing dominance of the Vonnegut Persona and its complications of self-reflexivity in *Breakfast of Champions*. The sarcastic word-play and implied author attitude from *Slaughterhouse* carry over to this later work but are diluted by a dispersion of satirical targets which stifles the narrator-reader partnership and opportunities for moral redemption.

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Short Titles

BC: Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions* or *Goodbye Blue Monday*. New York, NY:

Dell Publishing, 1999.

CC: Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1998.

SH5: Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance*

with Death. New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1999.

PREFACE

Nearly halfway through the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. leads readers through a detailed, fictional episode in which Billy Pilgrim—“come unstuck in time”—watches a WWII movie in reverse. This eerily silent scene, which memorably epitomizes much of what is admired in Vonnegut’s entire catalogue of work, carries a message of the impact that time and vantage may have on perceived value, as witnessed in an historical journey from horror to nostalgia:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen...The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes...

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to the United States of America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. Touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.

The American fliers turned in their uniforms, became high school kids. And Hitler turned into a baby, Billy Pilgrim supposed. That wasn’t in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed.¹

Simplicity is the key to this passage and to narrative style throughout Kurt Vonnegut’s body of fiction. In using unadorned nouns (planes, fire, men, containers, minerals) he strips away the political, social, and governmental complications that beg consideration when the processes of war are examined. Vonnegut shrugs off excuses and justifications, bringing the essential components of war to readers’ attention. The classifications of Germans, Americans, French, and English easily run together; in fact, they are hardly distinguishable within this passage so that salvation through reframing

¹ Kurt Vonnegut Jr, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 93-5.

one's perspective is accessible to all, not just those we might think of as the heroes. This is because Vonnegut makes Billy's primary focus not the motivations of the war or the nations involved, but the wounded men, the bullets, the fighter planes, and the destruction. Bullets are removed from Frenchmen, Germans, and Americans alike—no nationality is left untouched—so that the holistic nature of the damage simultaneously intensifies the suffering and makes the national definition of acts of violence irrelevant. War is a series of chain reactions, of duties, and of destruction by people against people—people who are so much like each other and so interconnected that they all seem to be transposable onto each other. And indeed the fact they can not only differentiate between each other, but can react to that difference so violently seems shockingly absurd.

Billy Pilgrim is the voice for common humanity at the closing of the scene. His extrapolation that rewinds beyond the beginning of the war to the beginning of mankind solidifies the intense sense of lamentation that readers feel at the conclusion of the passage. The thought of unthinkingly murdering the same high school friends with whom one grew up and spent years reveling, sharing new hobbies, passions and relationships is chilling and delivers a sharp shock of perspective. The narrator then carries Billy's line of thought further, inviting readers to imagine back to a time when even Hitler was in infancy. He suggests to us that every hero and enemy of history was once dependent on another for life and once had the same endearing spirit and innocence that we often associate with youth. And on top of all of that common humanity, Billy supposes further, each and every one of us has the very same original mother and father. His surname, Pilgrim, overtly suggests a journey, a wanderer; as he journeys back to the origin of Man, perhaps Billy is intended to embody the pilgrim in all men and women—an individual seeking something holier than quotidian life seems to offer. In Billy Pilgrim's mind we are capable of coming together

and “conspiring” as one race of humanity to overcome the sins of war, and by the sum of all our goodness, to nullify that which is evil in us and create two wholly perfect composite human beings—Adam and Eve. This sense of brotherhood evoked at the very end of Billy’s movie retroactively casts a sense of treachery on the war scenes that precede it. That betrayal seems suddenly more personal than a simple claim to shared humanity, for if we were to stop killing each other long enough to imagine an alternative to blinkered chauvinism, we would find that we hold within us the potential to form a perfect world together, a Garden of Eden. The intimate impressions of Billy’s extrapolations leave readers longing to go back and undo the violence and to hide away the weapons “cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again.”²

The nostalgic tone of Vonnegut’s passage above works to twist readers between sentimentality and disgusted shock, to juggle historical brutality with hope for an impossible salvation—impossible because Billy’s vision is inherently unattainable. Movies do not run backwards with any conventional sense of order, and correspondingly neither do the lives of those they depict. This fundamental fantasy quickly places readers within Vonnegut’s genre, his world: it is a world of writing that characteristically features the playing and replaying of history, forward and backward, with the writing often allowed to speak for itself and other times punctuated by Vonnegut’s narratorial persona. It strips history bare, right down to the basic lives and deaths—not of eminent historical figures—but of simple human beings performing the most elementary functions on which the fame and infamy of history are constructed. That social world is horrifying and it is melancholy; it maintains hope for that which is patently hopeless. Nonetheless, the writing carries on a devotion to that hope in the name of that which is yet concrete, possible, and

² Ibid.

unrelinquished—the medium of fiction. Vonnegut uses the art of writing itself to respond to the irreversible failings of the fictional worlds he represents. In this way he uses works of fiction as agents to transform the morality of the world that they occupy even if they cannot repair the morality of the worlds they present. In order to fulfill this self-declared imperative,³ the author employs a slew of rhetorical techniques: frequent manipulation of tone and narrative style, inserting representations of “himself,” illusions of and claims to reality, and starkly absurd fictional elements—all together creating ethical arguments that are simultaneously persuasive and comical.

Vonnegut’s methodology for sharing with readers a moral drive and the burden of redeeming humanity reflects a certain moral egotism on his part. He does not simply tell stories that direct us to think or feel one way or another about goodness and evil in the world; he tells stories that overtly demonstrate his desire to personally direct our reactions to the injustices he observes. Vonnegut directs these reactions by making his moral egotism explicit, placing in his work narrative voices that bear biographical resemblance to, and even claim to be, his verifiable historical presence.

Readers can see the seeds of this voice manipulation in the conclusion to Billy’s WWII movie:

That wasn’t in the movie. Billy was extrapolating. Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed.⁴

³ In his 1974 collection of essays, *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon*, Vonnegut opines on the social role of writers: “I was perplexed as to what the usefulness of any of the arts might be, with the possible exception of interior decoration. The most positive notion I could come up with was what I call the canary-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. This theory argues that artists are useful to society because they are so sensitive. They are supersensitive. They keel over like canaries in coal mines filled with poison gas, long before more robust types realize that any danger is there...Mankind is trying to become something else; it’s experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into the society, and also a means of responding symbolically to life.” 92; 237.

⁴ Kurt Vonnegut Jr, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 93-5.

This explanation allows us to see the formation of the narrator's reaction to the text. In this, the rhetoric itself implies a narrator who holds more knowledge than the modal narrator of the text seems to otherwise have. The voice does not indicate to readers that he was told these things by Billy; he conveys Billy's thoughts themselves, and does so through a moral lens that hints at Vonnegut's own persona invading the language. This Persona guides us through Billy's film and does so in a particular vocabulary and style that tells us something of the implied author's intentions. Not only is the language distinctly bare, it indicates hope for betterment of the human condition. It moves from killing machines to the mother and father of humanity, backing up from fighter planes to increasingly human figures—wounded bodies, world leaders, factory women, high school kids, babies—until it reaches the pure progenitors of humanity, Adam and Eve. This notion of always moving back to, and centering on, human beings is characteristically Vonnegutian. Vonnegut's satire targets this scene of war precisely because it recognizes human presence and significance in a way that war itself refuses to. By expressing this moral flaw of warfare through a passage that manipulates perspective so as to create paradise from horror, the implied author is able to establish a unified target of unalloyed evil against which he may set his moral indignation and provocations. Although the fluidity of Vonnegut's voice and style from work to work necessarily reflects changes in both his internal and external worlds, it always conveys a complex synthesis of desperation and hope.

OVERVIEW

Although the excerpt of prose in the Preface does not sync precisely with most traditional definitions of satire, it is faithful to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s distinct manner of re-envisioning the world in a radical way. The notion of satire may sometimes bring to mind acerbic wit and a condescending tone. Yet Vonnegut rejects any complication of his targets which this may lead to; he strips bare the objects of his satire, builds entertaining fairy tales and science fiction stories around them, and speaks to the reader in the same language as he would his friends and family (if not the local bartender at times). His efficacy lies not in a guilt-inducing attitude toward his readers, but in the quality of the story itself, its ability to touch readers in a familiar (often crass) tone, and the forming of a partnership with the reader. By fostering a sense of empowerment and shared responsibility to the brotherhood of humanity, Vonnegut's satire leaves his readers feeling not just humbled but more importantly provoked and dedicated to progress. Vonnegut occupies his own corner of the satire genre which he imbues with a highly distinctive narrative style and uniquely creative, fantastic and encouraging bulwarks against empty criticism.

While narrative style encompasses a broad range of techniques that an author may choose to employ, primarily at stake in analysis of narrative are the following questions: Who is speaking? When are they speaking and, also significant, when are they not? What claims do they make in regard to their own identity and role in the novel? What does the reader's image of the narrator say about the novel's implied author? i.e.—the particular sense of an author implied by the story. The analysis and understanding of how these questions function in the work of Kurt Vonnegut are crucial to exposing the precise rhetorical tactics that make his satire successful in many frameworks. Narrative style is the crux of Vonnegut's distinctive satirical voice and therefore is the decisive factor in his

success or failure to achieve what seems to be his ultimate ambition⁵—altering real morality by means of fiction.

Vonnegut typically delivers his text through three major figures: a primary narrator, a Vonnegut Persona as secondary narrator, and a version of himself as the silent implied author. The “implied author” or author’s “second-self” is a term thoroughly discussed in Wayne C. Booth’s work on narrative theory, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Because Vonnegut’s persona often makes claims to reality in his fiction through an overt speaking role, it is important to recognize the assumptions, limits, and opportunities that such an element brings to the writing. The voice of Vonnegut’s persona that makes such statements as “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this novel”⁶ is not the same as the silent figure of the implied author involved in the creation of the novel’s raw form. Of this implied author Booth observes:

Our picture of him is built of course, only partly by the narrator’s explicit commentary; it is even more derived from the kind of tale he chooses to tell...the ‘implied author’ chooses, consciously or unconsciously, what we read; we infer him as an ideal, literary, created version of the real man; he is the sum of his own choices. It is only by distinguishing between the author and his implied image that we can avoid pointless and unverifiable talk about such qualities as ‘sincerity’ or ‘seriousness’ in the author.⁷

The Persona, rather, is a secondary narrator who functions as another character in the fiction. By acknowledging these functions of Vonnegut the implied author and Vonnegut the fictional persona, readers can recognize the tensions between truth and lies or reality and fiction created between the narratorial image he claims as himself and the version of himself hidden behind the text. In Vonnegut, this Persona who occasionally enters the prose as a secondary narrator is a form of the self-conscious narrator; that is, a narrator

⁵ See p. 4, note 3.

⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 160.

⁷ Wayne C. Booth, “General Rules, II: All Authors Should be Objective,” *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 73; 75.

who is reflecting on an awareness of himself as a writer.⁸ This narrative approach occurs frequently in such novels as *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, where the narrator is not only self-conscious, but is sometimes claiming to actually be Vonnegut-the-
implied-author.

