

**Will the Real Kilgore Trout Please Stand Up?**

**The Chameleon Elements of Kurt Vonnegut**

by

Michael Richman

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## Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut reuses many elements of his works from novel to novel, but he does so in an unconventional way. Characters, places, and events maintain certain similarities but often feature markedly changed biographical details, character traits, attitudes, relationships, and the like. The choice on Vonnegut's part not to adhere to more traditional conventions regarding the reuse of characters from novel to novel is an embodiment of his larger concerns with certain traditional societal structures and methods through which artists and thinkers suggest that people can come to understand the universe. Whereas many traditional models are centered on a search for answers, Vonnegut advocates a schema where questions are as essential, if not more so, to reaching an understanding on the human condition as are answers. As a result, Vonnegut is consciously constructing a body of work wherein multiple representations of "chameleon elements" are presented, with no version particularly favored over the other. Thus, the space wherein the chameleon elements can be said to meet is within the questions they bring to light, as opposed to answers, which they often avoid attempting to provide.

My thesis begins with a look at how Vonnegut appropriates certain traditional cultural ideas and symbols and makes his own use of them, evoking the tradition in order to complicate it and provide new questions and ideas. This examination leads into a look at literary traditions in particular, reaching an understanding as to why for Vonnegut's project a departure from convention and tradition is beneficial. One such departure is the particular chameleon element I call the "Vonnegut essence," which sometimes seems to embody the author Vonnegut and is often interpreted as such but functions more complexly within the framework of Vonnegut's project to provide new questions and ideas. Through this, the details surrounding the chameleon elements move from specific questions raised to a more general model of the purposes and advantages of the inconsistency of the chameleon elements and the world outlook the Vonnegut project ultimately desires: one where there exists room for varying, divergent points of view simultaneously with a centralized, humanistic concern for a better world.

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## Introduction

Will the real Kilgore Trout please stand up?

Easy. He is a wise, shamanistic figure bearing a message of mostly hope and potential for the human race.

No, he is a bitter and cynical failed writer, though he deserves only so much blame for this, for he is really just the creation and plaything of another.

No, Kilgore Trout is not really an individual at all. Kilgore Trout is one of the pennames for the inmate Bob Fender, who is serving a life sentence for treason.

Such might be the argument between three people who had only encountered Kurt Vonnegut's character Kilgore Trout in the novels *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Jailbird*, respectively. Advising these three debaters to clear up their discrepancies by reading all of the other many instances where Kilgore Trout is encountered would ultimately prove of little help. More likely, the matter would only become that much more confused. The texts provide no clues to help readers who might be interested in determining which incarnation of Trout is the "real" version, nor are there any fast or easy clues as to how a reader might otherwise make sense of the incongruities.

Kilgore Trout is far from the only example of chameleon elements in Vonnegut's works. Rabo Karabekian is a minor character in *Breakfast of Champions* who gives an impassioned defense of his painting's worth and meaning, but then we find him reexamined as the central character of *Bluebeard* dismissing his own art as meaningless. The fictional city of Ilium in upstate New York is the site of a futuristic rebellion in *Player Piano*, the site of a research lab in *Cat's Cradle*, the birthplace of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s Billy Pilgrim, and the home of Mary and

Roy Hepburn in *Galápagos*. The fictional Midland City similarly functions in a variety of ways in several novels. Animals are not free from this reuse, as the dog Kazak is the mastiff of Winston Niles Rumfoord in *The Sirens of Titan*, a Doberman pinscher guard dog in *Breakfast of Champions*, and (as Kazakh) a seeing-eye German shepherd in *Galápagos*. Even a character claiming to be Kurt Vonnegut himself in one form or another, a “Vonnegut essence,” features prominently in many works, most directly in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Timequake*. Beyond a character as a stand-in for Vonnegut, elements of the texts that otherwise represent the author frequently develop, making this Vonnegut essence even more pervasive and demanding of investigation. This list of chameleon elements is far from exhaustive, but it is quite sufficient to show the point that Vonnegut exploits reuse in a highly unconventional way.

Reuse of elements is in itself no upstart on the literary stage. From the time Homer had Odysseus strap back on his *Iliad*-sullied armor and set sail anew in the *Odyssey*, literary works have often seen the same characters appear time and time again. Settings, both real and fictional, are reused; thematic elements develop in parallel from novel to novel; and metafictional aspects frequently play and replay an important role. What readers of Vonnegut notice as unconventional, however, is the way Vonnegut often reuses characters and locations, keeping them consistent enough so that readers view them as the same people and places (as opposed to different people and places with the same name) but inconsistent enough so that the changes are shocking and confusing. These chameleon shifts make up a large part of Kurt Vonnegut’s body of work and speak to one another in manners that invite exploration.

Yet, toward what end? A certainly plausible explanation for Vonnegut’s technique, especially in light of his overall tone, is that he actively wishes to avoid meaning. By taking what he establishes in one text and severely distorting it in another, he might be sending the message



that the search for meaning is pointless as meaning either does not exist as a whole or is beyond the reach of human understanding. The question relates to an understanding of Vonnegut's complex relationship with certain prevalent traditions overall. Vonnegut is well-known as a satirist, but what is the purpose of his satire? Does he wish to tear apart institutions for the mere sake of being iconoclastic? Or is there, perhaps, a larger aim in his work, a broader purpose in his complications of establishments?

If the latter case is so, his employment of his own chameleon elements may well follow suit. The chameleon elements such as the Vonnegut essence may well be complications that suggest a new structure for understanding the world, and their refusal to adhere to certain traditions might suggest a need to rethink those established traditions. Exactly what new structure Vonnegut would propose in their place lies within the very existence of the chameleon elements and the ideas they encompass.

## 1

**Fruit from the Tree of Freedom**

At the end of *Breakfast of Champions*, a character Vonnegut, who operating metafictionally writes the very book he is a part of, approaches his creation Kilgore Trout and announces the presentation of a new symbol. The symbol is to be a restorative one, a concept to help heal the broken mind of Kilgore Trout. It is a symbol of “wholeness and harmony and nourishment” and is appropriate for Americans, who as a people “hunger for symbols which have not been poisoned by great sins our nation has committed, such as slavery and genocide and criminal neglect, or by tinhorn commercial greed and cunning” (300).

Perhaps Trout was therefore surprised when the Vonnegut character, who is godlike in this book but no other, provides his creation not with a new symbol but with one of humankind’s oldest—he shows Kilgore Trout an apple. Why does Vonnegut appropriate a symbol with so much established meaning in traditional culture and turn it on its head? Several possible solutions exist. Perhaps the text here suggests that the character of Vonnegut is ignorant of traditional culture. Perhaps the character is a contrary individual who enjoys misrepresentation simply for the sake of being capricious. Perhaps the apple really is meant to be just an apple. These prospects, however, do not hold up well against the book as a whole.

The allusion to the apple of the Garden of Eden is obvious within the book’s context.<sup>1</sup> The Vonnegut character introduces himself to Trout by saying “I’m your Creator” (299). The novel earlier makes reference to an apple as that which the snake offered to Eve (205). Furthermore, the apple is given to Trout just before an exile of sorts, as Vonnegut claims he will

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<sup>1</sup> The exact text of the Bible has a fruit, not necessarily an apple, growing on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 3:3). However, works of popular culture, including this novel, often depict this fruit as an apple.

“set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career” (301).

Yet this apple is clearly operating much differently than Eden’s. Instead of a symbol interwoven with the idea of the original sin, this apple is a symbol free of “great sin.” Instead of a cause of misery and pain, this apple is to provide a joyous freedom. What is the effect of not providing a less troubling symbol, one that evokes fewer cultural resonances and fulfils the expectation of Vonnegut presenting a truly new symbol? Investigation of this question dovetails with the broader question of Vonnegut’s chameleon elements. This apple shows an established cultural idea represented unconventionally with no direct explanation, just as Vonnegut’s chameleon elements unconventionally change across his works with no direct explanation.

The very notion of providing a symbol as a sort of remedy is a strange ending for a book that opens with mockery of some of America’s most prevalent symbols—the flag, the national anthem, and the motto *e pluribus unum*, among others—calling such symbols “pure balderdash” (7) and “gibberish” (8). A chief complaint the narrator has with such symbols is that they could be not just meaningless but “evil nonsense,” in that it could “conceal great crimes” such as exhorting Columbus’ “discovery” of America while not teaching of the genocide and strife that followed as a direct result (10).

