

Abstract

The works of Kurt Vonnegut stand as seminal in the American literary canon. Looking at three of his most influential novels, namely *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, this study aims to better understand the mechanisms which inform his fiction. Working chronologically through the novels, the study examines historical context, narrative technique, theoretical underpinnings and the social critique of each novel. Guided by an idea of the postmodern novel the study examines how these elements interact, concluding that by way of what may be considered "simple" yet self-conscious metafiction and prose as well as variations in narrative technique, Vonnegut is able to more accurately convey his opinions on the American situation as well as demonstrate his stance on the role of fiction and the writer in contemporary society. The study also considers closely the role of the reader and the author/reader/text relationship.

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A self-conscious Kurt Vonnegut: an analysis of *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*
and *Breakfast of Champions*

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*A book is an arrangement of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numerals, and about eight punctuation marks, and people cast their eyes over these and envision the eruption of Mount Vesuvius or the Battle of Waterloo.*¹

Like many of his contemporaries around the sixties and seventies in America, Kurt Vonnegut was always conscious of his identity as a writer, as the “canary in the coal mine”, as a manipulator of words and worlds. He loved to simplify the problems of fiction, breaking it down into its basic constituents and allowing the picture to clarify on its own for the reader. He did the same with his stories. Simple (albeit sometimes fantastical) stories told eloquently, leaving the rest up to the reader.

For Vonnegut though, there was more to fiction than simply playing around with words on the page. He writes in *Fates Worse Than Death* that “You cannot be a good writer of serious fiction if you are not depressed”.² Depression was a serious issue for Vonnegut. His mother committed suicide when he was young, and he too attempted to take his own life around 1984. The quote demonstrates his deep concern with the emotional in his fiction; he is claiming that without a serious sense of pain and difficulty, there is not much to write about. Of course, he was not without this pain. Suicide, divorce, his family’s decline during the great depression, his experience at the bombing of Dresden — all of these shaped him into the writer that we now know — the writer who faces serious matters with a smirk on his face, who jokes as a response to misery.³

It is this combination of attention to the art of fiction and an emotional subject matter shaped often by history and context which forms the basis of this study. Beginning with *Cat’s Cradle* and working chronologically through *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* I wish to analyse these elements. Each chapter begins with a contextualization of the novel in question, placing the novel in history as a text or in the life of the author, the progression of style over the combined ten year publication of these novels becoming evident. Place and time mattered greatly to Vonnegut, and they matter when trying to understand his novels as well. Secondly, close reading forms an important part of each chapter. I will draw on theories of “metafiction” and the idea of the postmodern novel. As I have mentioned, Vonnegut was keenly aware of his own as well as his readers’ role in the production of meaning in his novels, and his style reflects this. Each chapter takes into account the role of the authorial voice and the way in which genre, narrative and tone affect the experience of the reader. Finally, no study of Vonnegut would be complete without an analysis of the author’s critique of contemporary society. Vonnegut’s sometimes scathing remarks on American culture, war, religion and modern science cannot be ignored. Thus, I close each chapter with a discussion of these issues, paying close attention to the ways in which the literary and historical context affects or produces them in specific ways.

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country* Random House Digital, Inc., 2007.

² Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death: An Autobiographical Collage* Berkley Pub Group, 1992, 29.

³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon (Opinions)* Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1974, 174.

Vonnegut's works can tell us a lot about the world he was faced with and how he chose to deal with it, as well as how he thought we should all deal with it. He writes of himself that

I had suffered all right – but as a badly educated person in vulgar company and in a vulgar trade. It was dishonourable enough that I perverted art for money. I then topped that felony by becoming, as I say, fabulously well-to-do. Well, that's just too damn bad for me and for everybody. I'm completely in print, so we're all stuck with me and stuck with my books.⁴

We are stuck with them. But contrary to what Vonnegut may have believed about his own work, reading them is both a pleasure and a worth exercise in literary analysis. We must choose to view them in as much detail as possible so as to extract the author's meaning and understand better the world he lived in – a world which no doubt formed the foundation for what we see today.

⁴ Philip Gourevitch, "Kurt Vonnegut," in *The Paris Review Interviews, Vol 1*, Vol. 1 (New York: Picador, 2006), 160-205.

Chapter 1 – *Cat's Cradle*

In this first chapter I will focus on *Cat's Cradle*, a novel which precedes *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. Some scholars of Vonnegut's work have noted how *Cat's Cradle* stands as the first example of the author broaching the subject of his experiences in Dresden and the trauma which accompanied it, but they acknowledge that he does not do so as explicitly as in the later *Slaughterhouse-Five*.⁵ It is without a doubt a politicised work of fiction but, like the novels which succeed it, it demonstrates experimentation in narrative form and style. A brief analysis of *Cat's Cradle* serves as an adequate starting point when reading Vonnegut as it highlights the themes and techniques which become more thoroughly fleshed out later.

Cat's Cradle is set mostly on the fictional island of San Lorenzo, a highly contested patch of land in the Caribbean. It is written entirely in the first person by "Jonah" or "John", a likely projection of Vonnegut himself.⁶ John sets out to write a book about the development of the nuclear bomb and is in the process of researching one of the leading scientists on the project, Dr. Felix Hoenikker. After getting in touch via letter with Dr. Hoenikker's youngest son Newton (Newt) Hoenikker, a midget who gained fame by having a failed affair with a Russian circus performer, John makes his way to the island of San Lorenzo along with Newt's older sister, Angela. They are on their way to meet the last of the Hoenikker children, Frank, the most famous and most rebellious of the three, whom John wishes to interview as part of research for his book.

During his preliminary investigations, though, John comes to learn about a substance known as *ice-nine*, a powerful water derivative which Dr. Felix Hoenikker had developed shortly before his death and which has the ability to freeze anything instantly upon contact. Dr. Asa Breed, when interviewed by John, claims that Dr. Hoenikker never developed the substance and that it was a ludicrous concept. We later learn that *ice-nine* is a very real substance and that each of the Hoenikker children is in possession of some. John lands on the island and begins to piece together parts of the lives of the Hoenikker children, their father, the people they are in contact with and the island they find themselves on. Perhaps one of the most significant things that John learns of on the island is Bokomonism, the religion of the majority in San Lorenzo. Through a series of extraordinary events, John himself begins to lean towards Bokomonism, falls in love with Frank Hoenikker's fiancé and subsequently finds himself witness to the release of *ice-nine* and the freezing of the island of San Lorenzo and all the surrounding waters. The novel climaxes with a mini apocalypse when the island's current leader, Papa Monzano, uses *ice-nine* to commit suicide.

Throughout *Cat's Cradle* there is significant interplay between science and religion as two predominant ways of thinking, or worldviews. Vonnegut carefully weaves the characters' beliefs and conversations as well as the events in the novel to make some serious claims (and

⁵ Kathryn Hume, "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 12, no. 3 (1982), 177-190.

⁶ The novel opens with the line "Call me Jonah", echoing the opening line of *Moby Dick*. See Kurt Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, ed. Sidney Offit (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc, 2011), 5. However, as the narrator's given name is John, I will be referring to him by that name throughout this chapter.

indeed, debunk others) about the debate. This chapter will focus on this question as a starting point, moving on to discuss the narrative form of the novel, its role in this debate and how it differs from *Slaughterhouse* and *Breakfast* which will be discussed in greater detail in the chapters to follow. Finally we will discuss the role of the threat of nuclear war, and Vonnegut's experience of war in general in the production of this novel. It will become clear how *Cat's Cradle* in many ways formed the basis for what was engaged with more deeply in the other novels, thus demonstrating how the three novels form a kind of trilogy.

Beginning with the most prominent issue of *Cat's Cradle* then, we must turn to Bokonon and the curious belief system of Bokononism.

Bokonon and Bokononism

Central not only to the novel, but also to most of the debate and scholarship on *Cat's Cradle*, is the question of the role of the fictional religion of Bokononism and how, as a metaphor for religion in general, it stands in opposition to science. In order to fully understand and analyse this issue, a brief exploration of Bokononism is necessary.

Bokononism is the prevailing religion of the inhabitants of the island of San Lorenzo and later on, after reading the books of Bokonon, John too becomes a Bokononist. While he does not convert until later on in the novel, we can assume that his writing is shaped by his later conversion to Bokononism, evidenced by his regular references to the books of Bokonon and his unique perspective on past events, as well as the time of writing as stated in the novels closing chapters.⁷ Bokononism is, of course, a religion begun by Bokonon (born Lionel Boyd Johnson) who, after washing up on the shores of San Lorenzo started to formulate his belief system along with his partner Earl McCabe. The religion was devised as one way of establishing San Lorenzo as a utopian society. One of Bokononism's central premises, however, is that it is a "collection of harmful untruths" or *foma* which one lives by.⁸ Bokonon himself is regularly quoted saying that everything he says is a lie, a paradoxical statement typical of the confusing and contradictory nature of Bokononism.

It is this confusing paradox of a belief system which is placed at odds with science (often embodied in the person of Dr. Felix Hoenikker) throughout the novel. But not in the sense that one is directly opposed to the other, as many believe the case to be with contemporary religion and science. Rather, it is Bokononism's claims of "untruth" which regularly undermine the "Truth" claims of science. This is the usefulness of a "religion founded on lies" which John is talking about.⁹ While the religion itself may seem to be undone by the lies upon which it is constituted, it is this very transience of truth (a kind of statement about subjectivity) which, when held up against the supposed objectivity of science, becomes useful. What is being invoked here is not a claim to the moral use of religion — that it helps people to do good — rather, its usefulness is shown in its ability to deconstruct other truth

⁷ *Ibid.*, 180-182

⁸ "Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" *Books of Bokonon*. 1:5 (*Ibid.*, 4)

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8

claims through a series of carefully constructed lies or untruths. Paul L. Thomas puts it well when he says that

Vonnegut uses Bokononism to pull us back far enough from our own religion, our own religious experiences and mythologies, so that we can see this fabricated religion being overtly honest about its dishonesty *and* yet still meaningful.¹⁰

Thus Vonnegut's main use for Bokononism is not simply to debunk science, but also religion itself as he forms a kind of "double-critique", something which will continue to become familiar as we analyse the novels which succeed *Cat's Cradle*.

Crucially however, science is very rarely redeemed in the novel and is often seen to be the cause of a lot of trouble. Thomas claims that the most significant evidence of this is the fact that it is science which is responsible for the creation of *ice-nine* which leads to the destruction of the world.¹¹ He neglects to acknowledge, however, the role of the wielder of *ice-nine*, namely, Papa Monzano. Papa Monzano, at the time of his death and the release of *ice-nine*, is the president of the Republic of San Lorenzo. Although Bokononism is outlawed in San Lorenzo it is revealed at the moment of his death that Papa Monzano is a devout Bokononist (like everyone else on the island) and indeed is driven to suicide via *ice-nine* by that very religion. How then can we conclude that science is solely responsible in this case for the apocalypse? We cannot. Rather, I would argue, Vonnegut offers here the aforementioned "double-critique" of both. Neither is solely responsible; each has a role to play.