A second crucial figure in the structure of the fiction itself is the primary narrator. In an essay, Booth notes that “‘Narrator’ is usually taken to mean the ‘I’ of a work, but the ‘I’ is seldom ever identical with the implied image of the artist.”⁹ This distinction between the ‘I’ of a work and the work’s implied author is vital to keep in mind in Vonnegut’s fiction, as he often makes it difficult to distinguish between his narrator and Persona figures. Vonnegut’s principal narrator is frequently traditional in his own right—relating information through speech, action, and gesture—with his role complicated by the presence of the Vonnegut Persona’s claims to reality. This primary narrator’s usefulness and reliability are determined significantly by his relationships with the second self, reader, and characters, as well as his distance from these figures’ moral, intellectual, and temporal positions.

The figure of the traditional, silent implied author then offers something of a constant for these other two figures, a backdrop against which their actions are interpreted. This implied author especially helps readers to determine the reliability of the other figures in the text, such that a narrator is reliable “when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not.”¹⁰

⁸ Wayne C. Booth, “Types of Narration,” *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 155.

⁹ Wayne C. Booth, “General Rules, II: All Authors Should be Objective,” *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 73.

¹⁰ Wayne C. Booth, “Types of Narration,” *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 158-9.

Through these three vehicles for narration, the author can manipulate the apparent truthfulness or falsity of rhetoric, sometimes intentionally expressing the unreliability of one figure via its blatant contradiction with another. Employing all three rather than a more conventional set-up of narrator and implied author gives Vonnegut vastly more potential sites for tension among the voices in the narrative. Simultaneously, it heightens the reader's awareness and consideration of the author's possible intentions. This awareness provides the opportunity for the author to create humorous satire by regulating glimpses between the blurred lines of that which is real, imitating reality, posing as fiction, or genuinely fantastic. Such blurring also allows Vonnegut-the-implied-author to exercise his moral egotism by creating intimacy between the narration and the reader, such that the reader develops a sense of personal investment in the unified targets of Vonnegut's satire and experiences a greater depth of moral provocation.

The satirical Vonnegut—popularly regarded as a master manipulator of narrative form calling for collective triumph over mankind's shared burden of sin—was not always so liberal in his stylistic choices. In order to understand the effectiveness and rhetorical strategy of Vonnegut's satire, it is first crucial to understand two things: the shape of its growth and the fact that it grew as the result of many years of writing and stylistic revision. The earlier Vonnegut was not only more likely to be categorized as a science fiction writer than a satirist, but also more likely to be read in short story form than that of the novel.

Kurt Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano* was published in 1952, although his experimentation in the fusion of middle class themes with science fiction settings dates back to 1949. He wrote more than fifty short stories between 1949 and 1966 for magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, claiming that he

sold them to “finance the writing of the novels.”¹¹ However, the impetus for *Player Piano* was generated by his experiences in an assortment of other jobs, particularly as a public relations agent for General Electric in Schenectady, New York.¹² Depicting a protagonist in a fight for his life and livelihood with machines, the satire of this first novel is characterized primarily by the tongue-in-cheek commentary of its hero, Paul Proteus, and situational satire; for example, one scene features a confrontation between the foreign Shah of Bratpuhr and an American supercomputer which the Shah misconstrues as a great and all-wise God prophesied to eradicate all suffering on Earth.¹³ As Vonnegut recalls candidly in a later collection of autobiographical essays, this novel was about “things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now.”¹⁴

Eleven years and three novels later, Vonnegut was to publish *Cat’s Cradle*. This work marks a crucial time in the author’s career as a writer, as the seed of irony buried within the largely conventional writing of *Player Piano* begins to blossom into the audacious, romping satire which will later widely characterize Kurt Vonnegut’s fiction. The middle ground that *Cat’s Cradle* occupies is best expressed by examining both its rhetorical effects—which will be dealt with at length in Chapter 1—and its reception by the literary and academic worlds. Vonnegut spent the mid-forties working on a Master’s degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago, only to leave the University years

¹¹ Jerome Klinkowitz, “A Do-It-Yourself Story Collection by Kurt Vonnegut,” *Vonnegut in America* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company, 1977).

¹² Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Fates Worse than Death: An Autobiographical Collage* (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 1991).

¹³ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Player Piano* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1952).

¹⁴ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., “Science Fiction,” *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (New York, NY: Delacorte Press, 1974).

later without a degree because the faculty rejected his two thesis proposals.¹⁵ Having never taken a bachelor's degree during his undergraduate study at Cornell or during his time in the army, Vonnegut's transcripts were absent of a degree of any kind until the University of Chicago awarded him a Master's in anthropology in 1971, allowing the novel *Cat's Cradle* to serve as his thesis project eight years after its publication in 1963.¹⁶ After having two rather esoteric-sounding proposals rejected by the University, the conferral of thesis-status on *Cat's Cradle*—rather than another of Vonnegut's nine then-currently published works, including the significantly more popular *Slaughterhouse-Five*—speaks to the relative orthodoxy of the novel in the realm of academia. *Cat's Cradle* begins by uniting readers against quasi-conscious masses of participants in organized religion, and ends with a return to stasis and a particular brand of redemption for its religious followers.

The second naturally significant moment in the novel-oriented portion of Vonnegut's career comes up in 1969 with the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut scholar Peter J. Reed refers to this period in the author's work as “the later Vonnegut,” comprised of the books published after *Slaughterhouse-Five* which he calls “an arbitrary and personal division, perhaps, but one which I think is shared by those who see an organic development through the first six novels and detect a break between them and the mixed works which have appeared subsequently.”¹⁷ The “organic development” referred to in this statement indicates the evolution and gradual domination of the more

¹⁵ The first was an exploration of what it takes to form a revolutionary group—a study of Cubist painters in France and the Ghost Dance movement among American Plains Indians of the 1890s. The second was entitled “Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales”—a demonstration of the definite and identifiable structures in Russian folktales, Kentucky mountain ballads, and stories from a wide variety of magazines.

Jerome Klinkowitz, “Vonnegut in America,” *Vonnegut in America* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company, 1977).

¹⁶ Jerome Klinkowitz, “Kurt Vonnegut: A Chronology,” *Vonnegut in America* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company, 1977).

¹⁷ Peter J. Reed, “The Later Vonnegut,” *Vonnegut in America* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company, 1977) 150.

brazen tone and form which I noted earlier in reference to *Player Piano*. *Slaughterhouse-Five*¹⁸ is commonly considered to exemplify Kurt Vonnegut's style in novelized fiction and even most non-Vonnegut fans are familiar with it in some capacity. The reason for this lies primarily in its popular success, which is rooted in a handful of rhetorical accomplishments. A cast of flawed, easy to identify with characters and a heavily colloquial tone make *SH5* arguably the most reader-friendly satire of Vonnegut's entire career. These characters and tone are Vonnegut's devices to diminish the overwhelming effect of his subjects and their tendency to cause readers to approach the writing with a mindset of denial and dismissal. Vonnegut scholar Jerome Klinkowitz observes that "since the reality of mass murders is never absorbed, they are never understood, and cannot be prevented from happening again,"¹⁹ and Vonnegut's invitation for reader involvement works to counteract this inclination. In order to inspire real reactions via a fictional medium, Vonnegut must make the firebombing of Dresden simultaneously accessible and digestible, genuine and bearable.

Appearing on a number of best-seller lists and praised by popular book reviews and literary critics alike, Vonnegut became fashionable for the first time in 1969. After spending years battling against the irreverence affixed to the science fiction genre, he did not (perhaps arguably) have anything to prove for the first time in his writing career. Paradoxically, it was precisely this acceptance that the author struggled with the most as a professional. His alcoholism and depression climaxed in the limelight, as Vonnegut strained under the pressure of writing a follow-up to *SH5* and living up to popular expectations. Later in the year of *Slaughterhouse*'s publication, Vonnegut would come to

¹⁸ *Slaughterhouse-Five* may be referred to hereafter by the shorthand *SH5*.

¹⁹ Jerome Klinkowitz, "Vonnegut in America," *Vonnegut in America* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Company, 1977) 29.

the University of Michigan as a writer-in-residence and cynically remark, “I’ve realized that the only thing I hate more than listening to people, is talking to them.”²⁰

Using *Player Piano*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as landmarks in Kurt Vonnegut’s writing career, we can observe that the highly variable public reception of his work seems to trace the same parabolic line as does his development as a writer within the satire genre. Vonnegut’s aptitude as a satirist crescendos among *Player Piano*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* with the increasingly successful use of his characteristic tone to bolster his rhetoric. The latter half of his body of work is widely considered—by Vonnegut himself as well as his critics—to fall off after the publication of *SH5*, both in popularity and in satirical effectiveness.²¹ While the tone of the satire is relatively stable throughout Vonnegut’s fiction, a notable catalyst for the inconsistency of his popular and communicative success lies in the continual transformation of narrative style. Whether Vonnegut is writing of Tralfamadorians, robots, or common people, the same powerful moral quality punctuated by equally crude humor is unwavering—it is merely the delivery of it that is in flux.

As Vonnegut’s effectiveness and popularity rise among *Player Piano*, *Cat’s Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and begin to fall with *Breakfast of Champions*, we may examine the progression of a number of the most effectual and inconsistent elements of his style. Measuring against perhaps its only stable component, a driving moral egotism, one may analyze an evolving and devolving focus in the targets Vonnegut sets his novels up against, the attitudes of his implied authors, and the courses of redemption he chooses to

²⁰ Conversation with Professor Peter Bauland, 19 October, 2007, University of Michigan, Associate Professor of English Language and Literature, Director of Writer-in-Residence Program, 1969.

²¹ In the novel *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut assigns letter grades to his own novels, giving two Ds, two Cs, a B-minus and an A to his works post-*SH5*. Those before receive three As, two A-pluses, and a B. In *Breakfast of Champions*, published in 1973, he writes: “‘This is a very bad book you’re writing,’ I said to myself.”

follow. For each target of his satire, Vonnegut seeks a form of redemption, but the sites of this redemption are in constant motion from one work to another. Similarly, in his implied authors we can follow significant variations in tone—aural impressions manifested in the narrator that serve as both a feature of the language's content and a rhetorical device of contrast. Yet among all of these fluctuations, the steady, driving force of moral egotism never relents nipping at the heels of its readers.

CHAPTER ONE: VONNEGUT INVITES US TO SING ALONG WITH HIM

One hundred and twenty chapters (albeit a mere two hundred and seventy pages) into the novel *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut's narrator sets the stage for the beginning of the end. Not just the end of the story, but the end of the world (or at least *Cat's Cradle's* fictional world):

I recalled an advertisement for a set of children's books called *The Book of Knowledge*. In that ad, a trusting boy and girl looked up at their father. "Daddy," one asked, "what makes the sky blue?" The answer, presumably, could be found in *The Book of Knowledge*.