This sentiment, one set against misrepresenting and overemphasizing culture and tradition, is strongly evident across Vonnegut’s works. In an article he wrote and first published in 1988 in *Lear’s* magazine, Vonnegut mocks the idea that a successful society is dependent upon adhering to classical traditions, upon allowing the past to determine the future. In the article, Vonnegut is at his satirical finest, talking about the world’s future and lampooning optimists and pessimists alike. Regarding the books of doomsayers, Vonnegut writes:

They said, as most of them do today, that the country was falling apart because the young people were no longer required to read Plato and Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius and St. Augustine...whose collective wisdom was the foundation of any decent and just and productive society. (*Fates* 114)

The multiplicities inherent in Vonnegut's use of the apple challenge the ideas of these thinkers and the societies that would follow them. In addition to the two instances in *Breakfast of Champions* where the apple clearly alludes to religious ideas, a third reference gives the apple minimal significance, using it in an analogy that describes "the atmosphere of Earth relative to the planet...as thick as the skin of an apple," and further inauspiciously explaining apples as "a popular fruit" (127). While each of the three understandings varies greatly from the others, there is no indication that these apples are anything but the same object, and there is no suggestion that some sort of transformation does or can occur. Furthermore, each reference to the apple is accompanied by a drawing of an apple, and each of the three drawings is identical. In effect, the apple is given three apparently non-compatible definitions.

Such confusion does not mesh well with the ideas of the thinkers referenced in the *Lear's* article. It is true that their philosophies differ from one another in fairly significant ways; each philosophy would take a significantly different track, for example, if faced with the project of determining an object's meaning. Platonic thought would look at meaning in terms of "a realm of pure ideality" wherein meaning could exist "uniform, indissoluble and unchangeable" (Ogden 32). Aristotelian thought, in direct response to Platonic philosophy, looks to logical change as the primary mechanism for finding meaning in the world (Stumpf 99). The Stoics would examine the material basis of an object as grounds of getting at its reality (Stumpf 123), while Augustine emphasizes relationships between sensation, deductible truths, and a Christian God to understand the world (Stumpf 146).

While these philosophies clearly have differing approaches towards understanding reality and meaning, they are alike in that they depend upon the premise that a meaningful reality ultimately exists and humankind can understand it in a fairly objective manner. Were this premise not inherent in these philosophies, there would be no use for mechanisms to understand reality, for why bother with this attempt in a world devoid of meaning. Working in this way, these philosophies serve to form an evolving and multifaceted tradition entailing single realities and logical universes. While this tradition is, of course, by no means the only tradition or even the only Western tradition, it has been a significant and pervasive mode of thought in Western culture.

Vonnegut's apple actively frustrates this critical premise. The same symbolic apple simultaneously represents conflicting ideas. In this tradition, therefore, it is difficult if not impossible to say that the apple has *any* meaning, since it appears impossible to extract and prove any such meaning in a logical, objective fashion. The connections in the text equating the depictions of the apple are so firm that, as opposed to making attempts to find a way for the apple to function within this premise of these philosophies, the strongest interpretation is to see the apple as a direct, intentional confusion of the premise itself. Vonnegut does not feel beholden to follow the dictates of this tradition. The apple is given as a symbol in stark contrast to its typical role as a means of asserting the very ability to do so, to forgo tradition and blaze a new trail.

Of course, this new trail is firmly attached to the tradition from which it stems. Vonnegut's apple is not, all in all, a new symbol; it is an old symbol used in a new way. The past is not discarded. Rather, the past is relatively ignored, though its presence is undeniable. The sum effect is to suggest that it is foolish to ignore tradition as though it plays no role and never

did, but it is equally foolish to feel beholden to cultural expectations, to shy away from beliefs that run contrary to what is traditionally accepted. Thus Vonnegut does not hesitate to mock Liberty's torch as a "supposed imaginary beacon for children to see.... sort of an ice-cream cone on fire" (10). And thus this example of a chameleon element points towards the direction of Vonnegut's chameleon elements as a whole. These elements are making a complex statement about a traditional structure of meaning that does not easily accommodate such diversity. Just what shape such a statement takes on however, is a question that goes beyond one simple piece of produce.

## 2

**The Road to Xanadu and the House of Tradition**

Intertextually, Kilgore Trout's apple appears to be rotten in the end. The promises made to him in *Breakfast of Champions* for fame, fortune, and redemption are not fulfilled anywhere. Trout's son Leon, the narrator of *Galápagos*, describes his father as having lived and died a bitter, pessimistic failure. Kilgore Trout is certainly no better off when first encountered in *Timequake*. He is again an unknown and cynical writer who has little to be happy about in his past. If the triumphant end for Trout at the conclusion of *Breakfast of Champions* finds any symbolic meaning, Vonnegut appears to withdraw the meaning in later texts. As Vonnegut did not feel beholden to the traditional implications of the symbolism surrounding the apple, he did not find it necessary to maintain his own crafted meaning. Yet, also as with the apple, Vonnegut chooses to evoke the very past he immediately and almost completely ignores.

One of the final events to happen in the timeline of the non-linear *Timequake* is "a writers' retreat called Xanadu, where each of the four guest suites was named in honor of an American winner of a Nobel Prize for Literature" (31). In a novel deeply concerned with the way life and culture change as the past becomes the present and onto the future, the symbolism of the mansion can be seen as writers earlier in American tradition—here Hemingway, O'Neill, Lewis, and Steinbeck—providing the structure, support, and shelter for contemporary writers, such as Vonnegut and Trout, who both attend the retreat. Yet however honored, the laureates are not at the retreat, are not presently themselves contributing new literature, are not indicative of cutting edge trends; the contemporary writers, who can move about and leave the mansion whenever they wish, are currently charged with these capabilities. The writers of the past are, in a sense,

the apple, and today's writers such as Vonnegut can choose to follow their lead or diverge in a different direction.

Of the Xanadu honorees, Hemingway is connected especially closely to Vonnegut, both in terms of critical interpretation and Vonnegut's own writings. Critics have frequently compared Vonnegut and Hemingway, and for good reason. It has been said of Vonnegut that "of the young novelists to emerge in the 1960s, he is also the most recognizably Hemingway-esque" (McConnell 170). The two share similar backgrounds, growing up in middle-class families in the Midwest and experiencing firsthand the horrors of world war. They share common thematic concerns, looking into "problems of illusion and truth and with the relationship between them" and exploring the human condition (Burhans 174). Even their writing styles converge, Lawrence Broer points out in his essay comparing the two authors, as both men write in an "ironic, understated style—a screen of words, of short, ritualistic, declarative sentences that numb the protagonist's pain protect him from further potential horror" (71).

Yet even if he labors within a house built in part by Hemingway, Vonnegut certainly feels no duty to follow his predecessor's work or even advocate it as beneficial. In his play *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*, Vonnegut portrays the character Harold Ryan, a satirical depiction of Hemingway, as a "silly swaggering bully" who is "out-dated and irrelevant; and he is very dangerous" (Burhans 173). For all the similarities to Hemingway, Vonnegut firmly asserts independence, both in his art and his personal viewpoints. Vonnegut commented in a 1989 lecture:

His [Hemingway's] choice of subject matter, though, bullfighting and nearly forgotten wars and shooting animals for sport, often makes him a little hard to read nowadays. Conservation and humane treatment of animals and contempt for the so-called arts of war rank high on most of our agendas *nowadays*. (*On Hemingway*, 21, emphasis original)



In distancing himself from the views and the traditions most recently embodied in American literature by those such as Hemingway and the other Xanadu honorees, Vonnegut is not simply being capricious, nor is he alone in this regard. In the age Vonnegut is writing, "Hemingway's work falls out of style with the times" and new writers do their "part to carry on the diminishing of Hemingway so necessary for society to envision a new type of hero," a hero set apart from Hemingway's anachronistic machismo (Klinkowitz 104). Finding many elements of how tradition had evolved to be distasteful, the literary world began "the literary disruption of tradition that constituted the first major development in American fiction since the modernist breakthroughs of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner," giving rise to the postmodernist movement (Klinkowitz 188).<sup>2</sup>

The world of the 1950s and 1960s, when Vonnegut and many of his contemporaries were gaining prominence, was still reeling from unprecedented and horrific events. Two terrible world wars and the Great Depression had ruptured traditional boundaries between what was thought of as possible and impossible, between what should be expected and unexpected. For Vonnegut, the tough times of the Great Depression and service in the U.S. Army during World War II served as an "artistically formative experience teaching him how not just economic but also social and cultural values, long assumed to be stable realities, could be transformed overnight into an entirely new world" (Klinkowitz 177). Little wonder, then, that Vonnegut was loath to continue designing in exactly the same architecture that gave rise to the house at Xanadu.

Along with dark humor, metafiction, understated prose, and other techniques, Vonnegut's chameleon elements serve as the spear tip of a charge towards a new direction. The significance

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<sup>2</sup> For an outstanding and thorough look at how Vonnegut uniquely fits into the rise of postmodernism as compared and contrasted to other authors of the time should refer to Jerome Klinkowitz's chapter "Vonnegut in Fiction" in his book *The Vonnegut Effect*.

of these elements is often overlooked. Broer, for example, attempts to connect Vonnegut and Hemingway in terms of how each author relates to his works:

In their respective psychodramas, the authors invite us to follow the evolution of essentially one individual, the same person under different names, whose wounds, sins, and hopes for redemption carry from one protagonist to the next, and are nearly always those of their creator.... And nearly always these fictional self-creations have their authors' history behind them. (70-71)

Just as Nick Adams, Frederick Henry and Jake Barnes, among others, are seen as analogous to the author Hemingway, Rudy Waltz, Billy Pilgrim and many others have been written about in terms of the life of the author Vonnegut (Broer 71).