Thus, while it is science which creates *ice-nine* (and indeed the atomic bomb, the other major signifier of science in the novel) it is man, along with his beliefs, moral codes and religions who is responsible for how it is used. We need to be wary of religion, of course, but also wary of "science without morality"¹² We must make sure that we do not completely forego either science or religion, and be aware that each has positive elements and negative ones.

The interplay between (and debates around) the usefulness and goodness of both science and religion are not far from Vonnegut's mind as demonstrated in his non-fiction collection. In *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s, aptly named after three of the central Bokononist concepts, he says that:

A great swindle of our time is the assumption that science has made religion obsolete. All science has damaged is the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Jonah and the Whale. Everything else holds up pretty well, particularly the lessons about fairness and gentleness. People who find those lessons irrelevant in the twentieth century are simply using science as an excuse for greed and harshness.¹³

¹⁰ P. Thomas, "No Damn Cat, and no Damn Cradle": The Fundamental Flaws in Fundamentalism According to Vonnegut," *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut* (2009), 33.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 39

¹³ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*s (*Opinions*), 194

The quote above exemplifies Vonnegut's thoughts in the conflict between religion and science and provides an obvious reference point for the arguments made in *Cat's Cradle*. Science does not nullify religion, and religion is not entirely opposed to science. Rather, the two must exist together, complimenting each other. As Robert T. Tally puts it, Vonnegut is aware that "human, all-too-human behaviour inevitably leads to ruin."¹⁴ However, *Cat's Cradle* is trying to show us that we must approach the situation diplomatically. We must ask ourselves what religion can offer, *and* what science can offer and consider all of these together. Vonnegut's "double-critique" thus demonstrates the negative aspects of both, while highlighting the positives as well.

The attention Vonnegut pays to religion and science is, as will be discussed, present in other novels too, including *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. *Cat's Cradle* is arguably the precursor to a more scathing critique of the two institutions, which is expanded later. Further, like *Slaughterhouse* and *Breakfast*, narrative form plays an important role in the way the reader apprehends these debates and critiques, the way they are conveyed, and no analysis would be complete without some discussion of the interaction of these.

The First Person John

If we were to trace the course of the three novels chronologically, from *Cat's Cradle* to *Breakfast of Champions*, we would notice an obvious progression in Vonnegut's development and experiments with narrative style. While *Cat's Cradle* employs a standard first person narrative, *Slaughterhouse-Five* makes use of an omniscient (although slightly restricted) narrator and *Breakfast of Champions* uses a partially omniscient narrator, but one who is also immersed in and affected by his own story. While this is an interesting progression from one to the next, it can also be seen as a struggle to adequately explain similarly difficult subject matter.

In her essay titled "Vonnegut's Self-Projections", Kathryn Hume raises the question of how Vonnegut projects himself, or aspects of himself, using varying narrative styles.¹⁵ According to Hume, Vonnegut projects a part of himself into all of his stories and the various narrative styles provide different possibilities and ways of facing and describing (or even explaining) personal issues. Taking Vonnegut's experience of the Dresden bombing as central to his "self", Hume notes how the different narrative styles, developing over the course of three major novels provide different ways of dealing with the same problem: war. Of the single narrative perspective in *Cat's Cradle* she notes that it "describes well enough, but proves too disengaged."¹⁶ The narrative of *Breakfast of Champions*, on the other hand, is able to "let him hammer out an answer that forces affirmation of human consciousness as sacred, and does so without recourse to religion."¹⁷

¹⁴ Robert T. Tally Jr., *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), 10, 185 pp.

¹⁵ Hume, "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction", 177-190

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 180

Hume's analysis provides important insight in to the ways in which the narratives differ across the three novels and also how these various projections of Vonnegut's self serve as stepping stones to dealing with the trauma of Dresden (an important informative element when analysing *Slaughterhouse-Five*). Paying closer attention to *Cat's Cradle* though, we can begin to consider the way in which the choice of first person narrative impacts the novel's specific concerns.

Cat's Cradle is in fact Vonnegut's first novel which employs this narrative point of view. By writing from the perspective of John, Vonnegut chooses one single point of view of the events in the story and is able to delve deeply into the mind of his lead character, but is limited in his capacity to explore the thoughts and feelings of more minor characters. Throughout the novel though, this inability to express the thoughts of others is tangible, as Vonnegut "strains against the limitations of using a single projective spokesman".¹⁸ This "straining" which Hume refers to is brought to our attention once again by the fact that John, the protagonist, is in the process of writing a book and the story we are reading is tracking that very writing. We have here an example of the use of "metafiction" in which the novelist is aware of the narrative process and the act of writing, even as he is performing the act. This is evident in the narrative structure of the novel – and the syntax – where self-consciousness on the author's part is displayed. What is unique to *Cat's Cradle* is the fact that the protagonist has set out to write one kind of book — the story of Felix Hoenikker and the atomic bomb — and has ended up writing something completely different.

Most curiously, the narrator continuously asks us to question his "Truth". The first four chapters of *Cat's Cradle* outline some of the narrator's intentions. They stand as a kind of prologue, being most likely written after the book's completion and certainly after John's conversion to Bokononism. I quote here from Chapter 4:

Be that as it may, I intend in this book to include as many members of my *karass* as possible, and I mean to examine all strong hints as to what on Earth we, collectively, have been up to.

I do not intend that this book be a tract on behalf of Bokononism. I should like to offer a Bokononist warning about it, however. The first sentence in *The Books of Bokononism* is this:

"All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies."

My Bokononist warning is this:

Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either.

So be it.¹⁹

By drawing our attention to the untruth of his own writing, John is reminding us to question always the claims of writing and to try to understand the layers involved in textual production. What is particularly important though is the way this is then extrapolated to the idea of the usefulness of religion. Even those founded on lies are useful, according to John, and if we cannot understand that we should stop reading. This claim forms the basis for the continuing debate which rages throughout the novel, as noted earlier.

¹⁸ Ibid., 178

¹⁹ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 8 (emphasis mine)

The relationship between religion, text and narrative is significant here. Firstly, the function of metafiction in this particular quote, and in the text as a whole, is grounded in Vonnegut's use of a first person narrator. Because of the uniquely personal tone and inevitable one-sidedness of a first person, narrative we are all the more astonished by the claim of absolute untruth. John is reminding us to disbelieve almost everything he says, but also to not disregard everything simply because it is a lie. This is a principle he has taken from Bokononism, the religion built entirely on lies. The intensity of self-awareness and self-criticism here is very much like that found in *Slaughterhouse* and *Breakfast* but is exacerbated by the personal first person narrator. He explicitly says that his book is a lie, and this is unique to *Cat's Cradle*.

Secondly, we have the use of various textual references throughout. *The Books of Bokonon* of course form the foundation for Bokononism and are referenced and quoted at regular intervals throughout the novel. Not only does this draw greater attention to the role of the "Text" in the production of truth — reminding us also of the major religious texts of our culture, such as the Bible — but it reminds us of the narrator's reliance on external texts and the voices of other authors in the production of his own, weaving an intricate pattern linking these texts. Complicated as it may seem, the choice of first person point of view and textual referencing combined with a claim to the "truth" of the untrue (or *foma*) makes an important statement about the role of the author and is a prime example of this kind of postmodern textual awareness typical of Kurt Vonnegut's work.

Finally, it is noted later on in the novel, when John begins to read the books of Bokonon, that it is a book without an end and that new chapters and sections are constantly being added as Bokonon writes them. We get the sense that the book is working towards some end which we do not yet know. This haphazard building of a text is then mimicked by the structure of *Cat's Cradle* itself, being written out in one hundred and twenty seven very short chapters, each appearing as a small building block combining to form a complete structure. The short chapters also give the impression of the book being written in bursts, the same way the Bokonon writes his book.

Using this information, we may make the argument that a thread can be drawn from Bokonon, to John to Vonnegut through the similarities in style and the common awareness of the shortcomings of textual production, a kind of multi-layered metafiction. As Bokonon writes his book, so John comes to learn more about Bokononism and reads how it moves slowly towards an end point. As he reads we become aware of the impending apocalypse as a result of *ice-nine* and the end to which he is headed. This mirrors the production of *The Books of Bokonon* but also the production of *Cat's Cradle* itself as it is being narrated by John and written by Vonnegut — there is this constant sense of writing producing itself and producing the reality of the story. These layers of meta-fiction, when closely inspected, demonstrate the true complexity of Vonnegut's project with regards to *Cat's Cradle*.

However, it is important finally to note the effects of this kind of textual layering with regards to the question of religious and scientific truth. If we are to take the assertion from earlier in this chapter that Vonnegut is trying to discredit preconceived notions of the

antagonisms between science and religion, we can safely argue that the blurring of lines between text, author and reader (and reading and writing as closely related acts) mirror in some ways the proposed interconnections between science and religion. If, as Thomas proposes, Vonnegut wishes to demonstrate that science and religion need to take lessons from each other — that they are not mutually exclusive — then we can argue as well that a part of the way in which this argument is made manifest, is through the structural realities of the text. Like the interaction between author, text and reader (in a metafictional sense) produces new layers of meaning or even “truth”, so too science and religion must interact to produce “truth” in the world. If we were to have one without the other it would be irresponsible and, like *Cat’s Cradle* teaches us, may end in a disaster of epic proportions. Truth for Vonnegut lies not in science or in religion exclusively, but rather in a combination of various elements of both. In the same way, we cannot reach the truth of a text by *only* looking at reading or writing, but rather we must look at how reading and writing are not mutually exclusive — each has a role to play in producing the other and, finally, in producing the “Truth” of a text.

Turning now to the end of *Cat’s Cradle*, I wish to conclude this brief introductory chapter by considering some of what the novel has to say about war and in particular nuclear war. War, for Vonnegut, is a subject which is hugely significant, and as Hume suggests, underpins almost all of his writing.²⁰ *Cat’s Cradle* deals explicitly with the implications of powerful weapons systems and the ways humans both wield them and deal with the consequences of their usage. In the case of this novel, it is the fatal powers of *ice-nine* which we are faced with.

The *Ice-Nine* Apocalypse

When setting out to write a book documenting the work of the famed scientist responsible for the creation of the atomic bomb, Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the narrator of *Cat’s Cradle*, John, has no idea that he will soon face an apocalyptic disaster himself. The dangerous substance known as *ice-nine*, created by Dr. Hoenikker as a solution to the hindrance of muddy swamps for US marines, is able to freeze any liquid immediately upon contact. Some of it was preserved after Dr. Hoenikker’s death and each of his children now possesses a small amount. Not only that, but some of it has been passed on to Papa Monzano, the leader of San Lorenzo, and when he decides to commit suicide by ingesting *ice-nine*, an apocalyptic freezing of the island’s surrounding waters is the result.