If I had had my daddy beside me as Mona and I walked down the road from the palace, I would have had plenty of questions to ask as I clung to his hand. "Daddy, why are all the trees broken? Daddy, why are all the birds dead? Daddy, what makes the sky so sick and wormy? Daddy, what makes the sea so hard and still?"²²

Not unlike the prophet of the Book of Revelations, St. John the Divine, this John brings us Vonnegut's own apocalypse. One might legitimately challenge any reader to escape this scene with an impression of comedy, in fact, with that of anything but chilled speechlessness. Curiously, this would be the case for a surprising number of scenes that might be isolated from the novel *Cat's Cradle*. Yet those same readers would simultaneously be hard-pressed to leave the novel in its entirety without being certain of its incontestable status as satirical humor.

With the same manner in which the Book of Knowledge purports to offer explanations of the world's seemingly inexplicable mysteries, the books of Vonnegut's fictional religious prophet Bokonon in *Cat's Cradle* preach soothing "lies" about reality. These lies—the religion's foundations and public face—offer solace to human beings while making Bokononism's conspicuous acts of manipulation and falsification utterly transparent. The narrator learns to endorse this artifice of comfort, observing that "Religion

²² Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1963) 270-1.

was the one real instrument of hope. Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and better lies.”²³ Bokononism’s foundations imitate traditional religions, establishing their own interpretations of the creation story, miracles, relics, prophecies, rituals, and even last rites. The only real difference between traditional religions and this fictional alternative lies in Bokononists’ recognition and acceptance of these artistic manifestations of their religion as manipulated and mutable. In this way, the practice of Bokononism becomes an art form itself where “people [don’t] have to pay as much attention to the awful truth...they [are] all employed full time as actors in a play they [understand], that any human being anywhere [can] understand and applaud.”²⁴

Thus the relationships between this triad formed of religion, art, and life are utterly transparent as they exist within the novel: religion seeks to make life conform to art. Religion aims to craft a beautiful, pleasing, idealized (art-like) existence out of inevitable uncertainty, and the way that Bokononism achieves this is (circularly) through art forms—namely, expression in writing and song. Literary critic Loree Rackstraw indicates the relationship that this triad has to Kurt Vonnegut’s function as its authorial architect:

The purpose of a text, holy or profane, is to help strengthen the reader’s sense of power and purpose in a world of accidents and contradictions, whether through building muscles or spiritual atonement. The narrator comes to the bittersweet realization that it is through Bokononist “foma”²⁵ that humans can find the energy to play out the joke, the absurdity, the purposeless polarity that makes up the Cat’s Cradle game called Life.²⁶

Rackstraw notes the narrator’s “bittersweet realization,” that while he still partially desires the “truth” that Christianity may promise, he also comprehends the contentment associated

²³ Ibid. 172.

²⁴ Ibid. 174-5.

²⁵ Defined by Vonnegut’s fictional prophet Bokonon as “harmless untruths” in the Preface to *Cat’s Cradle*.

²⁶ Loree Rackstraw, “The Paradox of ‘Awareness’ and Language in Vonnegut’s Fiction” in *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations* eds. Marc Leeds and Peter J. Reed (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000) 55-6.

with simply accepting the artifices of a religion. The narrator recognizes that this potential for contentment, even under the full awareness of pretense, is preferable to—as Klinkowitz suggests—“rebel[ing] in fruitless anger.”²⁷

While Bokononism’s pursuit to conform life to art is continually operating within the novel and circling back on itself—offering manifestations of religion in art, demonstrating art’s similarity to religion in form through the construction of systematic artifices—a congruent triad is simultaneously operating external to the story, in the process of the storytelling. Vonnegut himself is deploying art—the writing of *Cat’s Cradle*—to create a new religion which may make life happier and more comfortable by presenting a religion which relieves Man from the burden of understanding and being responsible for the world he occupies. Vonnegut gathers his readers to him under the terrifying umbrella of inevitable death and demonstrates the moral blunders that may be involved in both dismissing organized religion thoughtlessly and accepting it without understanding one’s own motivations for doing so.

No single thread of these placating life-art-religion webs can be disassociated or isolated from either their own triangular relationship or correlated triad (the external Vonnegut triad or internal *Cat’s Cradle* triad) without affecting the efficacy and dynamic of the novel itself. This is because the humor of the novel relies upon the dramatic irony created by the overarching satire of these triads, which in turn lend themselves to the creation of additional ironic inner layers. Vonnegut’s writing of the novel itself is often similarly transparent by operating under the same notions of artifice and value as the pretenses of the story within it; but it is important to recognize that this transparency is a key narrative style choice, because, “if his themes are to have any usefulness at all, it will

²⁷ Jerome Klinkowitz, “Coming to Terms with Technique,” *The Vonnegut Effect* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 62.

be because they are self-evident as pieces of artifice.” Thus Vonnegut uses the tension between these two life-art-religion structures to move between them and exploit their ripeness for his wry tone and deceptive “Vonnegut persona,” both which feed an “undercutting humor [that] keeps that awareness foremost in the reader’s mind”—that is, the awareness of self-reflexive artifice.²⁸

Vonnegut sketches both the inner and outer triad immediately as the reader enters the novel’s opening pages, establishing the ironic pattern of contradiction and circling ideas back on each other before a reader can even enter the first actual chapter. The preface to *Cat’s Cradle* reads:

Nothing in this book is true.

“Live by the *foma** that make you brave
and kind and healthy and happy.”

The Books of Bokonon I: 5

**Harmless untruths*²⁹

The initial statement incites a number of questions and curiosities, among them: If the reader already knows that the novel is fiction, why is such a statement necessary? and What is it about the writing to follow that warrants such a statement?

The second statement stimulates even further inquiries, with the asterisk that defines “foma” being of crucial importance. To consider the first statement in light of the second, one must ask first either, does this imply that the first statement is a foma? or does it presume that the writer has lived according to the second statement, and thus endorses the first? If we accept the first interpretation—that the second statement implies the first is a “foma”—we may ask whether or not it is truly harmless to read something untrue.

Furthermore, since introducing selections from other texts is a novelistic tradition intended

²⁸ Ibid. 61.

²⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat’s Cradle* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1963).

to guide the reader's interpretation of a text, is this declaration from *The Books of Bokonon* meant to guide us or to make us skeptical of the story that follows it?

This string of issues raised by a mere three lines of text essentially settles on two primary interpretations of the statements' relationships: either they are in an antagonistic relationship to each other and the second discredits the first as a false statement; or, they exist as corollaries and the first encourages you to embrace the story to follow in order to be "brave and kind and healthy and happy."³⁰ Vonnegut's implied author may be playing redeemer for us here, offering readers the easy, pleasant way out of his satire, rather than foisting the moral provocation for such redemption upon us. However, without a way to ever definitively know the implied author's intentions, the preface's most important functions are: first, to introduce uncertainty and skepticism to the reader's mind; and second, to introduce Vonnegut's and Bokonon's independent methods of strategic manipulation—Vonnegut of the reader's perceptions, and Bokonon of his followers. Thus, in just the preface of the novel, we begin to see a vague outline of the two structures of fiction—one in Vonnegut's sphere as a writer, and the other in Bokonon's as a prophet, both of which inevitably impact the minds of their followers in a way that is theirs to determine through representations in art, whether that art is presented in the form of a satirical novel or a transparently manipulated religious text.

Vonnegut's table of contents is the next element that catches one's eye, especially in light of the quasi-religious invocation made in the preface through the *Books of Bokonon*. The chapter titles span five pages of the book, which total 127 chapters for 287 pages of text, making for an average of just over two pages per chapter. With religious text fresh in the reader's eye, these chapters seem to mimic the brief and numerous books of the

³⁰ Ibid.

Christian Bible. On closer inspection, they reveal something closer to a parody on the books of the Bible, with chapter titles such as, “The Last Batch of Brownies,” “A Nice Midget,” and “A Self-Supporting Squirrel Cage.” Still one sees the swirling together of art, religion, and life, with Vonnegut’s art imitating a much earlier art, and a religious one at that. The effect is to heighten the reader’s awareness of the effect that these artistic manipulations are conspicuously intended to have on us, that is, to establish a lighthearted tone of conversation between the reader and narrator which will beget a likelihood for the reader to approach the content of such frivolous-sounding material more skeptically and dismissively. Because of this likelihood, Vonnegut must make rhetorical adjustments in order to take advantage of the parodic bond between reader and narrator to achieve moral suasion.

If the preface and table of contents were not enough to draw readers into Vonnegut’s quickly-compounding language paradoxes, *Cat’s Cradle*’s first paragraph offers one more chance:

Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John. Jonah—John—if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still—not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail.³¹

The first sentence contains an allusion to both *Moby Dick*’s first line “Call me Ishmael,” and Jonah the Biblical prophet. The invocation of the prophet Jonah is significant for Jonah’s infamy as an “unwilling prophet.” Jonah was called by God to be a prophet but ran from the calling, seeking refuge on the coast where he boarded a ship. He was thrown clear by mariners when they discovered he was fleeing from the Lord. The sea abated as soon as he was cast off the boat. Only after he was taken into the belly of a whale did Jonah resign

³¹ Ibid. 1.

himself to bring damning news to the city of Nineveh so that they might pray to the Lord for deliverance.³² Similarly, the narrator Ishmael of *Moby Dick* brings to readers the damned news of Captain Ahab's fateful battle of revenge against the great white whale. Does the narrator of this story mean to imply that he will bring us a similarly fatal tale?

Just after the narrator brings all of these references into the reader's mind, we realize that he ironically does so simply to prove a point of the insignificance of a name, saying that the role a human being is meant to fill is determined "according to plan," and that the means of fulfilling this plan "have been provided," by implied external forces.³³ Thus he establishes an empty symbolism in basic human conventions such as attaching some sort of predictive power to naming practices, encapsulating the conventions of art forms both religious and literary. He affirms his awareness of the power that symbolic representations in writing, art, and history can have on the literal and immediate lives of the people interacting with them. This conviction suggests that a name attached to prophetic duty in a manipulable, humanly fallible text might carry its symbolic attachment across to existences in reality. Yet he immediately dismisses this notion as unfounded by demonstrating the non sequitur that exists between the symbolic language and the human existence, such that the life confers the name and not vice versa. Therefore, the narrator can be simultaneously a literal John and a symbolic Jonah, in form and function, respectively.

This surname-less narrator, John, the offspring of German immigrants who seems to have more than ancestry in common with Vonnegut the biographical author,³⁴ is the

³² *The Bible, New International Version*, "Jonah 1:1-3:10," BibleGateway.com, 2007.

³³ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1963) 1.