Broer, however, is here omitting investigation of the fact that Vonnegut's characters so frequently *do not* have "different names." His point is most readily applicable to Hemingway. Though Hemingway is highly modern and unconventional in many ways, his works, unlike Vonnegut's, do not contain particular challenges to a Western tradition that posits a meaningful and interpretable world, a challenge firmly established within Vonnegut's chameleon elements. This situation holds true even though Hemingway, like Vonnegut, does reuse characters, particularly Nick Adams. Nick Adams appears in several of Hemingway's short stories, but Nick's characterization and background details are consistent enough that readers need not doubt that each Nick Adams is the same as the other, allowing readers to conglomerate all of the meanings of the Nick Adams stories into a coherent whole, as "Nick Adams was obviously autobiographical" (Flora 2). Furthermore, there is enough consistency within the information given regarding Nick Adams to study him in terms of his own chronology, first "as a young boy, then as an adolescent, then as a soldier in war, and then as a soldier recently returned from war" (Flora 15). Similarly, Jake Barnes, Fredrick Henry, and Robert Jordan, though all having characteristics and pasts that allow for easy connections to Hemingway's life, are completely

separate, consistent characters living completely separate, consistent lives. Anyone wanting to understand these characters though a traditional Western lens would find little frustration in the attempt.

As is probably unsurprising at a writers' retreat, the topic of literature comes up several times at Xanadu. On one such occasion, Vonnegut relates to Trout his reaction to a relative who had been brought to the brink of tears by the tragedy of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Vonnegut had said to his relative, "The tears Hemingway has made you want to shed are tears of *relief*! It looked like the guy was going to have to get married and settled down. But then he didn't have to. Whew! What a close shave!" (*Timequake*, 93, emphasis original). Here, in a sense, Vonnegut imagines chameleon elements for Hemingway's novel. Despite the slightly hyperbolic tone of the passage, Vonnegut's reply speaks against the relatively close-ended linear plotlines of modernists such as Hemingway. Vonnegut's point is to illuminate that much of the pathos felt for Hemingway's characters stems from the supposedly happy ending they narrowly miss achieving. Vonnegut's novels often do not allow for this type of pathos, at least, not on an intertextual level. The redemption of Trout of *Breakfast of Champions* is undone in with his failures in *Galápagos*, which are subsequently reshaped in *Timequake*. Such chameleon elements in Hemingway would have seen Robert Jordan, having already died at the hands of the Fascists in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as the one disappearing in the rain at the end of *A Farewell to Arms* and then gallivanting around Europe with an unrealizable love for Lady Brett Ashley and a passion for bullfights in *The Sun Also Rises*. Vonnegut's chameleons call into question the firmness of each novel in relation to one another, an issue to which Hemingway's novels do not give rise.

This divide between the two authors is indicative of a significant difference between their overarching projects in writing. Hemingway's project deals strongly with an attempt to show "us the truth of our world and how to live in it," which inherently demands a world ripe with interpretable meaning, a world in keeping with significant lines of traditional Western thought (Burhans 174). Hemingway finds a permanent source of redemption in "Friendship, love, and empathy: these are man's finest triumphs over an existential and creatural human condition he can neither escape nor change nor ultimately understand" (Burhans 183). By contrast, "For Vonnegut, life on earth is a ridiculous ordeal men must struggle through blind, a little crazy, and mostly alone" (Burhans 189). With Hemingway's project entailing a permanent solution, and Vonnegut's project shying away from finding any such permanence, the effect of chameleon elements in relation to literary tradition is much clearer. Connecting his various novels through chameleon elements, Vonnegut illuminates the transient, temporary nature of a human's life and all the structure built up around it.

Within his texts, Vonnegut reinforces the idea that permanent solutions to the problems of human existence are mere chimeras. In *Timequake*, Vonnegut admits, "I always had trouble ending short stories in ways that would satisfy a general public. In real life...people don't change, don't learn anything from their mistakes, and don't apologize" (161). As someone "green in judgment" having trouble finding a way "to end stories without killing all the characters" the voice seeks the advice of his literary agent:

[The agent] said, "Nothing could be simpler, dear boy: The hero mounts his horse and rides off into the sunset."

Many years later, he [the agent] would kill himself on purpose with a twelve-gauge shotgun. (161-162)

The Vonnegut-voice's stressing of his then-novice status conveys the idea that such advice would be appropriate for an immature or hack writer, but not for one who was authentically

seeking to reflect the real world. The abrupt jump to the agent's own unhappy fate contrasts sharply with the idea of such a storybook ending.

Yet, for all his pessimism towards the prospect of life containing permanent sources of redemption, Vonnegut does end up at Xanadu, which takes its name from the mythical paradise made famous in Samuel Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan." The creation of the retreat and the meeting of Vonnegut, Trout, and the other writers arrive at Xanadu follow the end of the timequake, the book's central disaster. The timequake forces all of humankind to relive the past ten years, living on "automatic pilot" as everyone knows what is going to happen but is powerless to do anything but follow the dictates of fate "making everybody and everything a robot of their own past" (111). People are, in effect, living their lives as linear stories, relegated to witnessing what they know will occur. The disastrous apathy that ensues following the end of the timequake stems from the fact that people continue to expect their lives to be stories. So when the timequake finishes, motorists fail to steer their cars, emergency workers do not respond to calls, people climbing stairways halted in mid-stride and fell to the bottom, and so on. Recovery from the timequake, of which the Xanadu retreat is highly symbolic, comes when people once again embrace the possibilities of self-determined change, no longer expecting life to follow a pre-determined trajectory. Gone is the "correct" pathway that life is beholden to take. The future is no longer a permanent, concrete roadway but an open landscape ripe for exploration.

Vonnegut himself quotes Coleridge as speaking of the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." Vonnegut points out, "This acceptance of balderdash is essential to the enjoyment of poems, and of novels and short stories, and of dramas, too" (101). The suspension of disbelief, however, is only temporary, and accepting the world of

fiction for enjoyment is not the same as believing in the permanent structure of fiction—the well-defined beginning, middle, and end. Failure to understand the distinction risks letting life seem like a timequake, wherein certain events must happen, and choice is not an option.

The conflation of fiction and life worries Vonnegut as well as many postmodernists. Techniques such as non-linear plots, metafiction, self-conscious narration, and fragmented prose actively work against achieving verisimilitude and are prevalent in many postmodern works, including Vonnegut's (*Klinkowitz*). A chief effect of these techniques is to send the clear message that a work of fiction portrays a world as developed by an individual with his or her own individual interpretations and thus cannot exist as any sort of objectively "right" or "correct" representation of the world. Given the historical context of the postmodernist movement, this message makes a lot of sense. Vonnegut and other early postmodernists witnessed persuasive demagogues and self-serving storytellers concoct myths that would lead the world into the two worst wars in human history, the Great Depression, the unleashing of nuclear weaponry, and McCarthyism, just to name a few of the biggest events. Depicting a lack of faith in firm answers and permanent solutions, Vonnegut's texts instead provide a plethora of questions. They shy away from the practice of "old-fashioned storytellers to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end," traditional literary conventions that in effect convey a predetermined structure (Vonnegut, *Breakfast*, 215).

Incorporating this tone with chameleon shifts of traditions—be they cultural, historical, philosophical, or so forth—Vonnegut invites the reader to apply a skeptical, dubious attitude towards the traditions in question. That someone may have once said "This is how it is and always shall be" does not necessitate acceptance forever, even if blind adherence has been the

choice of the past. Vonnegut's novels frequently avoid featuring traditional senses of closure or catharsis. More often, they give a sensation of "The proper ending for any story about people" (*Breakfast*, 234). *Breakfast of Champions* defines this ending with three capital letters that are not even a complete word in themselves but an abbreviation, requiring in themselves a continuation for even an initial completion: "ETC." The final page might mark the end of the book, but it is not the end of the story.

The questions Vonnegut brings about through applying chameleon elements to traditions constitute a large part of a project "to deconstruct, demystify, and decenter the grand narratives of American culture" (Davis 158). Inherent in this is the constant need to question and question again the apparent firmness of stories told to us. Through applying the chameleon elements in *Breakfast of Champions*, for example, Vonnegut is able to tear at "the very fabric of American mythology, deconstructing slavery, pornography, religion, homosexuality, and Midwestern morality" (David 159). If the effect of all this is not necessarily to wipe the board completely clean, there is now certainly space for new generations to write their own tale and not be subsumed by past stories.