It seems all too easy to draw comparisons between events like Hiroshima (or indeed, Dresden) and the events of *Cat’s Cradle* and that is because in many ways, it is. Like the destructive power of an atom bomb, *ice-nine* is able to wipe out an entire population in a single stroke and to cause massive amounts of environmental damage. Wielded only by those in power, the responsibilities involved in possessing and using *ice-nine* are almost exactly like the ones faced by the possessors of nuclear weapons. But these are not new ideas. We know that nuclear weapons are dangerous, just like we know from the beginning of *Cat’s*

²⁰ Hume, "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction", 177-190

Cradle that *ice-nine* is dangerous. Rather, Vonnegut wants to draw our attention to something more complicated than the simple “evils” involved with powerful weapons and their use.

On her essay on the role of war in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Rachel McCoppin notes that Vonnegut “uses the topic of war and his black humour to advocate the existential component of *individual responsibility* for one’s actions in the modern and postmodern world.”²¹ While *Slaughterhouse-Five* undoubtedly draws our attention to the tremendous destructive power of war and weapons (like fire-bombing) and highlights the personal struggle of seeing and experiencing that kind of destruction, *Cat’s Cradle*, I would argue, falls more into the category described by McCoppin. *Ice-nine* is without doubt a destructive substance, and we are made keenly aware of this fact — but the novel pays more attention to the individual reactions to these events, and their understanding of responsibility.

In his familiar, deliberately detached tone, Vonnegut describes the reaction of the three Hoenikker siblings to the death of Papa Monzano and the release of *ice-nine*.

Frank came back with brooms and dustpans, a blowtorch, and a kerosene hot plate, and a good old bucket and rubber gloves.

We put on the gloves in order not to contaminate our hands with *ice-nine*. Frank set the hot plate on the heavenly Mona’s xylophone and put the honest old bucket on top of that.

And we picked up the bigger chunks of *ice-nine* from the floor; and we dropped them into that humble bucket; and they melted. They became good old, sweet old, honest old water.

Angela and I swept the floor, and little Newt looked under furniture for bits of *ice-nine* we might have missed. And Frank followed our sweeping with the purifying flame of the torch.

The brainless serenity of charwomen and janitors working late at night came over us. In a messy world we were at least making our little corner clean.²²

In this seemingly random and relatively mundane paragraph we see the curious reaction of the Hoenikker siblings and John to impending apocalyptic disaster on the island of San Lorenzo. It is the very mundaneness of this scene which, in Vonnegut’s typically contradictory fashion, epitomizes what he is trying to say about responsibility for disaster. We know that, if it weren’t for the Hoenikker children (and their father, of course) there would be no *ice-nine* on San Lorenzo. They are directly responsible for the freezing of the ocean and the death of thousands on the island because they brought it there in the first place. But in this scene, they are able to calmly assess a small area of damage and “mak[e their] little corner clean”. The mundane and calm way in which they deal with the situation is so astonishing to the reader so as to draw criticism: How, in the face of such serious damage, are they able to calmly clean up and remain ignorant of their role in the damage as well as of further consequences? At no point do they admit their role in the event, and Vonnegut is careful to subtly remind us of this through the tone of the passage.

Secondly, the repeated trope of the “humble bucket” or “honest old bucket” works to reinforce the plainness, as it were, of the situation the Hoenikkers are in. By drawing the

²¹ Rachel McCoppin, “‘God Damn it, You’ve Got to be Kind’: War and Altruism in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut,” *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut* (2009), 57. (emphasis mine)

²² Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 162

reader's attention to the simple bucket, and later the "good old, honest old water" which results from melting *ice-nine*, Vonnegut is further simplifying and indeed, deliberately nullifying a seriously tragic situation. Not only has someone just committed suicide, but the whole island faces a grave danger. The Hoenikkers, however, are simply going about the business of cleaning up as if nothing had happened at all. This is an inappropriate reaction, and through Vonnegut's sarcastic tone, or what McCoppin and others have called "black humour"²³, we as readers are made uncomfortable by the simplicity of the scene and thus repulsed by it. This functions as a critique of the human reaction to apocalyptic weaponry and draws our attention to the way in which "individual responsibility for one's actions" is either ignored, or down-played.

Vonnegut is taking the simple or mundane events of war and making them so mundane as to render them ridiculous, thus offering a kind of postmodern critique. This is a technique he uses often. I refer to it as "simplicity" and it will be discussed in great detail in the chapters which follow.

John's conclusions on the effects of disaster are perhaps the most astonishing, revealed towards the novel's end:

A curious six months followed—the six months in which I wrote this book. Hazel spoke accurately when she called our little society the Swiss Family Robinson, for we had survived a storm, were isolated, and then the living became very easy indeed. It was not without a certain Walt Disney charm.²⁴

To claim that a post-apocalyptic world is not without a "Walt Disney charm" and that "living became very easy" is preposterous. Like the immediate reaction to the release of *ice-nine*, this explanation of living on the devastated island is equally blasé, another clear indictment of the characters' failure to grasp the gravity of the situation on San Lorenzo. No one has claimed responsibility, and unrealistically, the characters have managed to live on in relative harmony. This is in direct opposition to Vonnegut's usual summation of the effects of massive destruction as a result of human warmongering or powerful weapons and with this knowledge, we can read *Cat's Cradle* as postmodern critique of both the use of nuclear (or similar) weapons and the individual claims to responsibility those in power fail to make when using these weapons.

Thus, through the apocalyptic events following the release of *ice-nine* on San Lorenzo and the characters' lack-lustre responses to it, Vonnegut draws attention to the seriousness of powerful chemical substances. Further, the similarities to *Slaughterhouse-Five* here are clear and we are able to see the early development of Vonnegut's style as it appeared in his later novels.

It is with this and other similarities in mind then that I wish to conclude this chapter. We are able to, through some brief introduction here, fully understand how the now famous sarcastic

²³ See also Kevin Brown, "'A Launching Pad of Belief': Kurt Vonnegut and Postmodern Humor," *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 14 (2006), 47-54.

²⁴ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 181

tone and seemingly mundane and paradoxical method of story-telling has established the author as one of America's great satirists. *Cat's Cradle* it seems was Vonnegut's first venture into political satire, and an analysis of contemporary religious and scientific debate, but not without a word on war, the great shaper of his life and work.

Placing *Cat's Cradle* historically, we are reminded that it was written during a time of war for America. With the Second World War not all that far from their minds, Americans found themselves on the brink of a second war with Vietnam, a war which brought its own unique forms of destruction including napalm, a weapon not dissimilar from the firebombs of Dresden. It was a war which made little sense to many Americans and one which most were vehemently against, including Vonnegut himself. He was seeing history repeating itself and after years of agonizing over it, he finally published his "Dresden novel".

Chapter 2 – *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In a letter to his family dated May 19, 1945, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. has the following to say about his experience in Dresden:

On about February 14th the Americans came over, followed by the R.A.F. Their combined labours killed 250 000 people in twenty-four hours and destroyed all of Dresden –possibly the world’s most beautiful city. But not me.²⁵

The sentiment of the final “But not me” of this quote reverberates throughout what is considered to be Vonnegut’s greatest novel: *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It was undeniably his most financially successful work, launching his career to previously unknown heights and leading to the re-issuing of the less successful works, like *Cat’s Cradle* which hitherto had gone relatively unnoticed.²⁶ Furthermore, it provided the capital for the production of his later novels and his establishment as a figure central to the postmodern American literary canon.

As is often the case with a work which is so widely regarded as the focal point of an author’s career as well as a standard in the American canon, the research on it is wide ranging. Many eminent scholars have expounded the various fascinating aspects of the work, from its implacability as a work of science fiction, to the psychological dysfunction of its protagonist Billy Pilgrim to the overt biographical relationship the novel has with the author, as it draws so heavily on his experiences of the Dresden fire-bombings of 1945. It is all of these elements of the novel, preoccupations of Vonnegut’s critics and enthusiasts alike, which meld together to make the novel the great work of fiction that it is. Indeed, far from functioning autonomously or independently, rather they create a web of interacting elements in the novel.

The following chapter aims to provide something of a broader understanding of these hypotheses. I wish to seek a deeper understanding of how these elements interact with each other, and how a reading of the work should take all of these facets into careful consideration. While I will work under three main headings, the aim is not to separate out and individually analyse these elements, but rather to show how they combine to create a unique document of a horrific historical event and as demonstrating its meaning in the 20th century. As a launching pad though, it seems most productive to start at the beginning, at the source: with Kurt Vonnegut himself.

Dresden: The Fiery Forge

One of the defining aspects of Kurt Vonnegut’s biography, as so many critical essays (as well as numerous interviews with Vonnegut himself) have attested to, is that he was present during the horrific fire-bombings of the German city of Dresden by the Allies in the summer of 1945. Vonnegut was born in Indiana in 1922 into a wealthy family. Living through the tumultuous Great Depression however, his father and mother struggled to make ends meet and saw the family fortune dwindle. After Vonnegut’s attempts at chemistry and German – subjects he took at his father’s behest – at university were unsuccessful, he signed up to the military, hoping to contribute to the American war effort. He was assigned to Camp Atterbury, situated about forty miles south of Indianapolis, and began his basic training,

²⁵ Ibid., 794

²⁶ See “Chronology” in Ibid., 811-832

eventually upgrading to special training in the operation of the powerful 240-milimeter howitzer, a weapon capable of devastating destruction. Vonnegut openly admitted that he didn't take the army all that seriously, and that it wasn't an uncommon trait among the young soldiers in his battalion:

I was never trained for the infantry. Battalion scouts were elite troops, see. There were only six in each battalion, and nobody was very sure about what they were supposed to do. So we would march over to the rec room every morning and play Ping-Pong and fill out applications for Officer Candidate School.²⁷

However, these days spent playing Ping-Pong in the rec room meant that Vonnegut and his colleagues were poorly prepared when they were deployed in Europe and as a result, were almost immediately captured in Germany in December of 1944. When asked what happened when he reached the front, Vonnegut openly admitted that he “imitated various war movies [he'd] seen”.²⁸

Upon capture, Vonnegut and some sixty other infantry men, including his close friend Bernard V. O'Hare who features prominently in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, were transported to Dresden in box-cars to work in a factory which produced specially designed highly nutritious syrup.²⁹ The conditions were dreadful, and while Vonnegut was made the leader of the group of prisoners as a result of being able to speak some basic German, he often fought with his captors and suffered for it. This, however, did not distract him from noticing the beauty of the city in which he found himself, and he would often cite later in his career how the events of Dresden affected him all the more because of the beauty of the city itself, noting in *Fates Worse than Death* how a return there moved him emotionally.³⁰

In the early hours of February 14, 1945, while Vonnegut and his companions took cover in a basement shelter below a slaughterhouse, the city of Dresden was firebombed by Allied planes, leaving most of the city in utter ruins, and a body count of between 22,000 and 25,000.³¹ After emerging from the shelter, Vonnegut and the other POW's were put to work exhuming and disposing of the bodies left in the ruins of the city, work which Vonnegut does not hesitate to admit had a tremendously traumatizing effect on him, creating memories which lasted for his whole life. Some weeks later, as the war came to a close, Vonnegut was rescued, and spent time recovering in an army hospital in France, before eventually returning home. He served a few more weeks at Camp Atterbury but was eventually honourably discharged in late July of 1945, psychological trauma cited as one of the causes for discharge.