³⁴ On page one of *Cat's Cradle*, the narrator remarks, "When I was a younger man—two wives ago, 250,000 cigarettes ago, 3,000 quarts of booze ago..." and on page 72 learns that a sculpture he is admiring at the cemetery was crafted for a German immigrant sharing his last name. In his autobiographies, *Fates Worse Than Death* and *Palm Sunday*, and his essay *A Man Without A Country*, Vonnegut speaks about his

vehicle of satire throughout *Cat's Cradle*. He is alone in his narration, a fact unique to *Cat's Cradle* in light of the complex narration of novels thereafter, and left to carry the whole of the novel's satire and storyline through only his own experiences and dialogues. Throughout the novel, it is John who gradually reveals to readers the grand impetus behind the religion-art-life triads that revolve within and around the story. From John we learn that the motivation for making life imitate art via religion is to relieve mankind from placing himself at the center of life's meaning. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this narrator not only mimics a biographical Vonnegut in character, but a Biblical prophet in role. The great paradox that John identifies for readers is the unavoidable human state of being born into death. He discovers the following on a police identification form filled out by Bokonon:

He reported his avocation as: "Being alive."
He reported his principal occupation as: "Being dead."³⁵

These seemingly bizarre responses by the prophet of Bokononism reveal the unending mystery of human existence, which is the attempt to reconcile an unidentified meaning of life with the inevitability and incomprehensibility of death. In the above passage, Bokonon himself expresses his constant and ultimately vain pursuit of life, while acknowledging that in the cosmic view, he must take into consideration "such things as the shortness of life and the longness of eternity."³⁶

After this irony has been established, John's role as narrator is to demonstrate the effect of spreading a soothing layer of religious relief—albeit satirical in the grander scheme of the novel—over this struggle, and most importantly, of doing so with utter transparency in his conspicuous manipulation. The Bokononism unveiled through John's

grandfather's immigration to the United States from Germany, his divorce from his first wife Jane Marie Cox and marriage to his second, Jill Kremenetz, as well as his struggles with alcoholism and addiction to his chosen brand of cigarettes—Pall Mall.

³⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1963) 135.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 135.

narration serves the function of avoiding the “Egocentricity [of assuming mankind as the center of meaning] by showing how people can be comfortable by admitting that the world they live in is not under their own or God’s control.”³⁷ Indeed, Bokononism seems to demonstrate that human beings can be more comfortable when they relinquish their egocentricity; however, if they wish to subscribe to a system of religion, this decision requires that they acknowledge and come to terms with the farce played out by allowing malleable symbolic expressions to dictate their interpretation of the world. Those who refuse to do so must alternatively understand the artifices of religion as objective and incontrovertible and endure the burden of mankind as the center of meaning, continually accepting inexorably feeble consolations. While Vonnegut does not necessarily leave readers comfortable in this knowledge, he does leave them with a sense of settlement—he has undertaken the moral problem himself within the scope of the novel and shown readers how it might play out.

Such religious choices are reflected by the implied author within and without the text, as though *Cat’s Cradle’s* characters were a tiny mirror through which Vonnegut’s readers are invited to view themselves. The image of the cat’s cradle itself comes to be the emblem of this struggle against the fatality of birth and impossible quest for ultimate meaning, as well as the battle between symbolism and literal existence. Young Newt Hoenikker, midget and youngest child of the father of the atomic bomb, expresses a universal frustration via “one of the oldest games there is, cat’s cradle”³⁸:

“No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat’s cradle is nothing but a bunch of X’s between somebody’s hands, and the little kids look and look and look at all those X’s...”
“And?”

³⁷ Jerome Klinkowitz, “Coming to Terms with Technique,” *The Vonnegut Effect* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 62.

³⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat’s Cradle* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1963) 165.

“No damn cat, no damn cradle.”³⁹

Newt’s aggravation is at the very heart of the triangular motion between art, religion, and life operating in both Vonnegut’s and Bokonon’s work. When children are young, they demand explanations for the world that surrounds them as they develop speech, memory and the ability to reason. And when they cannot immediately understand something, what do they do? They make up their own explanation until they can replace it with something more satisfying, such as the explanation of an adult. But what happens when the more satisfying answer never comes, even over a lifetime? The same thing that happens in childhood—one makes up an explanation. Because human nature lusts for justifications, we often choose to subscribe to false ones rather than accept the simple absence of one. The works of Bokonon and Vonnegut both do essentially this—they fill with symbolic reason that which has no literal reason. The cat’s cradle does both; it simultaneously offers a glimpse into the literal emptiness of the bare string and hands, and offers the opportunity to imbue these with symbolic value external to the very elements of the game itself. But Newt plays the part of the skeptic; he refuses to allow malleable symbolic expression to dictate his interpretation of the world, and thus he finds no satisfying interpretation of his world and is torn apart by such utter lack of resolution.

Bokononism builds its foundation on the inevitability of this eternal human struggle, as does Vonnegut the implied author, who is constantly shifting the counterweights between the internal and external irony of making life conform to art, toiling to keep the Newts of both his fictional and our real worlds afloat. However, in order to create tension between the religious and artistic satire of *Cat’s Cradle* the novel and Bokonon’s fictional religious struggle within that novel, Vonnegut, the implied author of

³⁹ Ibid. 165. Original emphasis.

both (one removed within the other), must shift between objects of conspicuous manipulation. This means that, in order to reveal the exploitation at work in Bokononism, Vonnegut's external novel must present itself as sincere and objective, and in order to achieve the same revelation in the novel itself, Bokonon's work must momentarily feign its own unaffectedness.

While Newt Hoenikker laments the literal hollowness of the cat's cradle, he also comes to understand the mode of symbolism it represents, even if his own interpretation is equal but opposite to that which is intended. Rather than instilling value in something that inherently has none, he takes that lesson and instead learns to strip symbolic value from those things in his life that offer no answers of their own. First he takes apart the art of language, of human speech:

"From the way she talked," I said, "I thought it was a very happy marriage."
Little Newt held his hands six inches apart and he spread his fingers. "See the cat? See the cradle?"⁴⁰

And just pages later, he dismantles religion itself:

Little Newt snorted. "Religion!"
"Beg your pardon?" Castle said.
"See the cat?" asked Newt. "See the cradle?"⁴¹

Poor Newt fails to comprehend the entirety of religion's paradoxical function, and tragically finds himself unable to follow through with "the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it."⁴² Bokononism just happens to be, as any other mode of infusing life's paradox with symbolic meaning might be, the foundation around which Vonnegut's parallel triads of palliation are framed. As our narrator discovers, Bokononism's myriad Christian parodies such as the psalm-like calypsos, Bokononism-style crucifixion on "the Hook," or even the ritual of co-mingling

⁴⁰ Ibid. 179.

⁴¹ Ibid. 183.

⁴² Ibid. 284.

“soles” (literally, the rubbing together of feet) Vonnegut’s own external objectives lie hidden. He allows readers to dwell on the absurdity of a culture that allows their greatest life-and-death fears to be assuaged by such blatantly absurd and empty symbolism, and he leaves them to question how anyone could be comforted by belief in a religion that conspicuously acts out a play of religious persecution just to give meaningless glory to the image of an average man. Truly the question is, how can any of these religious expressions offer tangible consolation to those who are overtly aware of their fabrication—after all, does their entire value not lie in one’s ability to hold even the smallest belief in their truth?

But then the implied author steps away from Bokononism’s conspicuous manipulation of life into art through religion, carrying on with a very credible story, one that is even terrifyingly serious at times—as one glimpses in the *Book of Knowledge* anecdote on page 15. It is then that the implied author’s own conspicuous manipulation is foregrounded on the canvas of *Cat’s Cradle*’s fiction. With concerns for Bokonon’s followers resounding in one’s head, the reader is encouraged to reflect such concern on his own condition. Is not the very act of reading such a fiction related to the practices of Bokononism? Is a novel itself much more than a symbol, a pretense, a way of making that which is unanswerable make sense? And in the reflection of our wavering narrator John, and all the willing Bokononists of *Cat’s Cradle*, we see our own image and our own willingness to find literal consolation in that which we openly acknowledge as symbolic art. Sometimes, one is invited to suppose, believing in our culture’s more-than-temporary explanations for life’s mystery is a much more appealing alternative to the impotent doubt of forever seeking a certainty which does not exist. After all, John considers, “‘How does a man die when he’s deprived of the consolations of literature?’ ‘In one of two ways...petrescence of the heart or atrophy of the nervous system.’ Neither one very

pleasant, I expect...”⁴³ And as the chemical compound Ice-9 is unleashed on the world at the novel’s end, restructuring the very molecular bonds of water to contagiously freeze all that it touches, the stasis of the earth itself reflects that of Vonnegut’s novel, with the same evils he began by allying readers against having been digested, understood, and resolved—if not redeemed.

* * * *

With its publication in 1963, *Cat’s Cradle*⁴⁴ arguably marked the beginning of Vonnegut’s success as a novel-writer, with its increasingly deft and intricate satirical work paving the way for that of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* within the next seven years. Just as Vonnegut’s situational satire of *Player Piano* grew quickly into the more holistic irony of *CC*, so did the world of John the surname-less immigrant gone apocalyptic prophet rapidly evolve into yet another permutation of sarcastic world-play. The characteristic humor of Vonnegut as he is generally thought of today is marked by two primary features: the “Vonnegut Persona,” a fictional image which claims to be the author himself within the text, as well as a bantering verbal irony which his previous work largely lacks relative to its drama.

The absurd, farcical religious parodies of *Cat’s Cradle* give rise to each of these features in their own way. Vonnegut, in his evolution as a writer, seems to recognize that for his ironic tone to be maximally effective, it must do two things: first, it must demonstrate experience; and second, its voice must turn the rhetoric on itself, such that it implies that at least the author thinks no less of his reader than of himself.⁴⁵ How much credibility does one hold in the eyes of those he approaches with a sarcastic and overtly

⁴³ Ibid. 232.

⁴⁴ *Cat’s Cradle* may be referred to in shorthand as *CC*.

⁴⁵ Conversation with Professor Eric S. Rabkin, University of Michigan Professor of English Language and Literature, 15 November 2007.

unserious tone? The clear answer is next to none; in fact, one's initial reaction would naturally be to *disbelieve* the things that such a person says. So how is Vonnegut to bring across any serious moral matters in his characteristic satiric voice? Given that tone is a characteristic of the author's voice existing mutually independently of its corresponding rhetoric (understood as the manipulation of language for the purposes of persuasion), then rhetorical style can be understood as having natural associations with various modes of expression. However, Vonnegut's structure of ironic relations between tone and denotation seems to vary throughout his career as his implied author's attitude toward his subject matter changes. This dilemma incites the progression of humor between *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which the Vonnegut Persona and the implied author's verbal irony are rhetorical responses to the writing's distinctive satirical form.

CHAPTER TWO: THAT WASN'T IN THE MOVIE

In 2007, Nielsen BookScan, a branch of Nielsen Media Research—the world's leading provider of television, radio and print audience measurement⁴⁶—published statistics regarding three of the most famous authors to surface after WWII, all deceased within the past year. In this report, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* shows the sale of 280,000 copies since 2006, a pace which is four times higher than that of each of Norman Mailer's and William Styron's three most popular novels combined. Included in these counts are Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1968, selling less than 2,000 since 2006, and Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, a Pulitzer winner in 1969, at a mere 3,000. While Vonnegut never won a Pulitzer Prize, his third bestselling novel since 2006, *Breakfast of Champions*, came in at a commanding 74,000 copies sold.⁴⁷

In an attempt to examine such disparity in public reception, Dana Gioia—Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts—cites the broad appeal of humor as a possible explanation for Vonnegut's enigmatic “staying power,” recalling “being given an honorary degree a few years ago at Lehigh University, when Vonnegut was the commencement speaker...you could tell these kids had read him in a way that they hadn't read Mailer or Styron.”⁴⁸ Surely the relatively more inviting tone and length of Vonnegut's novels contributes to his fame, but it seems that the extent to which Vonnegut's popularity endures across decades of re-readers, generations of new readers, and demographics of all kinds never ceases to impress statisticians and literary critics alike, leaving them forever falling short of a full, satisfying, and tangible explanation in the eyes of readers.