And, after all, stories are just that: stories. As Vonnegut lectures:

Only stories are supposed to be stories. They are artificial constructions. Like a diamond tiara, like a ballet, they are purely artifacts and have no relation to life except they are entertaining. And yet there are a certain number of people, and Hemingway was one of them, who believe that their lives have to be good stories or are not worth living.... And Hemingway made a serious mistake thinking that his life had to be a good story and that, when it ceased to be one, it was over. (*On Hemingway*, 25)

For Hemingway, regrettably, the finish to his story was not to be an ETC. but a period, and at a point he decided to provide himself with that final mark of punctuation. He, in Vonnegut's view,

succumbed to a personal myth, just as nations and peoples can fall to other traditionally accepted myths if they are left unexamined.

The scenes at Xanadu are easily among the most tranquil in all of *Timequake*. One might be tempted to assume that here, within the shelter of writers past and amongst the company of writers present, Vonnegut and Trout have at last found some permanent measure of redemption. Yet this would be just another myth. In Coleridge's "Kubla Kahn," the paradise of Xanadu is fated ultimately to fall, a fate hearkened by "Ancestral voices prophesying war" (Coleridge 298). Meanwhile, Vonnegut suggests measures that might be prudent "should there be another timequake" (*Timequake*, 206). The novel acknowledges both symbolically and textually the eventual end for the peace of Xanadu, which is only a *retreat*, a pullback, and not a permanent home. The road to Xanadu is the process of change, resisting the urge to live life as a tradition, as a story, and it does bring about recovery from the scripted timequake. The process of change, however, is also the road away from Xanadu, from this transient respite in paradise. Yet at least the path is blazed by its travelers of their own actions and decisions, and while this path is necessarily a continuation of yesterday's road, the choice of possible directions is wide open—until the next timequake, at any rate.



## 3

**The Last Word on Dresden: Questions in Answers**

*Slaughterhouse-Five* stands, in the very fact that the novel itself exists, as evidence for the importance of choice in a world that is so eager to provide prototypes—stories—of how life will be. The novel does so, strangely enough, through inundating the reader with deterministic tropes, elements prevalent throughout Vonnegut's literature. These elements comprise such a strong component of Vonnegut's work, Bo Pettersson has written of Vonnegut's career as a writer as a progression towards a steadily "firmer denial of free will" (53). *Slaughterhouse-Five* establishes a tone of determinism with the constant epitaph of "So it goes" following every single death, be it that of a central character or of a bird in the background. Determinism is further expounded philosophically through the Tralfamadorians, the extraterrestrials who perceive and exist in all moments of time—what humans would deem past, present, and future—simultaneously, thus understanding the inevitability of one moment to become the next. Even the plot itself is given as framed and predetermined, as in the first chapter the narrative voice explains:

It [the book] begins like this:

*Listen:*

*Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.*

It ends like this:

*Poo-tee-weet?* (22, emphasis original)

This is, in fact, how the plot of the book progresses; "Listen:" is the very next word encountered, as foretold (23).

Yet, for all this, the book exists. Why should it not? The authorial voice offers a suggestion in the first chapter, relating an exchange with moviemaker Harrison Starr, who

responded to the idea of writing an anti-war book such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* by sarcastically suggesting, “Why don’t you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?” (3, emphasis original). The narrative voice explains, “What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too” (3). In spite of this belief, however, the narrator has chosen to write an anti-war book. He has, in effect, chosen to work towards a goal he admits is likely unreachable. Here, Vonnegut’s world, far from pessimistically deterministic, affords the individual a degree of existential autonomy. As Pettersson writes, Vonnegut sees that a person may “choose to act” and ultimately “is responsible for his actions,” thereby complicating attempts to use fate or the universe as a scapegoat for human cruelty (53). In this context, the “I” of *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes extremely significant, as this narrator is the chief symbol of human choice and responsibility in an otherwise fatalistic novel.

This narrator dominates the first chapter of the novel, detailing some of his World War II experiences, the process of writing his anti-war novel, and certain aspects of the novel itself. Then, beginning with the second chapter, the “I” drops almost completely out of the novel, and the bulk of the following narration adheres more strongly to a third-person limited style with Billy Pilgrim as the centrally concerned protagonist. An easy if nevertheless interesting examination of these details reveals a striking similarity between the “I” narrator and the real-world author Kurt Vonnegut, as both served in World War II, studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, became writers, and so forth. These similarities have led critics, to some degree appropriately, to conceptualize the first chapter as Vonnegut’s “storyteller’s autobiography” (Klinkowitz 85).

Yet the “I” of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not limited to an autobiographical role contained within an initial chapter, a point Klinkowitz does not take on in his study. The narrator interjects

as a character a couple of times during the novel when World War II occurrences are narrated as present action. The narrator speaks up once when he, in a POW camp, is sitting on a latrine that Billy Pilgrim enters; and once when he arrives with Billy and others in Dresden as American POWs. He narrates each time, “That was I. That was me” (125, 148). The interjection in each case is sharp and pointed in its sudden reversion from the third-person style the novel seems to have adopted and how the narrator repeats his identification, making the point difficult to gloss over. Yet the interjection is also subtle in how the subject matter at hand is fairly insignificant, even obtuse, given the larger context of being a prisoner of war—once the narrator comments that his diarrhea is like excreting “everything but his brains” (125), and he simply says upon his entrance into Dresden, “Oz” (148). Adding to the subtle touch, the narrator again submerges just as quickly and unostentatiously as he arrived.

Kurt Vonnegut may or may not have said these things in real life, but a first-person character, not a real-life stand-in, says them in the surreal fictional contexts of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. “All this happened, more or less,” are the novel’s beginning words, and the “more or less” qualifier speaks to the idea that this is not a novel of absolute certainties, just as Vonnegut’s chameleon shifts often serve to demystify the supposed absolutes of traditions (1). The point is important when considering arguments such as Klinkowtz’s contention that through *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s narrator a “lifetime of instruction that the narrator of a novel is not the author thus flies out the window” (84). While this concept is certainly challenged by Vonnegut’s narrator, the multifaceted “I” acts more as a mechanism for raising questions than as an attempt to provide firm answers. Yes, the “I” seems at points to function as a Vonnegut stand-in, but he is also undeniably a character within the fiction, just as any typical first-person narrator. He is neither completely one nor completely the other. Perhaps fairer to say is that the narrator

operates as a Vonnegut essence, an idea that will be important in later examination of Vonnegut's chameleon elements.

Due to his dual role, the narrator meshes well with Michel Foucault's examination of the role of the author when Foucault asserts it "would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the 'author-function' arises out of their scission—in the division and distance of the two" (129). The abrupt mid-novel interjections of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s narrator remind readers of the narrative lens through which the novel is perceived, and how closely this lens resembles a real-world Kurt Vonnegut is less important than understanding the ideas behind seeing a world through a particular viewpoint that necessarily has a particular bias. Multiple "correct" examinations of the world form an important motif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. One central example is Billy Pilgrim's interactions with the extraterrestrial Tralfamadorians. The text depicts what Billy perceives to be his time spent away from Earth with the Tralfamadorians, time he describes to others and writes about in newspapers in his later years. His audiences think he is crazy, and he is hospitalized, yet the text remains neutral on the issue, neither confirming nor denying Billy's report, merely relating what it is he believes he has experienced. Kurt Vonnegut's writing are steeped enough in science fiction tradition that Billy's beliefs are certainly credible on a textual level, but the text is carefully crafted that Billy could also simply be suffering from mental illness, with his "time traveling" a latent aftershock from his time in the war, a time at the center of his frequent hospital flashbacks. Either interpretation, within the text, is equally acceptable, equally "true."

In condemning war whole-handedly, the novel again presents the importance of viewpoints. The Germans' single-minded viewpoint of national and racial superiority helped lead to the horrors of World War II. At the same time, however, the Allies are not blameless, as their

equally single-minded belief in their correctness leads to conceptualizations such as the character Professor Rumfoord writing about the unnecessary bombing of Dresden as “a howling success” (*Slaughterhouse*, 191). The horrors of war stem, in part, from oversimplifying the world into singular points of view. Oversimplifying the “I” of the novel into an artifact that tries to depict merely one point of view stemming from the experiences of one real-life person would not be in keeping with the overall tone and message of the novel.

The Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky points out how convention breeds complacency in the sense that interpretation becomes automatic, habitualized, and “so life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works” (12). The purpose of art, then, is to act against habitualization, presenting ideas and images in surprising new manners, a technique Shklovsky terms “defamiliarization,” so as to “increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12). In effect, defamiliarization forces the observer to contemplate questions that would otherwise go unasked. Such is exactly a major part of Vonnegut’s project, and such is much of the function of the narrator in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. His intrusions into what mostly functions as a third-person narrative, connected to the opening, autobiographical seeming chapter, connected to the ideas of the plot itself, defamiliarize the first-person pronoun and bring about questions into the nature of viewpoints that would otherwise be not as significant.