Twenty-four years, five moderately successful novels, and a multitude of short stories later, Vonnegut was finally able to write his “Dresden Novel”. The process, he would later explain,

²⁷ Gourevitch, *Kurt Vonnegut*, 165

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 165

²⁹ See Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 449-453

³⁰ Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death: An Autobiographical Collage*

³¹ Vonnegut seems to cite from as many as 250,000 dead, to as few as 25,000, but the official numbers are between 22,000 and 25,000. Exact numbers are difficult due to the destructive nature of firebombing and the difficulty in retrieving and identifying bodies.

was a difficult one, and this is what led to the novel's lengthy composition time and delayed publication. Vonnegut writes in the novel's opening chapter:

I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big. But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then – not enough of them to make a book anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown.³²

Coincidentally, the novel did make Vonnegut a lot of money and its successful sales are what led to the subsequent growth of his career. But the quote above indicates too that Dresden was never an easy topic for Vonnegut. The words did not flow easily from his mind to the page, unlike previous novels, where the writing came more easily. There the emotional investment was not as great. Instead, the sentiment expressed above indicates that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was for Vonnegut a twenty-three year chore, or indeed as many would have it, a twenty-three year *process* of coming to terms with the difficult experience of Dresden.

The plot of *Slaughterhouse-Five* centres on the protagonist Billy Pilgrim, a middle-aged optometrist who hails from the fictional city of Ilium, New York. But Billy is far from ordinary and suffers from a curious ailment: he has “come unstuck in time”.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between. He says.³³

The “he says” at the close of the quote implies a possible dishonesty on the part of Billy which we will investigate later. It is this curious ability of Billy's to travel through time which provides one of the characteristic elements of the novel. The result of Billy's time travel is a narrative which fluctuates at random and which is able to, in a non-linear fashion, provide an over-arching biographical account of the life of Billy Pilgrim. Billy was, like Vonnegut, present at the bombings of Dresden and he is forced through his random travels through time to continuously re-live his experiences there. These experiences are placed alongside other significant events in his life such as his marriage, his capture by the alien race of Tralfamadorians and his life on their planet.

Because it is explicitly asserted by Vonnegut himself that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is his “Dresden novel,” the novel which serves to recall and better understand his experiences during the firebombing of the city, it is a simple next step to read Billy Pilgrim as representing the voice of the author on the page, much like John in *Cat's Cradle*. While we are provided with two bookends to the novel, chapters one and ten being overtly written in the voice of Vonnegut himself, the bulk of the novel is made up of the first-hand experiences

³² Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 345-346

³³ *Ibid.*, 360

of Billy. Martin Coleman sums up the object of *Slaughterhouse-Five* rather succinctly, noting that the novel functions like a “road map”, growing explicitly out of the author’s World War II experiences and attempting to engage meaningfully and emotionally with those experiences.³⁴

Taking this biographical aspect of the novel as a backdrop then we are led to understand the novel and its techniques in specific ways. The assumption that the novel is largely an exposition of Vonnegut’s own experiences implies that it is a deliberate act of remembering, leading to a conclusion that literary technique and science fiction as a genre play an important role in enacting this task of remembering. Vonnegut’s way of remembering is uniquely shaped by his stylistic choices and these are important considerations when trying to understand the emotional task of remembering. Taking our brief synopsis of the novel as an introduction, as well as our understanding of the events of Dresden and the life of Vonnegut, we can begin to consider the ways in which *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a Text functions both cathartically for Vonnegut and as a way of remembering and preserving the events of Dresden in 1945.³⁵ Therefore, as our point of departure into the *text* as such, an analysis of the literary technique employed in the novel is necessary, beginning with a closer understanding of the category of science fiction.

The Science Fiction Urinal

From early on his career, beginning with the publication of his first novel, *Player Piano*, Vonnegut was considered by many of his critics to be a science fiction author. He was often derided as a hack plagiarist of authors like George Orwell or Aldous Huxley, and indeed readily admits that he drew heavily on novels like *Brave New World* and *1984* when writing *Player Piano*.³⁶ Nonetheless, the limitations of science fiction, or being classified as strictly a science fiction author, made Vonnegut unhappy and he made it very clear that he did not appreciate being uncompromisingly placed into this category. In the aptly titled ‘Science Fiction’, an essay which appeared in the New York Times Book Review in September of 1965, Vonnegut spoke out against this categorization:

I learned from the reviewers that I was a science fiction writer. *I didn’t know that*. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labelled ‘science fiction’ ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.³⁷

³⁴ Martin Coleman, "The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 44, no. 4 (2008), 693.

³⁵ “Text” here, and throughout this chapter, refers to the idea of text according to Roland Barthes (see Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text (1971)," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2010), 1326-1331.). That is, the text is the symbolic order perceived through the interaction of the multiple parts of the novel, while the work is the physical novel itself. The majority of this chapter deals with the *text* in this Barthesian sense, but is described in more detail and is more significant in the next chapter.

³⁶ “Address to the American Physical Society” in Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 782

³⁷ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon (Opinions)*, 29 (emphasis mine)

While Vonnegut obviously didn't appreciate this narrow view of his work, it becomes clear in works such as *The Sirens of Titan* and later *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* (although the latter to a lesser extent) that he does tend to favour the science fiction mode, or at least makes use of many of the tropes and techniques common in the genre. In an elucidating essay on science fiction in the works of Vonnegut, Karen and Charles Wood note that "it seems clear that [Vonnegut's] dislike of the label arises not out of disrespect for science fiction or its practitioners but rather from an understandable dislike of the general critical attitude toward science fiction."³⁸ But his is not a science fiction which is, in the very simple sense of the word, "pure". Comparing him to other more dedicated sci-fi authors, one finds that rather than being a clear-cut sci-fi author, Vonnegut uses science fiction tropes as an aid in the pursuit of a specific agenda. This argument is formulated by conceiving of science fiction literature as a literature of ideas, rather than experience. Again, Wood provides useful insight into this phenomenon:

...science fiction is primarily social criticism, usually veiled in the remoteness of time and alien location. Good science fiction communicates most effectively by projecting current problems to their logical future conclusions... [it] is an *extension* of current trends to logical and frequently horrible conclusions and an understanding of science fiction's tendency to extend current social phenomena into the future is important, even critical, to a recognition of the nature of current science fiction.³⁹

Such an appraisal of the function of science fiction is certainly accurate with regards to more overtly alien worlds in Vonnegut's work, like the planet Tralfamadore appearing first in *The Sirens of Titan* and again in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The alien universe provides both a backdrop for the satirical assessment of contemporary political or social affairs, as well as functioning as an extension of the author's concerns – ecological disaster, political corruption, the meaning of human life – to levels of absurdity. While a novel like *Player Piano* does not contain alien worlds of the Tralfamadorean ilk, the "extension of current trends" in machinery and computers which form the basis of *Player Piano*'s tension allow it to be classified also as science fiction.⁴⁰

The most important science fiction trope employed in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however is not the alien planet of Tralfamadore, but rather that of time travel. Billy Pilgrim's "coming unstuck in time" forms the basis for the novel's narrative thrust – that is, it is responsible for both driving forward the novel's narration, and providing a vehicle for supplementary elements of critique. Time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an important characteristic of both Billy Pilgrim's persona as well as a technique for the production of a non-linear narrative. In this regard it serves a dual function and is central to the novel's overall success in providing a unique way of remembering.

The use of time travel in Vonnegut's most successful and widely read novel has been a point of discussion for numerous critics since the novel's publication and its meaning has been a

³⁸ Karen Wood and Charles Wood. "The Vonnegut Effect: Science Fiction and Beyond" in Jerome Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 135.

³⁹ Wood and Wood, 136

⁴⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano*, Vol. 8 Rosetta Books, 2010.

source of contention. Billy's time-travelling has variously been described as schizophrenia, a mnemonic device, or simply a science fiction trope.⁴¹ Before we discuss the function of time travel though, it is important to understand the way it appears in the work, and how, specifically, it aids in the progression of narrative. This can be done by performing a brief close reading.

As mentioned earlier, Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is described as having "come unstuck in time". This has a curious effect on Billy, causing him to randomly move between time periods in his life, as well as spaces related to memories from those time periods. Billy's time travel is thus not simply temporal, but also *spatial*. When triggered by a specific mnemonic (memory) device or sensory experience, Billy will uncontrollably move back and forth through time and space.⁴² As an example of this mechanism, I quote here at length from Chapter Two:

Billy Pilgrim had stopped in the forest. He was leaning against a tree with his eyes closed. His head was tilted back and his nostrils were flaring. He was like a poet in the Parthenon.

This was when Billy first came unstuck in time. His attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light. There wasn't anybody else there, or any thing. There was just violet light – and a hum.

And then Billy swung into life again, going backwards until he was in pre-birth, which was red light and bubbling sounds. And then he swung into life again and stopped. He was a little boy taking a shower with his hairy father at the Ilium Y.M.C.A. He smelled chlorine from the swimming pool next door, heard the springboard boom.

[...]From there he travelled in time to 1965. He was forty-one years old, and he was visiting his decrepit mother at Pine Knoll, an old people's home he had put her in only a month before. She had caught pneumonia, and wasn't expected to live. She did live though, for years after that.⁴³

This passage is a perfect illustration of the unique incarnation of time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. We can see how, while Billy occupies physically a particular time and space — that of Dresden in 1945, leaning against a tree in a forest — he uncontrollably moves from there to different stages in his life: his birth, death, childhood, and middle age; and not simply temporally but spatially too, to the point where he is able to physically experience the memories through his senses (smelling the chlorine, hearing the springboard etc.). He has moved rapidly backwards and then rapidly forwards in time. Even more interestingly, we see that Billy has some comprehension of a time in the future which he does not specifically inhabit during this particular episode of time travel. He is able to retain details of all periods of his life as he travels, demonstrating the maintenance of a coherent consciousness throughout. At the end of the quote the sentence "she did live though, for years

⁴¹ See also Susanne Veas-Gulani, "Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatric Approach to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 44, no. 2 (Winter, 2003), 175-184.; J. A. Martino, "Billy Pilgrim's Motion Sickness: Chronesthesia and Duration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*," *Philament* 16 (08, 2010), 4-20. and Stanley Schatt and G.K. Hall, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, Twayne Publishers (1976) respectively.

⁴² Mnemonic device: a sequence of words or letters, or a physical object, triggering recollection in Billy. See also Daniel Cordle, "Changing of the Old Guard: Time Travel and Literary Technique in the Work of Kurt Vonnegut," *Yearbook of English Studies* 30 (2000), 166-176.