⁴⁶ Associated Press, (2007) “Readers Prefer Vonnegut to Mailer, Styron,” MSNBC.com, 2007. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21825211/>>. Retrieved January 2008.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The popular archetype of this mysterious appeal is Vonnegut's 1969 war story from Germany, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The novel itself was incidentally as much a Cinderella story as the grotesque play acted out within it, with the tragicomic figure of protagonist Billy Pilgrim in a halter-top fur jacket and silver boots the first of many stand-ins for Kurt Vonnegut's own perceived self-image of the time—a ludicrous, underappreciated, and sometimes pathetic figure⁴⁹. Vonnegut seems to have felt himself locked away in the science fiction genre by high-brow critical minds and left there to rot. But as quickly as he became scornful and partially resigned to this fate, along with it the impossibility of ever telling his war story from Dresden, *Slaughterhouse-Five* exploded in the collective popular mind. Vonnegut rose from near anonymity to broad fame, struggling to make his mental stability and confidence as an active writer keep pace.

The long drought of recognition, however, left Vonnegut as touched as did sudden popularity. In *Cat's Cradle* (*CC*) it is easy to recognize the implied author's meticulously calculated execution of satire. We see the dramatic play between comedy and tragedy, the eloquent scenes of fear and vulnerability encased in a multi-layered satirical context. By the time *SH5* is published, however, Vonnegut's 20-year inferiority complex seems to have finally found a release in his writing. In *SH5*, chilling, dramatic scenes like those of *CC* now coruscate with satire, and are almost never allowed to stand alone and echo unpolluted human goodness back onto readers without interruption:

Billy Pilgrim was lying at an angle on the corner-brace, self-crucified, holding himself there with a blue and ivory claw hooked over the sill of the ventilator. Billy coughed when the door was opened, and when he coughed he shit thin gruel. This was in accordance with the Third Law of Motion according to Sir Isaac Newton. This law tells us that for every action there is a reaction which is equal and opposite in direction.

⁴⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 184-5.

On the first page of his 1974 essay collection *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, Vonnegut writes: "I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled "science fiction" ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal."

This can be useful in rocketry.⁵⁰

The satire arises here from our broken expectation of the language. The passage invokes the deeply affecting image of Christ with the loaded word “crucified,” and profound pity with the raw language of “[shitting] thin gruel.” But then the implied author rapidly shifts his syntax and diction to give us a middle school physics lesson, addressing us first as mature intellectual readers and secondly as simple children. He prevents us from dwelling on the vulnerability and injustice of Billy’s condition, wrenching us between tears at the realism of Billy’s *human* suffering and laughter at the basic theory behind the *scientific* reality taking place. And not only is the satiric assault scientific, it is ultimately dehumanizing. With the comically simple and unassuming last line, Vonnegut makes Billy rocket-like—more machine than man.

It seems that the willing ignorance of *Cat’s Cradle* is no longer sufficient; life has become too disheartening for the “lies” to be enough anymore, and Eliot Rosewater of *SH5* demands of his psychiatrist, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living.”⁵¹ This notion resounds through Billy Pilgrim’s tale, with the implied author rejecting the healthy balance of comedy and tragedy present in *Cat’s Cradle*, and indicating a significant shift in attitude toward *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s subject matter. Vonnegut’s own disillusionment has perhaps seeped into this voice and begun to reflect his jading onto the very structure of the fiction.

In *Cat’s Cradle* the composition of the story is as complex as the implied author’s perception of the world. He shows readers how the tragedy of one period of life cannot stand for the whole of it, that one must consider the omnipresent goodness as well and never dismiss the balance between humanity and cruelty out of frustration. In just this way,

⁵⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 129.

a single chapter or scene from *CC* is far from representative of the novel as a whole, and one must examine all of its constituent pieces to truly understand its entirety.

Slaughterhouse-Five, on the other hand, seems a departure from this idea. Vonnegut's new implied author creates a far darker story in which an analysis of the part versus the whole is irrelevant for some purposes, and the world of *SH5* may seem to be very much all of a piece. This may seem contradictory, but a reader who examines a scene from *CC* and finds it dramatic and tragic while the novel itself is humorous can see that an understanding of each part is crucial to the whole and that the overarching satirical structures moving between religion and art are critical for Vonnegut to tie together a complex and multifarious world. That of *SH5*, on the other hand, is full of equally dark scenes of satire, any of which could stand for the whole. This two-dimensional structure of the novel's humanity seems to be inextricably interlaced with the implied author's attitude toward human nature in the world he himself inhabits. Billy's world is dark, cruel, and hopeless without redemption or rebirth—perhaps, we might imagine, in the same way that the implied author sometimes envisions his own—that is, capable of being immediately understood as a whole based on a single moment of hardship and brutality.

This new attitude of Vonnegut's implied author gives rise to a new breed of satire in which the rhetoric and tone are consistent, but the manner of expression and attitude are fluid. Just as in *Cat's Cradle*, this implied author unifies readers against a horrific and unalloyed evil, an approach to war that fails to recognize humanity, but the distinctive new manner and attitude of the satire in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not conducive to the distant yet pervasive dramatic irony of *Cat's Cradle* that moves in and out of the reader's focus. Rather, the novel is witty and unrelenting, featuring a strong verbal irony that insists upon having its say on any and all matters, and also introducing a unique and thus far unseen

character: the Vonnegut Persona. The Persona creates irony through its claims to reality while bringing immediacy to the writing through those very same reality claims. The ironic tone turns the rhetoric on itself, interjecting much more dialogue-play than previously seen, and establishes an equity between writer and reader. It invites the latter to laugh at one broken expectation after another in Billy Pilgrim's world and to see them in his own. Hopefully that reader may not only preside over Billy's tragicomedy but eventually learn to bring the insight into humanity and strife gained there into his reality. The implied author equips his readers with so much pity and moral outrage left unfulfilled at the close of the novel that it encourages the reader to seek redemption for humanity's goodness in his or her world, seemingly in honor of the injustice done to the fictional Billy Pilgrim. The implied author refuses to redeem humanity time and time again in *SH5* as he does in *CC*, and readers are drawn in much closer to the action and narration of *SH5*, invited to play the role of redeemer for themselves beyond the scope of the fiction.

Vonnegut plays on the discrepancies between lies and fiction here. Fiction is a lie generally acknowledged as such for the sake of art and story. It is a lie that intends social benefit, rather than any sort of either innocent or insidious deception. Conversely, a lie is an untruth that does not intend to be discovered, but may harbor intentions either good or bad. Vonnegut does not seem to want us to have to base our lives on lies—the notion he explores in *CC*. Rather, he uses the Persona's reality claim as a well-meaning lie to validate the fiction of Billy Pilgrim's story, retrieving the social value of an innocent lie in fiction.

Rather than achieving redemption for humanity through reassurance and optimism as in *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* achieves it through excess and pity. The satire continually pushes readers one line beyond the threshold of comfort, sometimes shocking

them by countering misery with bold humor, and often to the point where the overkill of tragedy becomes comical. The tagline “So it goes” appears on nearly every page of the novel to mark any incidence of death, human or otherwise. While this does serve, in the words of Vonnegut critic Jerome Klinkowitz, “As a reminder that death itself is one of life’s most common events,”⁵² that reminder is somewhat empty, and its role is full of complexities beyond that. Readers are simultaneously aware of the fact that, while death is one of life’s most common events on a large scale, it is actually quite rare in the lives of individuals. Thus, one of the reasons that war is horrible is that it makes death much more frequent and immediate, hence thwarting human efforts to ignore it. Preceding Billy Pilgrim’s similar image described on page 30, “So it goes” is used to describe the figure of Christ on the cross:

Billy had an extremely gruesome crucifix hanging on the wall of his little bedroom...A military surgeon would have admired the clinical fidelity of the artist’s rendition of all Christ’s wounds—the spear wound, the thorn wounds, the holes that were made by the iron spikes. Billy’s Christ died horribly. He was pitiful.
So it goes.⁵³

Then in another scene the phrase is mimicked in the description of an old champagne bottle:

So Billy uncorked it with his thumbs. It didn’t make a pop. The champagne was dead. So it goes.⁵⁴

Thus the reminder that death is one of life’s most common events is not as profound or moving as it certainly could be in a non-satirical novel. In fact, its presence is overwhelming, as though it were a tagline sprinkled on the text indiscriminately, so that the ridiculousness of marking the death of a bottle of champagne translates over onto the

⁵² Jerome Klinkowitz, “The Monster at the End of this Book,” *Slaughterhouse-Five: Reforming the Novel and the World* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1990) 27.

⁵³ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 93.

brutality of Christ's death, drawing the tragic power away from the latter image. Even though Klinkowitz does acknowledge the blandness that this phrase acquires through overuse, he does not push beyond indicating its reflection of death's regularity to show how the excessiveness of "so it goes" actually creates a strong irony through its very weakness in excess and serves as a powerful tool for the author. In demonstrating the deadening of souls to the significance of death that war and industrialization may cause, a new and powerful tragedy emerges from the failure of the phrase "so it goes" to provoke its own tragedy.

At the same time, the overuse of the phrase sometimes only creates the illusion of detracting from the significance of the moments of genuine tragedy; in fact, the comedic trivializing of such utter catastrophe draws readers even closer to that tragedy because it refuses to let the ridiculousness escape their notice and draws them intimately among the torturous tragicomedy. In his essay on Vonnegut's satire, Conrad Festa proposes that:

To a very large degree Vonnegut has accepted life as it is. But just as strongly as he has accepted life, he rejects the idea that we have no control over the evil in it that makes life unnecessarily painful. The tension between the two positions held simultaneously by Vonnegut creates not only the impulse toward satire but also the special tone of his satire—a Horatian spirit infused with a sense of urgency, anger touched with pity, and moral indignation bathed in a deep sense of personal inadequacy.⁵⁵

This tension that Festa identifies in Vonnegut is placed on the shoulders of *SH5*'s readers. Within the novel, Billy Pilgrim accepts life as it is. But the implied author, in his attitude toward the novel conveyed by his narrator's rhetoric and tone throughout the work, seems to be on Vonnegut's side in rejecting "the idea that we have no control over the evil in it that makes life unnecessarily painful." And so Vonnegut uses the work's satire in instances like the overworked tagline "so it goes" to put his sense of personal inadequacy onto

⁵⁵ Conrad Festa, "Vonnegut's Satire," *Vonnegut in America* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., 1977) 148.

readers; they ought to feel the same “anger touched with pity” and “moral indignation” at such bland, detached reference to unnecessary evil and pain as the implied author does toward the very content of the novel at hand. In other words, the implied author’s narratorial techniques manipulate readers into outrage at the apparent attitude of that implied author toward the world of the novel, and this is perhaps a translated mirror image of the same outrage that the latter seems to hold toward the world he is living in. The implied author thus makes himself into a satirical conductor for stimulating morality on a broader scale.