As a chief effect of defamiliarization is the asking of new questions, and as Vonnegut’s writings lean so heavily in favor of questions over answers, it makes sense that Vonnegut frequently employs defamiliarization. Many of these defamiliarizations are accessible to anyone with even a fairly basic cultural understanding. The defamiliarization of familiar icons such the American flag in *Breakfast of Champions* or America’s industrial and corporate business

structure in *Jailbird* relies only upon the well-known status of traditional symbols and ideas, to which Vonnegut can then give a chameleon shift to reexamine the whole system at play. But many of Vonnegut's chameleons are only accessible as such to those who have read a wider body of Vonnegut's own work. These chameleon elements represent a second (though related) project: the creation of a larger reading of text out of Vonnegut's overall oeuvre. With each reemergence of a chameleon, the texts develop relationships backwards and forwards that complicate established ideas and throw ever more questions into the fray. As examining the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveals an element that is significant not only as a voice but as a system of ideas developing important commentary on viewpoint, the continually defamiliarized chameleon elements of Vonnegut are significant not just as individual people and places but as systems that develop overarching ideas that contribute importantly to overall questions and thoughts most deeply embedded in Vonnegut's works.

How appropriate, then, that *Slaughterhouse-Five* ends, as promised, with a question, and with a totally unanswerable one at that, the question of a bird who stands with the narrator and Billy Pilgrim and a too-few others as the survivors of the horrific Dresden bombing. The last words of the novel: "*Poo-tee-weet?*" (215, emphasis original).

### Visitors from Another Novel

Kilgore Trout, the Tralfamadorians, the “family” of Rumfoords, Howard Campbell, Ilium, and Eliot Rosewater are all chameleon elements represented in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and in other texts. One way to explain these chameleons is through an additive schema, that is, conceptualizing each instance as part of greater whole. Sharon Sieber writes utilizing such as schema when she asserts, “It is important to read *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in juxtaposition to each other because each work elucidates the other. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, we learn that Tralfamadorians think all humans are machines. This makes more sense as we read in *The Sirens of Titan* that all Tralfamadorians *are* machines” (150, emphasis original). While the point of juxtaposing the works is certainly true, the idea that the two representations are of the same whole is a bit more contentious. The Tralfamadorians in *The Sirens of Titan* clearly exist as actual agents in the text, whereas, as discussed, they could be merely hallucinations in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Furthermore, the *Slaughterhouse-Five* Tralfamadorians have features that seem to point to their existence as biological and not as mechanical constructs, features that include a distinct physiology, telepathic communication, and five distinct sexes necessary for reproduction—details given to the reader as reported by the possibly fractured mind of Billy Pilgrim.

Yet, while the Tralfamadorians are not consistent across texts and do not seem to add up to a larger, more consistent whole, Sieber astutely notes the machine connection between the representations. In *The Sirens of Titan*, the living creators of the Tralfamadorians start warring, eventually wiping themselves out of existence, after the efficiency of the machines makes their

lives meaningless; the creators in fact make machines for the purpose of fighting, as the machines are more efficient killers than the living beings. Connecting this to Slaughterhouse-Five, which features the human race in World War II, the conflict Vonnegut elsewhere refers to as “Western Civilization’s second unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide,” elicits an image of a world where humans at war are the very unthinking machines they have created (*Timequake*, 73). This method of examining chameleon elements is more comparative than additive, but it nonetheless raises ideas in a more complex and fleshed out manner than is present in just a single text.

The examination is all the more appropriate given *The Sirens of Titan*’s “chronosynclastic infundibula,” where “all the different kinds of truths fit together” and a person can understand how there “is room enough for an awful lot of people to be right about things and still not agree” (8-9). Within the Vonnegut world, the differing depictions of an element such as Tralfamadorians need not be divided into supposedly correct or incorrect versions, nor need they add up to a single, completely coalesced whole. Room exists for both versions of the Tralfamadorians to be correct and “fit together” in such a way that they both, while both being correct, serve to bring up new ideas and questions.

Of all such of Vonnegut’s chameleon elements, the presence critics often interpret as Vonnegut himself emerging in the text is perhaps the most striking and demanding of examination. This textual presence exists in several forms. Perhaps the easiest form to identify is the preface or introductory note. These writings, which exist in almost all of Vonnegut’s novels, are usually self-contained, refer to the text, and are not spoken about within the texts themselves. Another simple form of the Vonnegut presence is the direct Vonnegut character, a character within the body of the texts who is at least in part the embodiment of the real-world Kurt



Vonnegut, though the circumstances and action of the texts' plots are highly or entirely fictional. Such examples are most prevalent in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Timequake*.

A version of the Vonnegut presence that is not as clearly intended to reflect the author is the indirect Vonnegut character, a character within the body of the text who seems to have a background and world outlook similar to the real-world Kurt Vonnegut, though he or she is clearly a different character and is not as similar to the author as are the direct Vonnegut characters. The most often cited example is Kilgore Trout, who is explained in such terms as "a means for Vonnegut to deal with problems that affect him as an artist" (Hume, *Heraclitean*, 220). The Vonnegut-voice says in the Prologue to *Timequake* that "Trout doesn't really exist. He has been my alter ego in several of my other novels" (xv). Other indirect characters include Howard Campbell of *Mother Night* and John (or Jonah) of *Cat's Cradle* (Reed 69).

The high degree of self-consciousness the presence exhibits makes the Vonnegut presence rather unique amongst Vonnegut's chameleons. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Timequake*, for example, the "I" voice of the presence is starkly aware of its role as a voice within a written work and its role in part as representative of the real-world author. Most significantly for the Vonnegut presence's operation as a chameleon element is its interplay across texts, its awareness that other texts exist and operate backwards and forwards in complex relationships. Sometimes references across texts are direct, such as when the Vonnegut presence makes a reference to "my novel *Cat's Cradle*" in *Timequake* (44), or when he identifies Kilgore Trout as one of "the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career" (*Breakfast*, 301). Other references are more indirect, such as Kurt Vonnegut's reference in the prologue of *Jailbird* to his father's failure as a husband and his mother's suicide compared with

Kilgore Trout's revelation in *Timequake* that his father killed his mother, with 1944 as the year of both incidents.<sup>3</sup>

A question thus arises as to whether these chameleon elements of the Vonnegut essence operate as the Tralfamadorians—as truths that must be viewed independently and comparatively to understand fully—or more additively, with the real-life Kurt Vonnegut the overall sum of the parts. The question has important ramifications for the idea of Vonnegut's chameleon elements as a defamiliarizing function. Foucault, establishing some context for his decentering of the author, points out how critics have often traditionally viewed the author in part as:

a principle of unity in writing where any unevenness of production is ascribed to changes caused by evolution, maturation, or outside influence. In addition, the author serves to neutralize the contradictions that are found across a series of texts. Governing this function is the belief that there must be—at a particular level of an author's thought, of his conscious or unconscious desire—a point where contradictions are resolved, where the incompatible elements can be shown to relate to one another or cohere around a fundamental and originating contradiction. (128)

Although Foucault proceeds to demonstrate problems with this sort of thinking and with traditional manners of construction the author as a whole, critics are still often driven to give the author this sort of potential. In fact, finding the author's life present in Vonnegut's works is a popular topic for some who study Vonnegut. Kathryn Hume's analysis is typical of such readings of Vonnegut in saying, "Some writers weave their fictions more obviously from the skeins of their own experience than do others. Vonnegut's main characters are usually straightforward projections of some part of his psyche...minor characters often embody other fragments of his personality" (*Vonnegut's Self*, 231). In doing so, in effect, critics attempt to provide an answer for many of the questions brought up by Vonnegut's chameleon elements, for

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<sup>3</sup> Using the dates of birth and death given to Kilgore Trout in *Timequake*. In other texts, Kilgore Trout has different dates of birth and/or death, although *Timequake* contains the only such time that Trout's parents are mentioned.

any meaning of these elements rests within Vonnegut's life, not necessarily the systematic ideas the interplay of questions might develop. The case for this depends upon whether or not alongside the consistent elements of the Vonnegut essence (similar to how the Tralfamadorians are consistently otherworldly, whether this means extraterrestrial or hallucinatory) exist strong chameleon inconsistencies (similar to how the Tralfamadorians are depicted once as biological and once as mechanical).

An example of possible chameleon inconsistencies of the Vonnegut essence develops from when in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the narrator's father tells the narrator, a Vonnegut essence, "You know—you never wrote a story with a villain in it," and the Vonnegut-voice agrees. (8). When dealing with words such as "villain," semantical debates are difficult to avoid. Perhaps, by carefully crafting a particular definition for villain, the voice's assertion can hold true. Most fair definitions of villain, however, could easily accept as villainous characters such as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*'s Norman Mushari, who is consumed by avarice and "provides a particularly repulsive example of the selfish attitudes that the capitalist system encourages" (Marvin 102). Similarly, Papa Monzano, brutal dictator of San Lorenzo in *Cat's Cradle*, is not difficult to depict in fairly pejorative terms. To be certain, these examples are exceptions and not the rule; ordinarily, even the more despicable of Vonnegut's characters have redeeming traits or histories that allow them at least a modicum of forgiveness. However, the Vonnegut-voice's assertion in *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not provide for exceptions; there he accepted the claim that he *never* crafted a villain. The back and forth interplay between texts here does not seem to function "correctly" under the logic systems of the traditions Vonnegut tends to resist, traditions that would have the truths of the world objectively interpretable.