⁴³ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 373-374

after that” indicates that even while Billy temporally and spatially inhabits 1965 he is able to see into, or has “memories” of the future. More accurately, the syntactic construction of that sentence — being in the past tense — indicates that Billy does not simply know the future, but in fact has inhabited it and is able to look back at it. It is this paradoxical position of Billy’s having memories of the future which heavily informs his experience of life. This complicated passage thus illustrates that Billy mentally inhabits past, present and future tenses simultaneously and moves both spatially and psychologically rapidly and uncontrollably between them, all the while retaining information he may have gained from each moment.

Billy’s occupation of time and space is therefore comparable to the Tralfamadorian view of literary narrative and comprehension of time, a comparison which many Vonnegut scholars have made.⁴⁴ The Tralfamadorian view of time is one which is not simply non-linear, but which sees all tenses simultaneously. Upon arriving on the planet Tralfamadore, a disorientated Billy engages with one of the aliens:

“Where am I?” said Billy Pilgrim.

“Trapped in another blob of amber, Mr. Pilgrim. We are where we have to be just now – three hundred million miles from Earth, bound for a time warp which will get us to Tralfamadore in hours rather than centuries.”

“How – how did I get here?”

“It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber.”

“You sound to me as though you don’t believe in free will,” said Billy Pilgrim.⁴⁵

For the Tralfamadorian then, all time is simultaneous. While there is a past, present and a future, they are not experienced in a linear fashion, with the past ever receding as the present moves forwards into the future. This conception of time is variously classified as Bergsonian. Henri Bergson notes that the human conception of time posits a linear framework upon which consciousness and free will rely.⁴⁶ This is not the case however for the Tralfamadorians, as Billy quite keenly observes. Rather, like a “bug trapped in amber”, the amber being time itself, Tralfamadorians are motionlessly suspended in all time at once. This is similar to the mental experience of time which Billy was thrust into by becoming “unstuck in time”. While he is able to experience separate moments from past, present and future, he retains knowledge of them all and seems to inhabit them all simultaneously, seeing them, as it were, like a “stretch of the Rocky Mountains.” Physically however, Billy is not suspended. He moves

⁴⁴ See for example Martino, “Billy Pilgrim’s Motion Sickness: Chronesthesia and Duration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*”, 4-20

⁴⁵ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 402

⁴⁶ Bergson, Henri as cited in “Martino, Billy Pilgrim’s Motion Sickness: Chronesthesia and Duration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*”, 4-20

through time physically as well and this is contrary to the suspension which a Tralfamadorian would experience. Mentally though, the experiences are identical.

The pressing question regarding Vonnegut's use of time travel, I would argue, is not in how it is manifest, but rather *why* it appears at all. While some critics have attributed the use of time travel to Vonnegut's penchant for science fiction, this is a difficult stance to substantiate since Vonnegut himself denies any desire to be categorised as such, as we have seen. In terms of the reasons for time travel being in the narrative at all, an analysis of the literature reveals certain trends.

In a lucid essay entitled 'Billy Pilgrim's Motion Sickness: Chronesthesia and Duration in *Slaughterhouse-Five*', J.A Martino analyses Billy's temporal fluctuations in light of the aforementioned Bergsonian theory of time and meaning. As Martino explains it, in the Bergsonian time model "the self, at any given moment, is comprised of each moment of its existence, and each new moment contributes to the building of the self."⁴⁷ The self then, in this view, is a combination of past experiences as they are created moment by moment, moving along a linear timeline and culminating in the present moment. Billy Pilgrim falls outside of this model as his experience of time is not linear, and Martino notes that this has a significant effect on his sense of self and identity. Thus, "if, as Bergson suggests, consciousness is defined by its existence in the linear flux of time and the persistence of memory, Billy Pilgrim's temporality challenges the precise nature of his consciousness, and therefore his freedom."⁴⁸ This disruption of Billy's consciousness is no doubt deliberate on the part of Vonnegut as "the linear time frame on which Bergson insists consciousness and freedom are reliant is dismissed."⁴⁹ There is thus a clear relationship, at the very least in the mind of Billy Pilgrim, between his experience of time and its implications for free will. Given that the circumstances of war form part of the memories through which he travels, the question of free will becomes important for Vonnegut here. The removal of free will from the equation of Billy's experience of the Dresden fire-bombings implies that things would have happened as they happened no matter the choices that Billy made. He is thus rendered powerless to his circumstances, and forced to endure the horrors of war without choosing to. This conception has some important implications for Vonnegut's political critique as well, which we will discuss in the closing section of this chapter.

What Martino provides for us then is a clear and deliberate understanding of the intimate relationship between Billy's position as "unstuck in time" and his sense of self. This sense of self is, for Martin Coleman, also intricately tied to Billy's sense of meaning. In the essay 'The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time' Coleman provides convincing evidence of the relationship between time travel and meaning. According to Coleman, "time is meaningless to Billy Pilgrim because he is unable to reliably relate experiences temporally... he feels disconnections and disorder absolutely."⁵⁰ Drawing on the work of John Dewey, instead of Henri Bergson, Coleman concludes, albeit similarly to Martino, that "the denial of time

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9

⁵⁰ Coleman, "The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time", 688

entails the loss of individuality because human individuality *is* the temporally related events that comprise biography; this history of changes makes the human individual unique.”⁵¹ Thus, as a consideration of Coleman and Martino suggests, Billy is unable to achieve either a consistent sense of self or meaning as a result of his tenuous and fluctuating apprehension of time. This approach to Vonnegut’s novel has significant implications for the common understanding of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a largely biographical work. It suggests, indeed, that Vonnegut, while writing a kind of cathartic biography, is nonetheless fully aware of some of the shortcomings of such an exercise, as well as being aware of the way in which biography and identity themselves are constructed and understood. It also calls into question the role of the author in the production of textual meaning, a theme which I will continue to explore throughout this study.

In this regard then, Billy, while being negatively affected by the implications of a lack of free will, is also forced to continuously remember a traumatic past which is inescapable death being unavailable as an exit. Our analysis of Coleman and Martino provides a foundation for understanding the novel as both a cathartic and autobiographical exercise for Vonnegut, exposing for the reader his experience of reliving his own traumatic memories of the war, noting in addition the impact of remembering in the constitution of a coherent identity. Vonnegut is unable to forget the past and also rendered helpless to change the situation, both presently and retrospectively. Most importantly however, it must be noted that this exposition relies almost exclusively on the science fiction trope of time travel. This reliance demonstrates the connection between the novel’s impetus and its use of science fiction. Without the creative freedom which a trope like time travel provides, the novel’s experiments in memory would not succeed.

In light of the above then we are able to surmise that the science fiction trope of time travel functions as more than simply a way into the category of sci-fi in the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Rather, it is a deliberate inclusion in the novel as way of creatively portraying the struggles which Billy Pilgrim faces. As a survivor of the tragic bombings of Dresden he is obviously psychologically traumatized. The use of time travel in the novel, and more specifically, of time as one “stretch of the Rocky Mountains” – past, present and future seen at once – allows the reader to view the “picture” of Billy’s life holistically; not as a sequence of events culminating in one individual, but rather as the culmination of all things, all events, past, present, and future. One life as “many marvellous moments seen all at one time”.⁵²

Time travel in this novel serves more than simply to create conflict in the person of Billy Pilgrim though. It also has an interesting effect on the way in which memory functions in the novel, and *for* the novel specifically as a biographical text – indeed, as an exercise in memory for Vonnegut himself. A number of eminent Vonnegut scholars have understood time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to represent excavations in memory for Billy Pilgrim. This forms a basis for many arguments and analyses; including those we may term psychological arguments. The above arguments form some of the basis for our next section, as I attempt to

⁵¹ Ibid., 691

⁵² Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 404

relate the implications of time travel and science fiction, with some of the symbolic and critical aspects of the text.

Memory, War and American Politics

It cannot be ignored that by way of its very nature as the “Dresden novel”, *Slaughterhouse-Five* must deal closely with issues of war and its consequences, and by association, the American political climate at the time of its publication. Indeed, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published during one of the most turbulent times in America’s war history: The Vietnam War.

Vonnegut engages closely throughout the novel, and subsequently throughout his career, with war and American war-making activities, often positioning himself as unashamedly critical of American war practices. With a novel like *Slaughterhouse-Five* though, the engagement with war is more human, so to speak, considering some of the closely personal implications of his experiences in Dresden in light of broader existential questions of meaning and free will, questions which plague much of Vonnegut’s fiction. This section aims at discussing ways in which the novel fails or succeeds in appropriating the experience of war for the reader, some of the biographical implications of this and the relationship the novel may or may not share with Vonnegut’s political, and self-proclaimed “humanist”, motivations.

Ironically, the novel’s opening chapter quite explicitly, almost self-defeatingly states that “there is no intelligent way to write about a massacre”⁵³, a statement which may imply a resignation on Vonnegut’s part to the inevitable ineffectiveness of this text. This kind of contradiction is common in Vonnegut’s work, that he claims the ineffectiveness of fiction with statements such as “fiction is so much hot air”⁵⁴ while participating in the act of writing fiction – or even claiming elsewhere how fiction can be useful.⁵⁵ The claim to the impossibility of writing intelligently about a massacre like Dresden may also have been placed there as a way of lowering the expectations of the reader, placing in their mind the idea that the novel may be unintelligible as a result of its unintelligible subject matter. But what is offered to the reader, while arguably chaotic, is far from unintelligent. The novel is in fact an unabashed attempt to engage with the fire-bombings of Dresden on three distinct levels: the personal, political, and humanitarian levels. As Stanley Schatt notes in the preface to his seminal work on Vonnegut, “at the very center of Vonnegut’s fiction is a concern with the age old question of free will and the meaning of life and love.”⁵⁶

As discussed previously, the choice of non-linear time as a narrative technique in *Slaughterhouse-Five* has some important implications for the novel being classified as science fiction, but, more importantly, the time travelling which Billy experiences leads to some important existential questioning. He accurately concludes that if one is to view the world the way the Tralfamadorians do, then it follows that free will is negated since no action performed in the present or the past will ultimately affect the events of the future.

⁵³ Ibid., 357

⁵⁴ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon (Opinions)*, 254

⁵⁵ “I am persuaded that we [fiction authors] are tremendously useful.” Ibid., 257

⁵⁶ Stanley Schatt and GK Hall, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr*, Twayne Publishers, 1976.

Immediately then the question is raised as to how this affects Billy, and by association Vonnegut himself, with regards to the events in Dresden of 1945, if we are to continue under the assumption as we have been that Vonnegut writes a lot of himself into the character of Billy Pilgrim. If free will does not exist, and all time for an individual happens at once, as if he were a “bug trapped in amber”, then how does one begin to comprehend a tragedy on the scale of Dresden? The implication would be that there was no way of preventing it – that it was always going to happen. This, then, forms the basis for most of the existential questioning which occurs in the novel as Billy tries to come to terms with the horror of his experiences in light of the Tralfamadorian experience of time under which he operates.