Perhaps one of the most slippery tools of *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s implied author is the Vonnegut Persona, an idea which goes by many other descriptors and often defies accurate description entirely. Yet this feature of Vonnegut’s writing is seemingly the most cited and interpreted aspect of his work. Critic Bill Gholson seems to grasp the subtle trick better than many others who, like Jerome Klinkowitz, often take Vonnegut at his word much too readily and literally in accepting the notion that “the person talking about them [the events of his World War II story] is the real Kurt Vonnegut.”⁵⁶ Gholson, rather, understands the layer of removal in such a technique, noting the forming of a consistent narrative self that blurs “the distance between...narrative self and the narrated self of each idiosyncratic narrator that narrows as we move through the novels until the two are virtually indistinguishable.”⁵⁷ Thus when Klinkowitz suggests that the “real-life author is present within the text: as the narrative’s central character,”⁵⁸ he is overlooking the essential fact that the voice claiming to be Kurt Vonnegut in chapter one of

⁵⁶ Jerome Klinkowitz, “Speaking Personally,” *The Vonnegut Effect* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 84.

⁵⁷ Bill Gholson, “Narrative, Self, and Morality,” *At Millenium’s End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001) 139.

⁵⁸ Jerome Klinkowitz, “The Monster at the End of This Book,” *Slaughterhouse-Five: Reforming the Novel and the World* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1990) 21.

Slaughterhouse-Five simply cannot, by definition, really *be* Kurt Vonnegut. The real-life Kurt Vonnegut is, as of April 11, 2007 is no longer even among the living. But even if he were, that would not make him any more synonymous with a narrative voice captured in the pages of a 1969 novel telling readers that his name is Kurt Vonnegut and that he was one of seven survivors of the Dresden firebombing in 1945. That narrative voice is just that—a narrative voice, a narrator, a character. If he has a name and historical presence in common with the author Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., that certainly makes the metaphorical relationship between the author and this Vonnegut persona complex, but will never make them the same being.

Correspondingly, the reader does not actually participate in the “immediately present act of writing” nor “a series of recounted events,”⁵⁹ but rather a recounting of the immediate act of writing. Because all writing is necessarily representational, the person in the beginning of the novel is a fictional representation of Kurt Vonnegut, but one that is perhaps even more telling than the “real-life” author himself would be. The literary decisions that Vonnegut’s implied author makes in representing “himself”—everything from the way this Vonnegut Persona speaks to the character traits revealed in him—while we wonder what others were omitted—help the reader and critic to evaluate the implied author’s attitudes and narrative strategies. Later in his essay, Bill Gholson notes that the narrowing between the narrative self and that of “each idiosyncratic narrator” helps to mold this moral element of the satire, such that:

Ethical implications of the tale being told are made explicit in the telling, and the moral character of “self” is aligned with the moral tone of the narration. Thus narrative and self are fused, accounting for the inescapable relationship between

⁵⁹ Ibid. 22.

morality and identity in Vonnegut's work, and his desire for a moral language closely allied with identity.⁶⁰

Thus the layers of Vonnegut's presence—the implied author, the Vonnegut Persona, and the biographically Vonnegut-esque protagonist, Billy Pilgrim—are used not to engage the reader in the creation of the story, as Klinkowitz claims, because the story is already written and such a thing is impossible, but to engage the reader in the novel's humor and concerns. The implied author creates complex layers of identity's reality and fiction in his narrator and protagonist, which often serve as Vonnegut's vehicles of satire. While the Vonnegut Persona is not unreliable in the conventional sense, his world is murky. His ability to draw the reader closer to the events of the novel, its major figures, and its implied author while simultaneously distancing the reader from these same elements perfectly establishes the dual sense of personal moral investment in the novel and distance from reality necessary for Vonnegut's creation of satire.

This Persona makes a slew of dubious suggestions of his existence, but only four times throughout the novel does he make explicit claims to his reality and identity as Kurt Vonnegut, the biographical author. The first is the entirety of chapter one, where his nature is somewhat different from the other three. This chapter introduces the subject of the novel, the challenges of its creation, and the external opposition to it. This narrator shows us the "reality" before the fiction, and he gives us the perspective of war from figures that he claims are historically verifiable. Mary O'Hare's character lays Vonnegut's target out for readers before Vonnegut even begins the actual tale:

You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Bill Gholson, "Narrative, Self, and Morality," *At Millenium's End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001) 139.

⁶¹ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 18.

Although readers receive Vonnegut's introductory stories under the guise of real-time events, it is important to recognize that these first-chapter claims are less relevant for the reader's literal belief in this writing-in-the-moment technique than for their function as another world in which the atrocity of war is condemned. Vonnegut sets up inhumane war as the unified target of his satire three-fold, through a world that poses itself as exterior and real (1), one that is self-conscious of its fictionality but representative of actual history (2)—the story of Billy Pilgrim that begins in chapter two—and a setting that is transparently fictional for all readers from all angles, Tralfamadore (3). We hear the voice of Mrs. O'Hare as our own mother telling us that war is unjust, we see the image of Billy Pilgrim that shows us the injustice, and we witness the extra-terrestrial perspective that lives in blissful ignorance, believing instead that since "There isn't anything we can do about them [wars]" we ought to "spend eternity looking at pleasant moments."⁶²

Chapter one is the implied author's opportunity to paint an image of the Vonnegut Persona, external to the Dresden war story, that is to give greater meaning and significance to the Persona's brief forays within that story. Even if we refuse to take the narrator of chapter one at his word that he is the literal author of this novel we hold in our hands, it shows us a partial and self-conscious image of what that person might look like. The implied version of Vonnegut the author who reveals to readers a fictional Persona that bears his name and historical experiences is sending us one message in two ways, directly through the characteristics of the Vonnegut Persona he chooses to narrate, and indirectly through the implied version of his authorial self deciding what aspects of such a character to include or exclude. That message is that there exists a powerful humanist and moral

⁶² Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1969) 150.

voice behind the language urgently desiring that we “Listen”⁶³ and, despite the satirical quips that color the story, accept sincerity in the narrator’s admonition:

There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again...And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like “*Poo-tee-weet?*”⁶⁴

As this Vonnegut Persona concludes his first chapter and hands the reigns over to a primary narrator, we enter that second chapter with our minds on a man who pities intensely Lot’s wife from the Biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah—turned to a pillar of salt for looking back on her city and its people burned to the ground—noting as the impetus for such compassion: “[she] was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human.”⁶⁵

The constant return to and focus on human goodness follows the Vonnegut Persona into his cameo appearances throughout the central fiction of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The voice we observed in the Preface manipulating Billy Pilgrim’s narrator becomes slightly bolder than when he initially refused to press his face against his moral lens enough to explicitly reveal his watchful eye. In the heart of the fiction, that Persona bursts briefly through the language to face readers head on and draw us continually back to the essential elements of humanity present amidst a flurry of witty satirical relief and material made naturally heavy by its historical and literary status. The first of these Vonnegut-bursts occurs in chapter three when Billy and his infantry regiment are taken captive by German soldiers:

There was another long silence, with the colonel dying and dying, drowning where he stood. And then he cried out wetly, “It’s me boys! It’s Wild Bob!” That is what he had always wanted his troops to call him: “Wild Bob.”...the colonel imagined

⁶³ Ibid. 29.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 24.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 28.

that he was addressing his beloved troops for the last time, and he told them that they had nothing to be ashamed of...

He said all this while staring into Billy's eyes. He made the inside of poor Billy's skull echo with balderdash. "God be with you, boys!" he said, and that echoed and echoed. And then he said, "If you're ever in Cody, Wyoming, just ask for Wild Bob!"

I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare.⁶⁶

A certain melodramatic quality lurks in this delusion of Roland Weary, an infantry private arguably as ludicrous to readers as Billy Pilgrim, trying to force his reality to align with the heroic script he has set for himself. His character in this scene is backed by pathetic descriptions of his excessive equipment and self-aggrandizement throughout the war, so that his fantasy of glory incites in readers more exasperation than pity:

Weary looked like Tweedledum or Tweedledee, all bundled up for battle. He was short and thick. He had every piece of equipment he had ever been issued, every present he'd received from home... Weary had a block of balsa wood which was supposed to be a foxhole pillow. He had a prophylactic kit containing two tough condoms 'For the Prevention of Disease Only!' He had a whistle he wasn't going to show anybody until he got promoted to corporal. He had a dirty picture of a woman attempting sexual intercourse with a Shetland pony. He had made Billy Pilgrim admire that picture several times.⁶⁷

Although Weary's character is set up in such a way as to make a mockery of the failed climactic moment where he envisions himself as a colonel crying out to his men for the final time, the presence of the Vonnegut Persona tugs readers back against the grain of the scorn into which the implied author has led them. Immediately after readers scoff at how pathetic Weary is, they are slapped with the humanity of his broken condition and the wartime circumstances that have made him as he is.

If it were not for those final two lines of the excerpt above, we might leave the scene with a maliciously humorous image of an overweight pretty-boy who takes himself too seriously meeting a fitting end. But the implied author seems to play a trick on readers, tempting them to fall into the attitude of accepting war and its victims as mere stories and

⁶⁶ Ibid. 85-6.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 50-1.

characters that we may laugh at because we can set them down as entirely separate from ourselves. As soon as he lures us into that trap, the implied author employs the Vonnegut Persona to snap it down and catch us in our callousness. The brevity of the Persona's lines shatters the train of our dismissive mental fiction, while the rare use of the pronoun "I" in the text takes us out of the realm of fictional characters and into terms we must relate to directly. "I" points at an individual, at a tangible humanity, and at the readers themselves. It puts readers in the context of self-identity and accordingly into the scene, forcing them to pity the humanity of it or seemingly commit a sort of literary masochism. This pathetic figure is no longer Roland Weary; it is Vonnegut (his fictional Persona); it is the reader; it is humankind—and that is nothing to disdainfully shuck off no matter the circumstances.

The Vonnegut Persona's following two appearances operate similarly. In one he interrupts an episode of violent illness:

Billy looked inside the latrine. The wailing was coming from in there. The place was crammed with Americans who had taken their pants down. The welcome feast had made them as sick as volcanoes. The buckets were full or had been kicked over.

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go." He meant his brains.

That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.⁶⁸

And another occurs upon the arrival of the American prisoners of war in Dresden, Germany:

The Americans arrived in Dresden at five in the afternoon. The boxcar doors were opened, and the doorways framed the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen. The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd. It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim.

Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, "Oz." That was I. That was me. The only other city I'd ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid. 160.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 189.

These later Vonnegut-bursts serve similar functions as that which marks the Americans' capture. The latter perhaps more so, with its ability to draw us into fantasy using strings of dreamy locution connected by an unconventional number of consecutive "ands," as well as soft magical diction in "loveliest," "voluptuous," and "enchanted." Though just as quickly as it lulls us to a fantastic reverie, it drops sharp sentences composed of nothing but a subject, verb, and direct object, again utilizing the personal pronoun "I" and giving us a harsh reality check. The former scene actually operates somewhat conversely to the others, while still achieving the same effect. The implied author bombards readers with harsh language and grotesque imagery, but instead of using the Vonnegut Persona to pull us back from a blissful internal fiction that he himself incited, he uses it to prevent our withdrawing from the overwhelming brutality of the scene, holding our faces down in the awful, intense humanity of it.