If this sort of inconsistency were an unduplicated phenomenon, it might be justifiably dismissed as irrelevant. In truth, however, this sort of unreliability is rather prevalent in various ways within and across Vonnegut's texts. In the Author's Note to *Bluebeard*, a Vonnegut essence, speaking of works of art, criticizes the tendency "to endow certain sorts of human playfulness with inappropriate and hence distressing seriousness." But in *Timequake*, the Vonnegut essence reacts differently when responding to a letter from his brother, who has picked up painting as a hobby and wishes Vonnegut's opinion on the worth of his art. The Vonnegut essence says, "I dare to suggest that no picture can attract serious attention without a particular sort of human being attached to it in the viewer's mind" (168). Far from depicting a serious approach to art as "distressing," the Vonnegut essence now portrays such a situation as desirable and speaks at length as to how it can be achieved.

The introduction to *Mother Night*, added to the novel five years after the original publication, begins, "This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don't think it's a marvelous moral; I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (v). And yet, the novel that follows is far more complex than simple cut-and-dry attitude of this supposed moral. The whole story of *Mother Night* forces readers to wonder about the ultimate moral stance that should be taken towards Howard Campbell. Is he truly a deplorable criminal because of his propaganda service to the Nazis, or are his actions justifiable, perhaps even laudable, since he was using his connections and position to provide the Americans with valuable intelligence information? Is his pretence his public role as Nazi spokesman or his clandestine role as American agent? Such questions arise not only within *Mother Night* but also through many of Vonnegut's characters, who often lead double lives of

conflicting, duplicitous moralities and are not easily “pretending to be” only one thing over its opposite.

One final example worthy of consideration is a statement in the preface to *Breakfast of Champions*, a novel the Vonnegut essence narrates to be a way of cleansing himself of his past, saying, “I’m throwing out characters from my other books, too. I’m not going to put on any more puppet shows” (5). Later, the Vonnegut-voice explicitly promises “to set at liberty” his characters, including Kilgore Trout (301). Two novels later, though, “Kilgore Trout is back” (*Jailbird*, 1). Far from being a world-famous Nobel laureate—the fate promised to him in *Breakfast of Champions*—he is the pseudonym of an inmate serving a life sentence for treason. Trout is not even the only pseudonym, as the inmate also writes under the name “Frank X. Barlow” (82). These examples illustrate the tendency of the Vonnegut essence to be somewhat chameleon-like in its own regard and raise larger questions as a result, questions that might go unnoticed or only partially examined if chameleon elements and the Vonnegut essence are merely ascribed to commentary on the author and his life.

Furthermore, the chameleon elements are distinct from being a mere real-world analogue in that, beyond important connections, there are also significant *lackings* in connections. That is to say, the texts do not provide the sorts of details that might permit an understanding of the shifts as a growth or development over time, such as changes in a person’s personality can be understood in the light of life experiences and individual transitions. The real-world Kurt Vonnegut, for example, has certainly not been a static individual over his lifetime. His beliefs regarding clinical depression, as shaped by his own experiences, have shifted, for instance. In a 1973 interview, Vonnegut relates:

I wasn’t taking a whole lot of it [Ritalin], but it puzzled me so much that I could be depressed and just by taking this damn little thing about the size of a pinhead, I

would feel much better. I used to think I was responding to Attica or the mining of the harbor of Haiphong. But I wasn't. I was obviously responding to internal chemistry. (*Wampeters*, 252-253)

Obviously Kurt Vonnegut is capable of looking back at past beliefs and revising his opinions, and he is furthermore not ashamed to admit to such revisions. Such connections are not provided, however, for the shifts in Vonnegut's chameleons. The assertions in individual texts are made as absolute claims without addressing previous claims. Similarly, the repeated literary elements are portrayed absolutely and without reference to other versions; Kilgore Trout is portrayed as the pseudonym for an inmate in *Jailbird* as though this is the only role he ever plays.

The chameleon nature of the Vonnegut essence thus embodies many of the same inconsistencies and contradictions as more clearly fictional elements, and the attempt to resolve these contradictions using the logic of certain traditions purposefully raises more questions than it answers. In fact, Vonnegut's works so often depict as simultaneously so comic and so tragic the desire to resolve irresolvable paradoxes, as opposed to allowing distinct "truths" simply to coexist. For example, the role of art in human society is a centerpiece of *Bluebeard*. The character Circe Berman, a novelist, represents traditional pop art, intellectually undemanding art commercially produced for the masses. Her "Polly Madison" novels are apparently somewhat simplistic in plot and theme, and they have an after-school-special feel about them that a "serious" artist such as Rabo Karabekian cannot abide. He considers her work pedestrian at best and in an argument sarcastically mocks her for "the high level of discourse one might expect from the author of the Polly Madison books" (134).

In turn, the recently widowed Mrs. Berman criticizes the inaccessibility of Rabo Karabekian's paintings and those of the Abstract Expressionists he so admires. She defends popular art forms, such as the pictures of Victorian girls on swings she enjoys so much, since

they tell stories and comment on society—in the case of the Victorian girls, the juxtaposition of the picture of the happy girls with the disease and violence prevalent in society constitutes the message (138). Judging from the reaction of the Soviet writers who visit Karabekian and hear this story, Mrs. Berman has a point. The writers “went from picture to picture, bewailing all the pain each girl would go through” and left the house exclaiming “No more war, no more war” (166-167).

Mrs. Berman claims that Abstract Expressionism created paintings about nothing but themselves, and Karabekian, for his part, concedes the point. Yet he additionally sees a danger in investing too much in a connection between art and society, as an overly zealous version of such an approach could lead to mindsets such as that of his former mentor Dan Gregory, who said, “Painter—and storytellers, including poets and playwrights and historians.... They are the justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil” (150). Yet Gregory himself idolizes Mussolini and the Fascists, crafting paintings in homage to them; and Gregory lied through his art for the sake of popularity, such as when he paints a wonderful image that seems to advocate friendship and understanding between races despite that fact that he himself is a racist. So Karabekian sees some value in how “the most admirable thing about the Abstract Expressionist painters, since so much senseless bloodshed had been caused by cockeyed history lessons, was their refusal to serve on such a court” (150). Karabekian stands in direct contrast to Mrs. Berman; he, too, has a point.

This example is but one of many within Vonnegut’s texts to acknowledge the potential for varying viewpoints on significance and meaning to be equally acceptable, equally a “truth.” As a result, the debate between Mrs. Berman and Karabekian is ultimately a complex one that suggests easy answers or full truths are highly subjective. Mrs. Berman can claim that realistic

art is superior to Abstract Expressionism and be “correct.” Karabekian can claim the reverse and also be “correct.” Readers can take their own stances completely removed from the characters’ if they wish. Is this multiplicity paradoxical? Yes. Is it problematic? No, not really. This subjectivity might not make for the most comfortable of positions, but is a stable one, one that invites fewer difficulties than an attempt to judge a “right” answer and a “wrong” answer.

Part of what makes the paradox so easy to accept, beyond the well-crafted and multilayered nature of Vonnegut’s prose, is that the different viewpoints at stake are presented through different and distinct characters. The idea that varying individuals have varying truths for the same sets of circumstances certainly comes as no surprise to anyone outside of grammar school. The truths for Person A are not the truths for Person B, but each person stands fast by her beliefs, and the world is truly to each what the world is to each.

The chameleon Vonnegut essence raises many questions, which suggests, given the Vonnegut’s project, that it successfully serves its purpose. On a literary level, the essence causes readers to consider questions of author-text relationships, variations in narrative voice and style, and symbolic representation, to name a few. Thematically, the essence embodies an investigation into ideas such as success and failure in art and life, the interplay of beauty and cruelty in an unforgiving universe, the importance of family and community, economic and social justice, and so forth. Yet the chameleon nature of the essence suggests that the supposed answers to this myriad of topics are indivisible into right and wrong, just as Vonnegut’s text show restraint in asserting the machine Tralfamadorians over the biological Tralfamadorians, or vice versa. When the Vonnegut essence or any other chameleon element possesses inconsistencies across texts, the varying depictions stand together in the overarching chrono-synclastic infudibula that is Vonnegut’s body of work.