The repetition of the phrase “so it goes” throughout the novel at a moment of someone or something’s death echoes this ominous sense of the inevitability of death and every human’s fate. The real question I wish to pose firstly in this section is how this resignation can be seen as a *personal* affectation of Vonnegut’s and further, discuss in what sense the novel might serve as a kind of catharsis for the author in light of his experience in Dresden and also how this affects his subsequent engagement with American society. For some clues in this regard, it may be helpful to turn to the closing chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which Vonnegut’s voice reappears as the speaker and he offers some conclusions on the text:

...every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes.

My father died many years ago now – of natural causes. So it goes. He was a sweet man. He was a gun nut, too. He left me his guns. They rust.

If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed. Still – if I am going to spend eternity visiting this moment and that, I’m grateful that so many of those moments are nice.⁵⁷

The closing chapter of the novel begins with an in depth contemplation of death, listing a number of significant deaths of public figures, as well as a more personal account of the death of Vonnegut’s own father. What is most interesting however, as evidenced in the above quote, is the sense in which death is not at all final in the Tralfamadorian configuration of time. Rather, Vonnegut contemplates the implications of an eternal life, like Billy’s, constantly moving back and forth through memories. The idea, Vonnegut notes, is not one which fills him with joy – but, at the same time he is thankful that he does have moments which he is able to look back upon with fondness. It is this interestingly ambiguous engagement with death and life’s meaning which plagues Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He seems unable to settle on death as either final, or as a gateway to eternity. He notes that the Tralfamadorians take no interest in Jesus Christ, and prefer an “Earthling figure who is most engaging”, namely, Charles Darwin.⁵⁸ This would seem to imply the author’s preference for a naturalistic, perhaps even existential nihilistic approach to life, implying an utter lack of meaning – one which is certainly compatible with a view of time which negates free will, as earlier discussed. This sense of meaninglessness is further emphasised by the

⁵⁷ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 487

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 487

excessive repetition in the closing pages of the phrase “so it goes”, occurring every two to three lines.

Turning to his later essays, speeches and interviews, a picture of Vonnegut’s personal feelings about life’s meaning emerges which is repeatedly obscured and revised. In an ‘Address to the Graduating Class at Bennington College’ in 1970 he notes, in a kind of atheistic, naturalistic mode that “[e]verything is going to become unimaginably worse, and never get better again.”⁵⁹, implying a sense of doom and meaninglessness – human beings fated to a gloomy and hopeless future. He would later state in “Reflections Upon My Own Death” that he “honestly believe[s], though, that we are wrong to think that moments go away, never to be seen again. This moment and every moment lasts forever.”⁶⁰ The implication here is the existence of an eternity, of a hopeful future beyond death, something which squares better certainly with Jesus Christ than with Charles Darwin. Existentially then, we see in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut’s close engagement with these questions and I would argue that this is one of the more obvious extensions of his own personal struggles embedded in the text.

What I would stress though is that while this approach to life is offered up to the reader by Vonnegut, he is never truly settled on it as absolute but rather the position he occupies is an ambiguous one. This, I would claim, is evidenced in Vonnegut’s continuation in the art of fiction, and in life. While he appears resigned to the deafness of others to his “canary” calls, as well as to his inability to change the past, he perseveres in his work to try and make sense of it all – an indication that he has not given up all hope. Billy Pilgrim in many ways embodies this aspect of Vonnegut, as he too, while acknowledging the fruitlessness of his attempts to change the world, is able to find joy in the happy moments of his life, particularly the life he builds on the planet Tralfamadore with Montana Wildhack. In this sense then it is clear that *Slaughterhouse-Five* stands as a clear example of Vonnegut engaging with his own personal difficulties and trauma in a kind of catharsis, while also writing himself biographically into the person of Billy Pilgrim.

It is also undeniable that at times, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an explicitly politically motivated novel, speaking out against the horrors of war through the example of Dresden – again something which is easily reconciled with Vonnegut’s public statements on the subject. Quite often, and quite explicitly, Vonnegut spoke out against America’s propensity for warmongering, an urge which he considered highly unproductive and which stood opposed to his humanist beliefs.⁶¹ Writing often in satirical, sarcastic tones, Vonnegut was scathingly critical of the political establishment’s condoning of war and destruction. Oftentimes his critique coincides with disillusionment with science, one which, as we have seen is particularly apparent in novels such as *Cat’s Cradle* but is not entirely absent from *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He often raised the question of scientific truth and its usefulness to humanity.

⁵⁹ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon (Opinions)*, 190

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 212

⁶¹ I work on the assumption throughout this chapter that Vonnegut considers himself a humanist, something which he states explicitly in his “Address to the American Physical Society” as cited previously.

I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientist, maybe my brother, would have taken a colour photograph of God Almighty – and sold it to *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Scientific truth was going to make us *so* happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima.⁶²

For Vonnegut, the expectations he had of science were to bring enlightenment and meaning to the human race. Instead he views as one of the pinnacles of scientific achievement in the world the destructive power of the atomic bomb, a device which shaped American society around the time of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s publication. This tentative approach to popular appraisals of science as redemptive permeates Vonnegut's social and political agenda, which is embedded in the text of his most popular fiction.

One of the most overt critiques of American society and politics in *Slaughterhouse-Five* comes in the form of a dialogue between Billy Pilgrim and a surgeon he encounters in Dresden.

There at the corner, in the front rank of pedestrians, was a surgeon who had been operating all day. He was a civilian, but his posture was military. He had served in two world wars. The sight of Billy offended him, especially after he learned from the guards that Billy was American. It seemed to him that Billy was in abominable taste, supposed that Billy had gone to a lot of silly trouble to costume himself so.

The surgeon spoke English, and he said to Billy, "I take it you find war a very comical thing."

[...] Billy wanted to be friendly, to help, if he could, but his resources were meagre. His fingers now held the two objects from the lining of his coat. Billy decided to show the surgeon what they were.

"You thought we would enjoy being *mocked*?" the surgeon said. "And do you feel *proud* to represent America as you do?"⁶³

The incident quoted above appears insignificant at first. Billy has recently travelled through time and is confused about his surroundings – a parade through the Dresden streets. There are two very important aspects of the passage which I feel need to be highlighted. The first is the surgeon's contempt for Billy purely on the basis of him being American. The surgeon automatically associates Billy and his American identity with a nonchalant attitude towards war, assuming that Billy finds it comical. He asks Billy, rhetorically and in a sarcastic tone, whether he feels proud about the way he is representing America. The representation of America to which the surgeon is referring relates to the parade which Billy was participating in at the time of their encounter. The festive nature of a parade through Dresden is highly inappropriate considering the circumstances of war and the impending bombing of Dresden. This context makes the parade appear foolish and mocking, making light of the seriousness of war and this is what the surgeon takes issue with and which he immediately associates with Americans as a whole. The surgeon finds this frivolous approach to war insulting and calls Billy out for his ignorance.

⁶² Ibid., 189

⁶³ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 447

The second important aspect of the passage is Billy's response to the surgeon's challenge. Apart from being confused and feeling slightly out of place, Billy is desperate to quell the surgeon's negative assumptions by being friendly to him, but he finds that "his resources were meagre". This could be read allegorically, having a direct relationship to Vonnegut himself. He finds himself as an author in a situation where accusations are being made toward America and Americans (like the situation Billy is in) and he wishes to change the image being portrayed by his society – but he finds that he lacks the resources to do so and is unable to make any significant difference, just like Billy is unable to convince the surgeon of his friendliness. This difficulty is one which Vonnegut was very much aware of throughout his career and one which he often spoke of. In his article on Vonnegut as a critical voice of American society, Lawrence Broer notes that: "Vonnegut acknowledges that in the wake of Hiroshima and the death camps, faith in human improvement has not come easily, pointing out that he and his fellow canary-bird artists chirped and chirped and keeled over in protest of the war in Vietnam, but it made no difference whatsoever."⁶⁴

"The canary-bird artists" mentioned in the quote above refers to Vonnegut's figuring of himself and other authors as canaries in a coal-mine. Like those canaries, Vonnegut proposes that the function of an author was to tweet as a warning of impending trouble, as the canaries did to warn of dangerous gases in the coal mine. The unfortunate consequence though was that the canaries would die from exposure to the dangerous gases, serving as a sacrifice for the safety of the miners. As Broer notes, Vonnegut feels like his warnings are going unheeded. The closing line of *Slaughterhouse-Five* reminds us of this unheeded call, and retroactively recalls the novel's role as fiction in the phrase *Poo-tee-weet*. Thus we see in the incident with the surgeon an embedded symbolism representing both a disdain of American society which Vonnegut admits he felt, and an urge to fix the cause of this disdain which at times seems fruitless.

While these two aspects of *Slaughterhouse-Five* – the personal and political concerns of the author – are made clear here then, it is important that I mention briefly in the closing paragraphs of this section what I would term Vonnegut's "humanitarian" concerns. These humanitarian or humanist concerns I would posit result from an interaction between the aforementioned personal and political concerns. Vonnegut, through the fiction of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, draws our attention to the difficulty of the human condition as he experienced it on a personal level, as we discussed in our understanding of time travel, free will, and human identity in section two. The novel I feel engages the reader to such an extent that this fear of the inability of each of us to change our conditions is made tangible in the character of Billy Pilgrim. Following from that then, Vonnegut's critique of American society as he writes for his American audience draws these two threads together, uniting the American people in an understanding of their need to change their society and fight the problems within it, even in the face of a seemingly unimpeachable problematic. The call of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is one which emphasizes issues of personal trauma *and* political turmoil and one which, when viewed holistically, births a broader humanistic ideology.

⁶⁴ Lawrence R. Broer, "Identity Crisis: A State of the Union Address by Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut," *Mailer Review* 2, no. 1 (Fall, 2008), 365.

As a brief conclusion to this chapter I wish to note some of the key points raised here which will carry through the chapter to follow. We have seen the significance of Vonnegut's traumatic experience in the Second World War and the way in which it has informed his biography and how he writes this trauma into *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle*. As biography is a theme which heavily informs most of his work, we will return to it in our analysis of *Breakfast of Champions*. Secondly, the use of science fiction constitutes a curious element of Vonnegut's work and enables him to write about and around topics which otherwise would have been engaged with differently. In the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the use of time travel enables a specific conception of human identity and memory which is then foundational to understanding a broader human concern with free will. It is these concerns as made possible through the science fiction trope which aid in the embedding of political concerns and critiques of American culture central to Vonnegut's canon. Variations on science-fiction pervade Vonnegut's oeuvre and in the final chapter which follows, this will remain an important element of my analysis as we begin to consider political, biographical and literary implications of *Breakfast of Champions*.

Chapter 3 – *Breakfast of Champions*

The extent to which a novel like *Slaughterhouse-Five* is biographical is in some ways mirrored in *Breakfast of Champions*. In the latter case though, the voice of the author is manifested in some very distinct ways. While Vonnegut throughout *Breakfast of Champions* makes reference to himself and to his position as a writer — the reappearance of the semi-autobiographical Kilgore Trout as protagonist being a case in point — the narrative voice is here more self-aware somehow, more self-critical.