The sudden shifts from soothing fantasies to harsh realities that we can track according to the presence of the Vonnegut Persona are exemplary of the restless style of the entire narrative. They mirror the shifting somber and trivial echoes of "So it goes" as well as the swift, uncomfortable motion between brutality and humor that we saw in the crucified image of Billy Pilgrim demonstrating Newton's third law of motion. Such a drastically fluctuating style is foreign to the satirical strategy readers observed in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* just six years earlier. *SH5* abandons the deliberate, intricate, holistic satire created through systems of triangular palliation in favor of sudden divergences and fast-paced sarcastic word play.

Because these satirical attacks occur at the level of individual sentences, rather than in the tension between shifting overarching structures, they create a much more even tone that emanates from the implied author's attitude and approach to the fiction. The reader is

faced with a greater challenge than before; s/he is not given glimpses of human goodness and hope. In fact, readers are emotionally guided closer to pity than anything else, and the effectiveness of the novel's moral provocation relies on this disparity between hope and pity. Hope comes from a need for assurance, from the promise and demonstration of human goodness, and from a desire for stability. *Cat's Cradle* gives this to readers; *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not. Rather, *SH5* sets them up against an unalloyed evil, brings the reader to a heightened awareness of humanity, and assails that vulnerability with human strife. Because the implied author has made the desire for human redemption accessible in his readers via the very first chapter, he can bring them to pity rather than losing them in utter despair. That fine line between the two is the source of the implied author's moral provocation. He brings readers to the breaking point in their intense longing for justice and leaves it unfulfilled within the scope of the novel. Instead of redeeming humanity within the fiction for readers as he did in *CC*, he rouses them to take the emotion of pity and transform it for themselves into outrage and a commitment to betterment, that is, to achieve human redemption in the world of the reader rather than the implied author, in reality rather than fiction.

CHAPTER THREE: THERE IN THE DARK IN THE COCKTAIL LOUNGE

At the opening of chapter 19, *Breakfast of Champions* refers to its own unique version of the Vonnegut Persona as “on a par with the Creator of the Universe there in the dark in the cocktail lounge.”⁷⁰ Readers may wonder at the motive for this less-than-subtle parallel between the functions of an author and a God—one of many in the novel—a notion perhaps born from Kurt Vonnegut’s perceived sense of his public image in the early 1970s. By the time of *Breakfast*’s publication, Vonnegut was many things he had never been before, including a best-selling author and one adapted to the big screen. In an essay entitled “Speaking Famously” regarding Vonnegut’s post-*Slaughterhouse-Five* work, critic Jerome Klinkowitz observes the following:

Slaughterhouse-Five is not just the last book Vonnegut wrote as a little-known, weakly selling author. It is also the last work done on Cape Cod, where he had lived for two decades; it is the final piece of writing he would do while sharing a household with his wife Jane, to whom he had been married for a quarter century; and it was the end of his career as a provider for six children. He considers these changes important enough to mention first in ‘About This Play,’ his preface to *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, the business of which had moved him to a borrowed apartment in New York City.⁷¹

Thus, fame was only one of many major life changes the author was undergoing at the time, and it does not require much stretching of a reader’s imagination to suppose that, overwhelmed with the burden of writing under a spotlight of success and in an utterly unfamiliar place in life, Vonnegut felt his creative burden no lighter than that of the Creator of the Universe as he craved the nostalgic dark of some anonymous cocktail lounge.

In this first novel after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, following a brief foray as a playwright, Vonnegut returns to fiction, having sustained his penchant for moral egotism.

⁷⁰ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 205.

⁷¹ Jerome Klinkowitz, “Speaking Famously: *Happy Birthday, Wanda June; Breakfast of Champions; Slapstick; Jailbird; and Deadeye Dick*,” *The Vonnegut Effect* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 99.

Breakfast's narrator takes on more biographically Vonnegut characteristics than can be attributed to chance, including his mother's suicide, his birthday,⁷² and his affinity for Pall Mall cigarettes.⁷³ In this way, the voice of the novel immediately and thoroughly blurs the identity line between the narrator amidst the text and the biographical author behind it, such that it takes readers only a handful of pages to forget who is supposedly speaking to them, a Vonnegut Persona like that of *SH5* or the new narrator of *Breakfast*. That narratorial "I" of the novel—who goes by the thin alias "Philboyd Studge"—goes on to cite for readers a moral provocation for his writing that sounds distinctly familiar to readers fresh off *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s powerful moral imperative:

As I had approached my fiftieth birthday, I had become more and more enraged and mystified by the idiot decisions made by my countrymen. And then I had come suddenly to pity them, for I understood how innocent and natural it was for them to behave so abominably, and with such abominable results: They were doing their best to live like people invented in story books. This was the reason Americans shot each other so often: It was a convenient literary device for ending short stories and books.⁷⁴

With this the narrator gives away both a moral egotism and a faith in literature's efficacy reminiscent of the biographically-understood Kurt Vonnegut himself⁷⁵. The assertion that his countrymen behave abominably due to imitation of stories conveys a confidence in the ability of fiction writing to affect the realities of their readers, for better or worse. This narrative voice accordingly feels obligated to, as a storyteller, assure that these effects are indeed aligned with not just *a* sense of moral rightness, but *his* moral rightness—by writing a piece of moral fiction. Through declaring outrage at a social immorality that he attributes

⁷² On p. 4 of *Breakfast*, the narrator tells us that his mother "wrecked her brains with chemicals, which were supposed to make her sleep," while Vonnegut's own mother committed suicide by means of a sleeping pill overdose. He also tells readers that his birthday falls on the former Armistice Day, November 11th, the same date as Vonnegut's own.

⁷³ On p. 294, the narrator tells readers, "I turned my back to the fence, took a deep puff of my cigarette. Pall Malls would kill me by and by."

⁷⁴ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 215.

⁷⁵ See note 3 on p. 4 regarding Vonnegut's theory of authors as "canaries in the coal mine," with a social responsibility to publicly advocate a strong morality.

to works of literature *in* a work of literature, he indirectly makes a claim for the morality of his own story, that is, the very novel expressing that outrage—*Breakfast of Champions*.

Continuing the vein of self-reflexivity near the conclusion of the novel, Philboyd Studge manifests himself to one of the fiction's characters, Kilgore Trout, with claims to authorship of Kilgore's story—or rather, life. Given that Kilgore's story which Studge is claiming authorship of is the very one in which Studge is “presently” manifesting himself, he again creates an illusion of real-time action for *Breakfast*. In this scene Studge offers Kilgore an apple as a “symbol which [is] richly colored and three-dimensional and juicy” to satiate the human hunger for “symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed.”⁷⁶ This strategy of self-reflexivity recurring throughout the novel makes an immediate reality claim for the world of the work of art in which the claim is made.⁷⁷ The world of the characters always remains complete, closed and separate from the reader's reality; but, when one of the characters makes a claim to the real-time writing of the novel, he reveals an awareness of readers and of the gap between the reality of the writing process and the fiction of its finished product. Thus, if this narrator has aligned his character with that of Vonnegut-the-author thoroughly enough, one might consider the apple in this scene representative of Vonnegut's own gift to readers of a novel intended as “a symbol of wholeness and harmony and nourishment” free from “the great sins our nation has committed.”⁷⁸ Loree Rackstraw endorses this conflation of the narrator's apple with Vonnegut's novel, suggesting to readers that the implied author desires the following of us:

⁷⁶ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 300-1.

⁷⁷ Conversation with Eric S. Rabkin, University of Michigan Professor of English Language and Literature, 7 February 7 2008.

⁷⁸ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 301.

To be conscious of our persistent and paradoxical need to invent new works of art and bodies of knowledge to transcend our awareness of mortality and impotence, and to recognize that the epiphany we create with language is inevitably doomed to be temporary, given the ironic flux of life that awareness reveals.⁷⁹

This is precisely what Vonnegut does for readers in *Breakfast*, employing every distraction possible to help readers transcend the everyday evils of the world that serve as constant reminders of a flawed human mortality. But when art is created to console human beings in their painful awareness of mortality, it also amplifies that awareness, necessitating the creation of more art—hence the “persistent and paradoxical” nature of artistic invention which Rackstraw refers to. In this endeavor Vonnegut creates a novel where the mechanical distance between the fiction itself and the writing process has lessened since *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while the aesthetic involvement of the Vonnegut Persona is constant, if not amplified. Vonnegut increasingly explores the metafictional aspects of his work, creating “an exploration of ideas in loose narrative form,”⁸⁰ and an exaggeration of *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s fast-paced verbal irony.

Such comparisons between *Breakfast* and *SH5*’s Vonnegut persona and verbal irony beg contrast in light of *SH5*’s overwhelmingly positive reception by critics, readers and author alike, and *Breakfast*’s mixed responses. While *Breakfast* did succeed in achieving best-selling status, the reactions of both author and critics were a disappointment from which Vonnegut and his work never quite recovered. The success with readers despite *Breakfast*’s poor critical reception perhaps suggests that the novel’s sales are more a reflection of Vonnegut’s latent popularity than the writing’s true satirical effectiveness. In his self-grading scheme of the essay collection *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut awards both

⁷⁹ Loree Rackstraw, “The Paradox of ‘Awareness’ and Language,” *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000) 62.

⁸⁰ Jerome Klinkowitz, “Speaking Famously: *Happy Birthday*, *Wanda June*; *Breakfast of Champions*; *Slapstick*; *Jailbird*; and *Deadeye Dick*,” *The Vonnegut Effect* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004) 110.

Cat's Cradle and *Slaughterhouse-Five* an A-plus, while sticking *Breakfast of Champions*⁸¹ with a meager C. Not only that, but the voice of Philboyd Studge, the ambiguous narrator-author-character of *Breakfast*, interjects the comment, in another imitation of real-time writing, “‘This is a very bad book you’re writing,’ I said to myself.”⁸² In his commentary noted on page 11 of the Introduction, Vonnegut scholar Peter J. Reed refers to Vonnegut’s post-*SH5* work with slightly more tact as “the mixed works which have appeared subsequently [after Vonnegut’s first six novels].”

If we consider these three novels (*CC*, *SH5*, *BC*) as benchmarks in Kurt Vonnegut’s writing career along which one may trace both public reception of his work and his development as a writer within the satire genre, the clear question is: where can we pin down the technical sites of this rise and fall? Vonnegut’s aptitude as a satirist crescendos amongst *Player Piano*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the author grows into his characteristic tone via evolving rhetorical techniques. Thus, one might assume that after 1969, he somewhat loses his grasp on the ideal marriage of the two. In *Breakfast’s* Preface alone, our narrator indirectly affirms that novel’s conception in moral egotism and the goal of affecting reality by means of moral fiction. If these Vonnegutian characteristics are constant throughout *CC*, *SH5*, and *BC*, as they seem to be, we might examine other crucial sites and methods of satire in the former two novels: the implied author’s attitude, the presence of a unified satirical target, and a resolution in author redemption versus reader moral provocation.