### Order in Chaos, Chaos in Order

“Will the real Kilgore Trout please stand up?” Of course, he cannot. No one version of Kilgore Trout is “real” above and beyond the others. Or, put an opposite but equally correct way, all the versions of Kilgore Trout are equally “real.” The same is true of Kazak, Midland City, Eliot Rosewater, Ilium, Howard Campbell, the Hoovers, or any other of Vonnegut’s chameleon elements. Incongruities across texts represent not so much a change but an independent “correct” way of interpreting the world. As no one interpretation can be proven objectively correct on such matters, all versions of the repetitions are either equally true or equally false. The texts depict a heavy critique of the traditions that suggest the universe contains single, objective truths that humankind can divine, understand, and prove. Art that claims otherwise is potentially risking serving on “the Supreme Court of Good and Evil”; it is claiming to reach levels of understanding human being, according to Vonnegut’s views, cannot reach. Vonnegut’s chameleon elements prevent his texts from falling into such a model.

This ambivalence makes perfect sense given certain aspects of the context of Vonnegut’s works. During the postwar period when Vonnegut studied for his masters in anthropology at the University of Chicago and thereafter, at the peak of popularity as a writer, “the cultural relativist perspective favouring nurture over nature was shared by most anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic,” becoming highly influential in philosophies, politics, and academics (Eriksen and Nielsen 76). The philosophy of relativism, which argues against the existence of objective truths or moralities, refuses to act in any way as a judge or arbiter of customs or practices of various cultures.

Occasionally in Vonnegut's works, this sort of philosophy is applied as is, onto an anthropological stage. In *Timequake*, Vonnegut satirizes the idea of European superiority, referring to Native Americans as having "been adequately penalized, one would think, for their stupidity" in regard to the epidemics that swept through the Americas following the arrival of Europeans (102). The satire mocks old European notions that the Europeans' conquest was possible and in fact necessary because of inherent cultural and racial superiority. Obviously biological differences, not cultural intelligence levels or moral superiority, were responsible for the illnesses. The differences between the cultures cannot be compared objectively as right or wrong, and Vonnegut further wonders "whether great discoveries, such as the existence of another hemisphere, or of accessible atomic energy, really make people any happier than they were before" (102). What Europeans or Americans may have considered as "progress" was probably not looked upon with as much favor by the Native Americans or the residents of Hiroshima.

Most of the time, however, the scope of the novels is more confined, and relativistic ideas are applied to the individuals and societal structures that form the foundation of a culture. Individuals may do things that are helpful to others and to society, or they may things that are harmful to others and to society; but, regardless of their motivations, they are not typically depicted as evil or as immoral. They are human beings, who are oftentimes slaves to brain chemistry and victims of circumstance, and their actions seem to be plausible reactions to the world, the human condition being as difficult to handle as it is.

Few ideas are as constant within Vonnegut's works as this relativism. As Rabo Karabekian defines truth in *Breakfast of Champions*, "It's some crazy thing my neighbor believes. If I want to make friends with him, I ask him what he believes. He tells me, and I say,

‘Yeah, yeah—ain’t it the truth?’” (214). The body of Vonnegut’s works function in just such a way. Each novel is essentially a belief of the world. We can say the belief is expressed through a particular voice, but it is not necessary to do so. The point is that the beliefs exist as distinct entities, and if we find one particularly agreeable, we are merely saying, “Ain’t it the truth?” This casual agreement is light-years away from a grand commentary on how to live a life or a moralistic judgment of individuals and societies.

The way in which this refusal to take a strong stance on “important” issues allows for such a multitude of possibilities might come across as a bit chaotic to some. And in some ways, that is exactly what it is. Purposeful chaos is an integral part of the Vonnegut project. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut as a character within the fiction, mistrustful of traditional modes of storytelling, claims his brand of literature would be one wherein, “Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done” (215). Here is Vonnegut’s relativism at its clearest. Everything is equal; nothing is superior. Vonnegut himself recognizes the situation that results: chaos, a state of “utter confusion and disorder” (“Chaos,” def. 3a). Without any sort of means for relative comparison, with everything on an equal plane, the resulting situation would be quite chaotic for traditions that require categorization, clear distinctions, and hierarchies to organize and order the world.

Even the syntax of the text speaks to this confusing, disordered state of affairs. The Vonnegut-voice claims he will not “*bring* order to chaos” but rather he will “*bring* chaos to order” (my emphasis). The word “bring” can here have, however, two senses: to cause to exist, or to convey. Does the Vonnegut-voice want to introduce a chaotic state into an orderly

environment, or does he want take a chaotic situation and make it orderly, as a judge might *bring* a rowdy courtroom *to order*?

Although the relativistic nature of the Vonnegut project might be evidence in favor of the former interpretation, the tricky syntax of the passage is highly significant. Vonnegut's texts, here and elsewhere, do see order as complexly involved in chaos. Along these lines, the relativism as expressed by the texts avoids making moral judgments; but more utilitarian sorts of judgments exist quite strongly. In fact, adding to the chaos even more, Vonnegut himself steps back from a complete subscription to relativism, for doing so would suggest an answer and not a question, which would be highly out of character for Vonnegut's project. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrator says, with a tinge of whimsy, that the University of Chicago's anthropology department after the war was "teaching that there was absolutely no difference between anybody. They may be teaching that still" (8). Relativism is no more an answer than anything else; it merely avoids the common mistake of looking for answers in way people form societies and religions and such. Along these lines, the stance expressed by the texts is less relativistic in a moral or cultural sense as it is concerned for the overall health and happiness of human beings as a whole. So, though it might not be a formally relativistic attitude, *Player Piano* does not hesitate to question the ultimate benefits of innovation, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* furiously attacks capitalistic philosophies, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Hocus Pocus* are none too favorable towards those who might try to justify war as a necessary evil. Neither side of any issue, however, is the "good guys" or the "bad guys." The vast majority of Vonnegut's protagonists are not so much traditional heroes as they are tired, scarred individuals looking back on a life of successes and failures, lucky breaks and terrible missteps, peaceful moments and broken promises—human beings who at long last realize that on the other side of the their bygone battle

lines had been not monsters, but human souls just as beautiful, tired, and scarred as they. Ours is a world wherein, as Vonnegut has said in a recent interview, “none of us, no matter what continent or island or ice cap, asked to be born in the first place” (*In These Times*).

Such is the complexity of the chameleon elements of Vonnegut’s works. Kilgore Trout, for example, does have some order; he is not simply any random conglomeration. He is a writer in all cases. Most of the time, he is a father, having given birth to a son, Leon, who died in an accident shortly after the Vietnam War. He is almost always unknown or virtually unknown, though wealthy Eliot Rosewater is described several times as a tremendous fan of his works.<sup>4</sup> Therein lies order. Sometimes he is extremely bitter and cynical, as in *Breakfast of Champions*; sometimes he can be close to inspiring, as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; other times, he is somewhere in between the two, as in *Timequake*. Other details of his life, such as his date of birth, shift. He never seems to gain the freedoms or rewards promised to him. Therein lies chaos.

If chaos and order are intertwined to such an extent, how can they be useful, either as individual elements or as a pairing? There is an essence of Kilgore Trout, the texts provide. Some of this essence stems from the consistencies of Trout’s life, the traits that appear factually through each novel’s window. Other aspects of the essence stem from the problems raised through inconsistencies, the points of contention that only arise through the chameleon elements and the subsequent questions that are of more significance as questions asked than as potentially answered and resolved issues. Together, the facts and questions form a truth, and if this truth—or any truth—cannot be *the* solitary truth, this truth is not without worth. Trout is knowable to a certain extent through facts and through questions. Attempts to “figure out” Trout and other chameleon elements by providing needless answers and appellations to break apart the inconsistencies actually hinder their effectiveness as sources of important questions. Rather, the

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<sup>4</sup> *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*

inconsistencies must be allowed to stand, no “real” Kilgore Trout can rise and be acknowledged, and so is created Vonnegut’s desired realm of coexisting yet differing truths.

The implications go beyond fictional characters for Vonnegut. There is a danger when a truth-seeker believes in a single-sided moral view that focuses on minor issues so much that the questions and inconsistencies that are a necessary part of the whole essence blur into the background. For Vonnegut, what useful meaning can be found can only be discovered if some vagueness and uncertainty is left untouched. The chaos across Vonnegut’s works gently reminds readers not to grow frustrated with the contradictions and questions in life, as these help form the essences of life as certainly as any answer.

Take for example the manner in which Vonnegut’s works depict theological issues. Vonnegut, who describes himself as a “Free Thinker” distrustful of religious concepts (*Palm*, 175), recognizes the potential for organized religions to cause cruelty and destruction. *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells of a short story written by Kilgore Trout wherein a “visitor from outer space made a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel” (109). *Jailbreak* refers to “the notorious cruelty of Christians” (81). The usefulness and potential benefits of religion are not simply tossed aside, however. *Jailbreak* also goes out of its way to mention the self-sacrifice of “a Christian family” who tried to save the protagonist’s wife from the Nazis (57), while *Cat’s Cradle* features “Bokononism,” a satirical depiction of religion that while admittedly built on lies is nonetheless respected as “an instrument of hope” (172). Spirituality has a place in human affairs, and this is an essence, a product of facts and questions, consistencies and inconsistencies. Attempts to figure out the specific details of the spiritual side of the universe, however, are not useful and even potentially dangerous. Each religion, each window into the spirituality of life, will necessarily differ in the specifics of

interpretation. Dangerous and cruel situations, such as crusades and jihads, can result if people get too distraught over these small details so much so that the true essence is lost.