The novel itself, while maintaining its plot, is in the majority composed of brief anecdotes, synopses of Troutean fiction and descriptions of common earthly phenomena. Central to the narrative thrust of the work are the parallel narratives of Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover, which eventually meet tangentially at the novel's climax. Trout — the very same as appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* — is the unmistakable alter ego of the real Kurt Vonnegut.⁶⁵ The plot centres on Trout's travelling to Midland City to attend and speak at an Arts Festival. He has been invited by Eliot Rosewater, another of Vonnegut's recycled characters, and departs on the trip in the hope of causing some stir at the event. The narrative follows Trout closely as he travels across the country, analysing, often in great detail, Trout's experiences and apprehensions of the world.

Resident also in Midland City is the “fabulously well-to-do” car salesman, Dwayne Hoover. Hoover, who also suffers from mental illness, finds his life very much influenced by a novel of Trout's which he speed reads shortly before rampaging through Midland City and causing some significant damage. The gruesome ending to the novel also sees Vonnegut himself intruding into the narrative, appearing as a character in his own work as he observes and also controls the other characters around him.

In the book's preface, Vonnegut describes the work as a “sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which [he has] thrown over [his] shoulders”.⁶⁶ As you read through the novel, you get a tangible sense of this discarding of trash, the novel's mismatched anecdotes and descriptions creating a mosaic of the author's mind, the tiles comprised of discarded bits of fiction. This is a move which explicitly draws attention to the writing process and the role of the author in the work's production, but also engenders a sense in the reader that all along the voice on the page is Vonnegut's, even when it isn't.

The aim of this third and final chapter then is to dissect to some degree the inner workings of this mechanism, commonly referred to as “meta-fiction”, a concept I touched on briefly in chapter one. Building on the understanding of authorial roles and biography in our examination of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle*, a more detailed picture of Vonnegut's writing method will begin to form. With recourse to theory of the postmodern novel and the role of the author, as well as to the vast reserve of Vonnegut's own writing on the subject, this chapter will shed some light on *Breakfast of Champions* as a postmodern novel, with a final aim of finding its place within Vonnegut's oeuvre. It stands apart in many ways from his other works in its obscure and disparate structure, but the novel can also be seen as an amalgamation of the various styles and agendas espoused in the earlier fiction and non-

⁶⁵ See also Hume, "Vonnegut's Self-Projections: Symbolic Characters and Symbolic Fiction", 177-190

⁶⁶ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 504

fiction. As a point of departure, a discussion of the theoretical basis of this chapter's arguments is necessary.

(Re)Defining Meta-Fiction

The basic theoretical concept of meta-fiction is nothing particularly new. Beginning as early as the modernists, the crux of metafiction is to create a work which is both conscious of itself as fiction and of the process of its own production. The author is aware of his or her role in the work's creation, as well as the role of the reader as "writer" of the text. Regarding the idea of "text" and the distinctions between reader and author, a mention of Roland Barthes is necessary. In his seminal "From Work to Text" Barthes understands the text in the first case as separate from the work — that is, the work is the physical object, the "fragment of substance" while the Text is a "methodological field".⁶⁷ This distinction is important, as it leads directly to a postmodern understanding of a text (and in our case the novel) as a self-conscious entity. Barthes notes that the Text "is Text for the very reason that it knows itself as text". This notion of self-awareness heavily informed the postmodern idea of fiction and subsequently, meta-fiction.

Barthes's understanding of the reader/author distinction is also important here and his essay "The Death of the Author" — like "From Work to Text" — went some way to establishing the postmodern idea of a novel. He writes of the reader that

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies *not in its origin but in its destination*. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without a history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.⁶⁸

By this definition we begin to see that while it is the Author which places the words on the page, it is the reader whose role is most significant in the production of textual meaning. This definition aims at avoiding "impos(ing) a limit on that text" and instead hopes to open up the meaning of the text to more broadly.⁶⁹

Thus, the reader is figured as an "active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer".⁷⁰ Bran Nicol defines metafiction in greater detail:

Metafiction is fiction (and other kinds of art such as film or visual art) which is "self-conscious", that is, aware of itself *as* fiction (as if it has its own consciousness), or "self-reflexive" or "self-referential" fiction, that which reflects on or refers to itself as a work of fiction rather than pretending it is offering the reader an insight into the real world. More

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text (1971)" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2010), 1327

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author (1968)," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2010), 1325. (emphasis mine)

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1325

⁷⁰ Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

precisely we might define metafiction as fiction that in some way foregrounds its own status as artificial construct, *especially by drawing attention to its form*.⁷¹

Nicol is here building on and consolidating the ideas of Barthes. The idea of the Text as self-constitutive and self-aware as well as the role of the reader is emphasised in this definition and we are able to arrive at a clear understanding of the metafictional, postmodern work.

Understanding fiction in this way makes it easy to see why an author like Vonnegut is regularly placed in the category of the postmodern. His techniques — in novels including *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* as well as the more overtly biographical *Slaughterhouse-Five* — draw attention to themselves and their own production as well as the author's and reader's role in this production. Vonnegut will often allow his own voice to enter the narrative, or will bookend his novels with a preface or epilogue drawing explicit attention to his thought processes when writing.

But *Breakfast of Champions* stands out in the oeuvre by doing more than what Nicol's definition accounts for. While the novel, through the brief synopses of Trout's short stories, provides some comment on writing as an act, Vonnegut takes this idea a step further by inserting himself in to the novel's plot as a character and confronting his own creations. He positions himself as both an observer and controller of the world around him, acting in a God-like role, distanced from the chaos of Dwayne Hoover's mental collapse, but simultaneously conscious of his own complicity in these events.

As for myself: I kept a respectful distance between myself and all the violence – even though I had created Dwayne and his violence and the city, and the sky above and the earth below. Even so, I came out of the riot with a broken watch crystal and what later turned out to be a broken toe. Somebody jumped backwards to get out of Dwayne's way. He broke my watch crystal, *even though I had created him*, and he broke my toe.⁷²

The above passage illustrates the consequences of the kind of literary moves which Vonnegut is making here and throughout the novel. He does not simply create a character and then comment on it objectively as the author acknowledging it as fiction, as Nicol suggests metafiction does. He takes an additional step by allowing the character to do physical damage to him. His place in the narrative is not simply as all-powerful, but he is himself a victim of the circumstances and characters which he creates. Rather than engendering a kind of ironic distancing in our apprehension of the author, it confusingly allows us to see the author's own suffering at the hands of his creation.⁷³ This kind of extension of the usual techniques of a postmodern or metafictional narrative requires a more nuanced definition than the one Nicol provides.

⁷¹ Ibid., 35 (emphasis mine)

⁷² Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 717 (emphasis mine)

⁷³ Vonnegut regularly noted in his speeches and essays the effects which fiction and being a fiction writer had on his life and psyche. He goes so far as to note in the Preface to *Wampeters, Foma and Granfallons* that “[he himself is] a work of fiction”. (21)

Robert T. Tally Jr. refers to this technique as “hyperfiction, or better *patafiction*”.⁷⁴ In other words, Vonnegut’s technique does not simply “acknowledge itself as fiction” but goes a step further by writing the results of this acknowledgement as deliberately absurd. He “highlights the absurdity of the technique itself” and is thus overtly critical of the postmodern move of metafiction.⁷⁵ Returning to the quote from earlier, the first move of the postmodern metafictionalist — that is, Vonnegut *as character* intruding on the novel’s events — is clear, but is followed by events which draw attention to the absurdity of this very move. We are made explicitly aware of Vonnegut’s complete control over the plot and the characters (“even though I had created him”), but he allows them to hurt him anyway, possibly insinuating his own lack of control, but also subtly noting the absurdity of the metafictional technique. Although appearing as an omniscient and omnipotent force here, Vonnegut *relegates* himself to being a victim of his own fiction – an absurd notion no doubt.

It is this understanding of Vonnegut’s work as “hyperfiction” which I would deem critical to a reading of *Breakfast of Champions*, in particular the way I hope to figure it here. By turning the critique in on himself, and by association on postmodern fiction at large as it is conceived up to this point, Vonnegut provides in this novel not simply a critique of the act of writing fiction but indeed of the act of re-writing fiction. It is a critique of the critique and it thus redefines what we have so far come to understand as the manoeuvres of metafiction.

Vonnegut’s unmistakable and uniquely sarcastic tone pervades *Breakfast of Champions*, as it does in much of his non-fiction and essays, and the employment of this tone enables this space of criticism which he wishes to situate himself in. The sarcasm creates a position which is explicitly ironic, serving both the needs of the “hyperfiction” as well as the cultural and political critique. In subtle, yet undoubtedly scathing ways, Vonnegut deconstructs our perceptions of American society and fiction about American society, especially the America he found himself in during the early seventies when writing *Breakfast of Champions*. Through the eyes of Kilgore Trout as he travels across America, but also in the way in which Dwayne Hoover experiences his narrative, *Breakfast of Champions* straddles the two sides of Vonnegut’s fictional emphasis — an analysis of the art of fiction writing and an analysis of society.

A Trip to Midland City

A thorough dissection of *Breakfast of Champions* is aided by the division of the two parallel narratives occurring in the text — those of Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover respectively. Trout’s in particular draws attention to Vonnegut’s unique approach to critiquing American society. Trout, whose narrative is made all the more poignant through an understanding of his character as semi-autobiographical, travels along the highways of America’s Midwest from Indianapolis, Indiana to the fictional Midland City. Figured as something of an objective observer of his surroundings — a tourist in his own country — Trout encounters a cast of

⁷⁴ Robert T. Tally Jr., “‘We are what we Pretend to be’: Existentialist Angst in Vonnegut’s *Mother Night*,” *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 2, no. 4 (Winter, 2009), 27-47.

⁷⁵ Robert Tally, *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography*, 174

characters and objects through which we are made to understand America. Importantly though, it is the constant intrusion of Vonnegut's own voice which allows our viewing of Trout's world to have such particular critical force. With the aid of simple illustrations (whose role will be discussed at length at the end of this chapter), Vonnegut relays with often childlike simplicity the American world.