In the transition between *Cat’s Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, readers observed a changeover between satire rooted in a dramatic irony and in a narrative voice. The narrator of *Slaughterhouse* seemed to bring to the novel a jaded perspective on the human condition

⁸¹ May be referred to in abbreviation as both *Breakfast* and *BC*.

⁸² Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 198.

(relative to *Cradle*), represented rhetorically in a continuous running commentary of satirical jabs in a wholly dark, unredeemable world. While we observed a distinct departure here from *Cat's Cradle's* shifts between moments of peace and despair that allow for redemption despite their umbrella of satire, we have also clearly seen the general satirical effectiveness of each mode. That is, the implied author's decision to present a narrator who reflects a complex world of both goodness and evil in which redemption is accessible (*CC*), or one who envisions it as a lost, evil cause without relief and all of a piece (*SH5*) is fluid among Vonnegut's novels. But in both cases, the text is successful according to both authorial and critical standards. This may reassure readers that *Breakfast* could continue to take yet another dissimilar rhetorical approach and still sustain an entertaining and effective satire, if it were not for one glaring variable: the constant presence of an unalloyed evil as the unified satirical target in both *Cat's Cradle* (endorsement of organized religion without acknowledging the element of blind faith necessary) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (an attitude toward war which fails to recognize the humanity of the very people by whom it is fought).

Breakfast of Champions introduces no fewer than five targets of its satire within the Preface and first chapter of the text alone, just 16 pages, including the decay of common courtesy, the loss of rich cultural foundation in America, the absence of sacred beliefs, the lack of brotherhood, and the historical failures of Capitalism. The attacks are undoubtedly clever in their spartan manner of re-envisioning common human practices to make them fresh and witty:

Trout and Hoover were citizens of the United States of America, a country which was called *America* (sic) for short. This was their national anthem, which was pure balderdash, like so much they were expected to take seriously... There were one quadrillion nations in the Universe, but the nation Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore

Trout belonged to was the only one with a national anthem which was gibberish sprinkled with question marks.⁸³

Furthermore, the narrator's sketches find humor in their simple and literal interpretations, including a sketch of an asshole represented by a gigantic asterisk, used indiscriminately to represent the word's biological and colloquial social definitions. Yet the sheer number of targets within this opening portion may foreshadow a general dilution of the satire among a myriad of dispersed targets.

True to Vonnegut's tireless focus on and circling back to humanity, *Breakfast's* targets continue to address what the implied author deems gross human moral failings. His narrator frequently attacks human pollution of the Earth, first directly in his own words, "The planet was being destroyed by manufacturing processes, and what was being manufactured was lousy, by and large"⁸⁴ to give credence to later, more thorough, attacks through the thin comic veil of Kilgore Trout's writing:

Within a century of little Kago's arrival on Earth, according to Trout's novel, every form of life on that once peaceful and moist and nourishing blue-green ball was dying or dead. Everywhere were shells of the great beetles which men had made and worshipped. They were automobiles. They had killed everything.⁸⁵

By noting his own disgust with human disrespect for Earth's ecosystems first, the narrator prevents readers from dismissing relevant moral messages from a fictional author that the narrator himself deliberately paints as a ludicrous failure.⁸⁶ The effectiveness of this strategy quickly begins to break down, however, when the novel's content skips from United States tradition to science fiction, porn, and insanity, attacking along the way gun

⁸³ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 7-8.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 86.

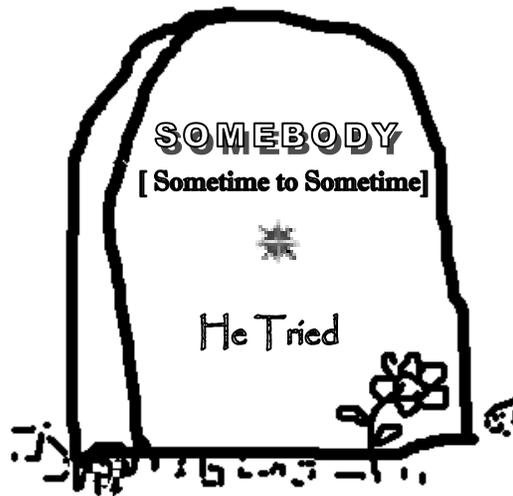
⁸⁵ Ibid. 29.

⁸⁶ Trout's self-declared mission at the Midland Arts Festival is to be a representative of failed artistry. The narrator describes him thus on page 231: "He expected to be received abominably, dreamed of embarrassing the Festival to death. He had come all this distance for an orgy of masochism. He wanted to be treated like a cockroach."

and property ownership, human communication skills, racism, military service, and modern US family structure.

Readers of *Breakfast* must wade through Vonnegut's "exploration of ideas in loose narrative form"⁸⁷ in order to find its bursts of crude humor, which are indeed entertaining despite their inconsistency. He throws out everything from bathroom humor to pathetically comic tombstone epitaphs:

A flying saucer creature named Zog arrived on Earth to explain how wars could be prevented and how cancer could be cured. He brought the information from Margo, a planet where the natives conversed by means of farts and tap dancing.⁸⁸



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Such comic episodes achieve Loree Rackstraw's objective for Vonnegut to "transcend our awareness of mortality" by disrupting the course of the narrator's criticism and allowing readers to come up for air and laugh at humanity's mortality before diving back under the admonishing prose. But is succeeding in that objective enough to make the satire effective?

⁸⁷ Jerome Klinkowitz. See note 79 on p. 48.

⁸⁸ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1973) 58.

⁸⁹ A representation of *Breakfast's* image on page 38 of the novel, identical to the original in text but not image.

Without a single primary target against which to set the attitudes of the novel's voices, which guide the readers' own perceptions and voices, the text's humor lacks the ability to sustain itself when digressions are taking place. Instead, readers are constantly being shuttled from one target to another, so that when one leaves their focus, there is no specific, enduring moral message to ground it in the backs of their minds through the rest of the story. And with no ultimate, unified satirical target, there is no correspondingly powerful morality echoing back when the fiction comes to a close. Readers can never feel themselves quite buying into opposition of an unalloyed evil against which they can develop a strong moral and personal investment that will stay with them beyond the scope of the novel, regardless of whether the author desires that they experience a sense of moral stasis (as in *Cat's Cradle*) or provocation (*SH5*). If indeed Kurt Vonnegut's literary goal is to moralize the reality of his readers via fiction—as certainly seems to be the case from his repeated personal depiction of authors as socially responsible for public morality⁹⁰ and fictional depiction of literature as essential to human health⁹¹—and if the dispersion of *Breakfast's* satirical targets detracts from the enduring nature of the novel's moral message, then it is perhaps true that, from this evaluative perspective, the author's newest rhetorical strategy falls short of these objectives and of matching the success found in either *Cat's Cradle* or *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

* * * *

After *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut went on to write 16 published volumes, including three scripts, five essay collections, one short story collection and

⁹⁰ See note 3 on p. 4, also mentioned at the opening of this chapter, to *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon* where Vonnegut states the responsibilities of artists as alerting society to danger, introducing new ideas, and responding symbolically to life.

⁹¹ See note 43 on p. 27, citing *Cat's Cradle's* narrator, John: "How does a man die when he's deprived of the consolations of literature?" "In one of two ways...petrescence of the heart or atrophy of the nervous system."

seven novels. He was 51 years old when he published *Breakfast* and 83 years old when he published his last work—*A Man Without a Country*. He would achieve best-seller status many more times after *Breakfast*, for novels and essays alike, and he died less than two years after publishing essays in 2005. While critics like Peter Reed⁹² seem to be in consensus as to the gradual devolution of Vonnegut’s satirical effectiveness, readers seem to be in similarly strong agreement⁹³ on his enigmatic staying power long beyond the pivotal period of literary development between the early 1960s and 70s which we have examined.

In April of 2007 Vonnegut came to the end of a life spent in the arms of a family and livelihood that he adored, but also spent battling bouts of depression, a suicide attempt, and family hardship.⁹⁴ These highs and lows encircled a career punctuated by both popular idolatry and harsh criticism, and in his later interviews admirers could hear the voice of a man swept up in the tide of all that a long life has to offer and battered by waves of alternating absolute contentment and immense despair. National Public Radio aired an interview with Vonnegut in 2005 entitled “A Man Without a Country” after his final work.⁹⁵ Listeners can hear each one of the 82 years in the man’s voice, in both the heavy-tongued lispng speech and sometimes-vain effort to keep his responses on track with the interviewer’s questioning; when she asks him about his favorite music, he responds with a

⁹² See note 17 on p. 11 regarding Reed’s commentary on “the later Vonnegut.”

⁹³ Even Vonnegut’s last work, *A Man Without a Country*, achieved best-seller status—36 years after *SH5*. Dinitia Smith. “Kurt Vonnegut, Novelist Who Caught the Imagination of His Age, Is Dead at 84.” The New York Times Online, 12 April 2007. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/12/books/12vonnegut.html?pagewanted=1&|>>. Retrieved 17 February 2008.

⁹⁴ Vonnegut attempted suicide in 1984—an act his mother carried out successfully when he was 22 years old—after struggling with depression for years. In 1958, Vonnegut adopted three of his nephews after his sister died of cancer within a week of her husband’s death in a train accident. “Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Biography,” Biography.com, A&E Television Networks, 2007. <<http://www.biography.com/search/article.do?id=9520329>>. 17 February 2008.

⁹⁵ “Kurt Vonnegut: ‘A Man Without a Country,’” 11 September 2005, Weekend Edition Sunday, National Public Radio <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4839818>>. Retrieved on 17 February 2008.

tangent about the development of jazz and bebop in the United States and mistreatment of African Americans in New Orleans during hurricane Katrina. In another interview by PBS (Public Broadcasting Service)⁹⁶ that same year, he demonstrates a remarkably sustained involvement in current events and social sentiments, but listeners also find him talking in circles in reproach of the current American political system, recycling verbatim quips from novels he wrote decades before, and by and large appearing to have a difficult time deploying coherent responses.

This fragmentation of Vonnegut's thought processes evident in late-life interviews is likely not unrelated to the fragmentation of satirical targets that we see in his writings during the latter half of his life. In his urgency to impart upon us both his frustration with human immorality and deep faith in human goodness,⁹⁷ the great moral egotist simply loses his delicate grasp on the ideal balance between these voices both within himself and in his writing. The 1949 Vonnegut of short stories printed in *The Saturday Evening Post* spent twenty years finding the brilliant collaboration of voices that populates *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and that fragile artistry which was half the product of spontaneous creative inspiration and half intense literary toil was doomed to the same fleeting mortality as the characters it depicted. And yet all critical attempts to discredit that artistry in the myopic light of devolutionary stylistic analysis are markedly overshadowed by the power of Vonnegut's bare, familiar voice to rouse ideals of hope, brotherhood, and empowerment indiscriminately in his readers.

⁹⁶ "NOW: A Tribute to Kurt Vonnegut," 7 October 2005, Public Broadcasting Service <<http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/vonnegut.html#>>. Retrieved on 17 February 2008.

⁹⁷ In his interview with NPR on September 11, 2005, Vonnegut remarks when asked about the communities in New Orleans reeling from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina: "My faith in the American people is *deep*."

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