Near the end of *Timequake*, Kilgore Trout attempts to describe a “quality in the Universe,” a spirituality that binds and makes life significant (242). Rather than fretting over particulars of this “quality” or departing on a prolonged spiritual quest to determine the proper name, Trout simply suggests, “Let us call it *soul*,” completing his specification with less concern than most people would give to naming a new pet (243, emphasis original). Exactly what it is, exactly what it is called, exactly how it functions—these are unimportant issues, potentially dangerous issues if they are over emphasized. That the quality *exists*, that it has an essence, is what counts.

For Vonnegut, the locus of truths, insofar as it can be said to exist, must be large enough to hold both answers and questions. If humankind accepts as a truth the need for structure and society for a functional and happy existence, it must also accept questions into the makeup of the society lest mythmakers and nationalistic zealots drive towards international strife or even world war. If humankind accepts the need for an economy and productivity to support human institutions, it must also accept questions into the manifestation of that economy, constantly examining social injustices, corruption, and the very notion of progress.

In *Timequake*, Kilgore Trout initially attempts to rescue victims who have been stunned into complete, totally immobilizing apathy by the timequake by shouting at them, “Wake up! You’ve got free will again, and there’s work to do!” But the shout has no effect, and so Trout, “Instead of trying to sell the concept of free will, which he himself didn’t believe in, said this: ‘You’ve been very sick! Now you’re well again’” (179). This version works miracles. The scene speaks to one in Voltaire’s *Candide* where victims of an earthquake lie painfully dying, unaided

by Dr. Pangloss, who is too busy attempting to rationalize the earthquake's existence within his philosophies, which depict in a world where logically "everything is for the best" (35). Rather than search for final answers, as Vonnegut's texts would have it, such unknowable philosophical inconsequentialities as free will and divine benevolence, people should get on with doing the work of life that needs to be done, pick up the pieces following the timequake, and do the work that can actually be of benefit. Similarly, at the end of *Candide*, a dervish famous for his wisdom cares little for Candide and Pangloss' philosophical concerns, asking derisively, "What has that got to do with you....Is it your business?" (141) Candide finally realizes the necessity to leave such worries behind and focus on what really need be done: "that we must go and work in the garden" (143). What *matters* is that people can work to help one another, to cultivate food, to build shelter, and to provide comfort in times of hardship.

Vonnegut places himself and Voltaire in the category of "bashers," Vonnegut's term for the sort of writers who are "in search of answers to these eternal questions: 'What in heck should we be doing? What in heck is really going on?'" (*Timequake*, 138). The importance of this line rests in the fact that the questions, not the answers, are eternal. The questions will always exist, so the search must always continue, and thus any "truth" derived from the search must necessarily include a continued asking of important questions. Vonnegut subsequently addresses the situation if "bashers are unwilling to settle for the basher Voltaire's '*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*,'" the very conclusion to *Candide* and the overall sentiment leaving *Timequake* (*Timequake*, 138). Those most self-conscious of the need to keep the questions alive must expect the future to chart its own course, with its own questions and answers.

Questions and answers working together form Vonnegut's chameleon elements, as they form his view on the universe. That people have an essence that allows them to help one another



is far more important than whether or not it is appropriate to call this essence "free will." The quest for complete information, complete knowledge, will not result in comprehension of meaning; seekers of such knowledge will merely find contention and disagreement as their prizes, and then they must take care to accept this multiplicity, avoiding haughty self-assuredness at every turn. Perhaps with this determination, the world need not end in *Slaughterhouse-Five's* fire or *Cat's Cradle's* ice.

## Conclusion

### Dead Machinery

I cannot truthfully claim that the term “chameleon elements” was the germ for this project; I cannot say that I carefully considered and examined the nature of Vonnegut’s inconsistencies, derived what I felt to be the best possible appellation, and then went forth with my investigation having a clear understanding of what my subject was. Rather, the term chameleon elements was one of several phrasings referring to a somewhat hazy concept in an earlier draft, and only because of the careful eye and consideration of my thesis advisor and a few other readers of my drafts was the untapped potential of the idea brought to my attention. Still, only as I reexamined my project and centralized the term did I realize how appropriate the phrasing was.

True, on one level, the analogy is somewhat superficial and simplistic. Some of the chameleon’s features, its skin colorations, change in varying situations. Likewise, Vonnegut’s chameleons change some of their features—life details and personality traits, for instance—in varying situations. Yet the purpose behind the immediately observable change delves deeper. Neither sort of chameleon changes haphazardly, without purpose. The animal chameleon’s changes allow it to survive and thrive in a variety of environments and locations that might otherwise be dangerous or even lethal. Along similar lines, the project embodied by Vonnegut’s chameleons urge adaptability in the face of the stern demands of tradition and custom. The willingness Vonnegut has for the “truth” to survive and thrive in a variety of situations, allowing contradictions and questions to remain without worrying over them, provides an adaptation to modes of thought that seek final and absolute principles. As Vonnegut’s chameleons demand

constant reexamination, so do aspects of society and day-to-day life that might be improved if somehow shifted into a new light, rethought with the benefit of new and interesting questions to spur constructive ideas. Though Vonnegut's chameleons might appear to deconstruct some traditional meanings, the aim is for an improved and ongoing reconstruction, and not for the mere dismantling of meaning and worth. Those critics who accuse Vonnegut of nihilism, such as when James W. Tuttleton includes Vonnegut in a set of writers who "represent an unignorable cultural fact of appalling implication," miss comprehending this important and potentially powerful point (236).

For all the space given to change and adaptation, however, some definite substance persists underneath. In the case of the animal, this foundation is simple; a biological creature made of organs and cells and sinews stands at the core of the surface colors that shift and blend. For the more abstract ideas at play in Vonnegut, however, the surface is an equally abstract essence made up of the questions and contradictions and ideas all necessary for the limited "understanding" humankind can ever achieve. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Rabo Karabekian defends his abstract painting from charges of inferiority and meaninglessness. He says of the painting, which represents his take on The Temptation of Saint Anthony as a single vertical orange stripe across an otherwise plain green field:

It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal – the 'I am' to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us – in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us in dead machinery. (226)

The sentiment contrasts with the novel's depiction of the mentally unstable Dwayne Hoover, who in mistaking the fiction of a Kilgore Trout short story for actual life believes that all humans aside from himself are purposeless machines, that only his life and thoughts have meaning and worth. As a result, Dwayne eventually goes on a violent rampage injuring several innocent people. The contrast is between granting life and humanity an essence and purpose, however abstract and unknowable it may be, and withholding the possibility. The results of the two mindsets speak for themselves.

Yet Karabekian's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is the orange stripe *and* the green field; the painting would not exist as such without the distinction caused by the juxtaposition of the two elements. Vonnegut's chameleon elements create questions that feed towards essences that feed back into questions in a cycle that can only seem to end if illusions are believed and myths are taken for fact. And if continuing the cycle, preventing foreclosed minds and stubborn misbelief, means allowing multiple "truths" to stand, even with contradictions—well, there is certainly plenty of room left on the canvas for more stripes.

## Appendix

### Textual Locations of Major Vonnegut Chameleon Elements

#### *Player Piano*

Ilium, NY

#### *The Sirens of Titan*

Malachi Constant

Kazak

(Winston) Rumfoord

Tralfamadorians

#### *Mother Night*

Howard Campbell

Malachi Constant

#### *Cat's Cradle*

(Remington) Rumfoord

#### *God Bless You, Mr.*

*Rosewater*

Eliot Rosewater

(Cynthia) Rumfoord

(Lance) Rumfoord

Kilgore Trout

#### *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Howard Campbell

Ilium, NY

Eliot Rosewater

(Lance) Rumfoord

(Professor) Rumfoord

Tralfamadorians

Kilgore Trout

#### *Breakfast of Champions*

Will Fairchild

(Wayne) Hoobler

Bunny Hoover

Celia Hoover

Dwayne Hoover

Rabo Karabekian

Kazak

Maritimo Brothers

Midland City

Eliot Rosewater

Kilgore Trout

#### *Jailbird*

Kilgore Trout

RAMJAC Corp.

#### *Deadeye Dick*

Will Fairchild

(Mary) Hoobler

Bunny Hoover

Celia Hoover

Dwayne Hoover

Maritimo Brothers

Midland City

Rabo Karabekian

RAMJAC Corp.

#### *Galápagos*

Bunny Hoover

Celia Hoover

Ilium, NY

Kazak

Kilgore Trout

#### *Bluebeard*

Rabo Karabekian

Paul Slazinger

#### *Hocus Pocus*

Paul Slazinger

#### *Timequake*

Kilgore Trout

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