Rambling along the American highways in a truck which picked him up, Trout enters West Virginia:

The truck carrying Kilgore Trout was in West Virginia now. The surface of the State had been demolished by men and machinery and explosives in order to make it yield up its coal. The coal was mostly gone now. It had been turned into heat... The demolition of West Virginia had taken place with the approval of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the State Government, which drew their power from the people. Here and there an inhabited dwelling still stood.⁷⁶

Appearing at first as a simplistic description of the surrounding countryside of West Virginia, a closer analysis of the opening to Chapter 14 demonstrates Vonnegut's subtle critique of American society. Stated as a progression of simple facts — coal was mined in West Virginia, the coal has run out, the land is left devastated — Vonnegut allows readers to construct an opinion of the situation in this area. However, it is the subtlety of these passages which allows them to have such powerful rhetorical force; a subtlety achieved through the reduction of terms and events to their absolute simplest forms. Choosing to state “the coal was mostly gone now” rather than expounding on possible causes, Vonnegut draws direct attention to the wastefulness of the mining endeavour. The pointlessness of the demolition of the West Virginian landscape is made manifest not through a scathing polemic, but by a simplistic and realistic stating of facts. Adam Kaiserman usefully describes this technique as “explain[ing] his lessons as if his readers were completely unfamiliar with his topics”.⁷⁷ This removal of assumed familiarity on the part of the reader allows for a new light to be shed on the condition of the West Virginian landscape. In Barthesian terms, we can assume here that the role of the reader is as important, if not more important than the role of the author in the way we see the landscape. Vonnegut writes simplistically, leaving interpretations open-ended and allowing the reader to “write” their own West Virginia.

This same technique is further illustrated through the mention of the State Government. While not blamed outright for the demolition of the landscape, the reader is left to assume a connection between state legislature and environmental destruction, further compounded by the meaninglessness of the destruction. Ordinarily an informed reader would be aware of these connections, but Vonnegut's assumption of ignorance, as Kaiserman describes it, draws explicit attention to them and allows for a more blatant critique. The additional note that “here and there an inhabited dwelling still stood” further emphasizes the emptiness of the West Virginian space, and the forlorn lives of its native population. A seemingly innocuous

⁷⁶ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 594

⁷⁷ Adam Kaiserman, "Kurt Vonnegut's PBS Style: Breakfast of Champions, Sesame Street, and the Politics of Public Culture," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 4 (2012), 335.

statement, this observation in fact bolsters the critique as the visions of the devastated landscape make the consequences of coal mining all the more clear to the reader.

What is particularly interesting then is not simply the content of Vonnegut's "message" here, if you will, but rather the way in which it is produced. Nicol suggests that it is the task of realist fiction to demonstrate the world as it is. Postmodern fiction in contrast intends to draw attention to the impossibility of this endeavour through the metafictional technique, drawing attention to the short comings of writing. The passage above, however, demonstrates a kind of fiction which is at once realist *and* postmodern. This is achieved through the composition of simple, perhaps even pedagogical syntax, and the sequential compounding of basic facts. These facts in their utter simplicity serve simultaneously to criticise the events in West Virginia and their causes and to state simply the reality which surrounds Kilgore Trout. While demonstrating the case for Vonnegut as the postmodern novelist then, this blurring of the realist and postmodern further show the author's commitment to a new form — a shifting of the received paradigms and limitations of fiction and their engagement with society.

These kinds of simple descriptions of space re-occur throughout the sections dedicated to Kilgore Trout's travels. But interspersed with these are the short synopses of Trout's own fiction. Almost always, the digression into these synopses is triggered by an event in the narrative: Trout may see something that reminds him of a story he wrote, or he may get an idea for a story based on what is happening around him. This technique has two basic functions, both of which are related to the idea of a hyperfiction. The first, I would argue, is that Vonnegut is critically engaging with the role of an author in a critique of society. If we are to consider Trout as Vonnegut's alter-ego we may begin to assert that their roles in the world are similar.⁷⁸ As Trout sees and writes his experiences, so too does Vonnegut, and these short stories are manifestations of this engagement.

Assuming this, we are able to make a second assertion. That is, by reading these short stories we are able to begin to understand the shortcomings of fiction in describing or critiquing the world. I would argue then that the brief digressions serve as quick examples demonstrating Vonnegut's own experiments in speculative fiction, but that the ones provided in *Breakfast of Champions* are those which he felt were inadequate or inaccurate, and thus, through the process of "clear[ing] [his] head of all the junk"⁷⁹ Vonnegut is able to set down these stories as examples. However, while the Troutean short stories do figure prominently in the novel, I will not be dealing with them in great detail here — it suffices for us to note their role in the metafictional construction of *Breakfast of Champions*.

I would like for the moment now to return to the idea of "hyperfiction" and begin to consider how what I have termed "simplicity" interacts with this postmodern literary technique to produce an understanding of the role of the writer in criticising the American political landscape.

⁷⁸ William EH Meyer Jr, "Kurt Vonnegut: The Man with Nothing to Say," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 29, no. 2 (1988), 95-109.

⁷⁹ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 504

Writing the Writer

In the preface to *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s, Vonnegut notes candidly that “I keep losing and regaining my equilibrium, which is the basic plot of all popular fiction. And I myself am a work of fiction.”⁸⁰ Appearing in an essay published shortly after *Breakfast of Champions*, the understanding of the writer’s role (and perhaps more truly, the writer’s condition) as expressed here seems to me an explicit reflection on, or adage to the way he portrays himself in the novel.

Vonnegut was well known for his belief in the power of fiction to influence the society which he grew up in and now found himself. But he was also keenly aware of the shortcomings of writing in America, as we have discussed earlier regarding *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In many of his later essays, interviews and stories, he reflected closely on the writer’s role as well as the ways in which fiction can or cannot serve to overcome the ills of the world. His most famous and possibly most vivid of these reflections is what he termed the “canary in the coal mine theory”⁸¹. Stated most simply, the theory suggests that, like canaries in coal mines in the past, the artist’s role is to alert others of any imminent danger by chirping very loudly. The only downside was that the canaries often found themselves victims of that very same danger, and would “keel over” in the act of warning others. In this way, artists, Vonnegut notes are “useful to society because they are so sensitive” but at the same time are dangers to themselves. While warning others of coming ills, they too suffer and perhaps die from the very task.

This reflection on art allows for a particularly interesting understanding of Vonnegut’s use of hyperfiction in *Breakfast of Champions*. As noted earlier, while he is able to place himself into the narrative as a character, keenly aware of his own complicity in creating the world and allowing the terrible events to unfold, he remains a victim in of his own fiction, suffering at the hands of his creation. In this sense then, *Breakfast of Champions* may be seen as a way of addressing or commenting on American landscapes and politics, as in the West Virginia example, but is also a reflection on the role of writers in writing these landscapes and their politics. Most importantly, though, it is a reflection on the consequences the writer faces in his task. At the risk of repeating myself here, I feel a further example may make this all the more explicit.

Regardless of the risk of taking the task of metafiction beyond its limits, or indeed beyond absurdity for absurdity’s sake, Vonnegut nevertheless makes an extraordinary literary move in Chapter 18, beginning to talk to himself *as himself* in the fictional world of *Breakfast of Champions*. It is the moment of collision of “narrator-Vonnegut” and “character-Vonnegut”, which, while giving us some idea of separation of voices, mostly creates further confusion. He reflects on his own book:

“This is a very bad book you’re writing,” I said to myself behind my *leaks*.

“I know,” I said.

“You’re afraid you’ll kill yourself the way your mother did,” I said.

⁸⁰ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*s (*Opinions*), 21

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 120

“I know,” I said.⁸²

Brief as it may be, this paragraph goes some way to explaining what I consider to be *Breakfast of Champions*' most important element. The paragraph quoted is a culmination of all three of the important characteristics of the novel I have noted so far.

Firstly, it demonstrates quite clearly the use of hyperfiction in the novel. Vonnegut here is talking to himself, as himself. He inhabits the role of both narrator and character and is able to understand himself as well as his role in the novel's production through this doubled perspective. Secondly, the paragraph is explicitly critical of the novel or “text”. He calls it a “bad book”, drawing attention to what he perceives as the novel's failure.⁸³ To what extent the novel is in fact a failure is debatable. Thirdly, as is evident in the quote, is the understanding of the role of a writer. By acknowledging the “badness” of his book, but persevering and writing it anyway, Vonnegut is able to reflect on the difficulty he faces. The very next sentence being a statement of fear, one particularly prevalent in Vonnegut's life,⁸⁴ allows us to see a kind of intersection between his life as writer and as a human being. He suffers from a crippling fear of his own suicide, but also of bad writing. By responding both times with a simple “I know”, reminiscent of course of the “so it goes” from *Slaughterhouse* and the “and so on” of *Cat's Cradle*, we are made to see an interrelation here between real life and the life of writing, and that Vonnegut fears a failure in both cases. Importantly though, the book which we are reading was very obviously written and published successfully, albeit “bad” in the author's opinion. The need to write then has overcome the fear of failure, and the importance of the book's role as “canary in the coal mine” is shown to be more important than any fear the author might have.

What I feel needs continual emphasis in any consideration of many of Vonnegut's novels, but is particularly the case with *Breakfast of Champions*, is the importance of biographical elements in the work. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was figured in chapter two as an explicit confrontation of an intensely personal experience, but nevertheless with greater political ends as well as reflections on the writing process. *Breakfast of Champions* reflects also on the personal, as we see, but is a close study of the writer Vonnegut. He is considering at this later stage in his career, when his position as “fabulously well-to-do” allows him freedom in his career, the very nature of his life and his writing and the points at which these intersect. Vonnegut, as always, achieves this through a kind of ironic distance and in a fictional context, but many times an unmistakably personal voice intrudes, leaving the reader feeling both sympathetic and amused. It is this engagement with the personal which gives *Breakfast of Champions* so much appeal as a part of Vonnegut's oeuvre.

Critically though, it is not the “truth” of any biographical claims which is important, but rather the usefulness of biographical elements in a broader postmodern and self-aware

⁸² Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 653

⁸³ “What do I myself think of this particular book? I feel lousy about it, but I always feel lousy about my books.” Ibid., 503

⁸⁴ He mentions often in his non-fiction the tremendous effect his mother's suicide had on him. Suicide also plays an important role in the life of Dwayne Hoover, the second protagonist in *Breakfast of Champions*.

project. Regarding these “two Vonneguts” Robert Merrill makes an important observation which relates closely to my own. He notes that: “Of course both ‘Kurt Vonneguts’ are literary constructs. When he tells us that his mother committed suicide, we are sure he is telling the truth, but he has assimilated such facts into a fictional context, so the question of ‘truthfulness’ is irrelevant.”⁸⁵ For Merrill then, as for me, the truth of biographical content here is not as important as the effect which drawing attention to the “self” has. While a biographical element which is ever present in Vonnegut’s fiction does inform much of the narrative, it is simply a tool in a much greater project — that is, the deconstruction of the assumptions of fiction and the understanding of the role of a writer. Any recourse to “truth” is thus irrelevant. The lines are often blurred however, the narrative moving so close to Vonnegut’s own biography sometimes that it is easy to think in divisions of truth/untruth. Nowhere is this more so than in the sections dedicated to Dwayne Hoover.

Dwayne Hoover, a Life

Being arguably one of Vonnegut’s most troubled characters, Dwayne Hoover shares many of the quirks and personality traits often attributed to his creator. We first encounter Hoover as a wealthy owner of a car dealership in the heart of Midland City. As the novel progresses he is revealed to be an absurdly wealthy man, with a family history which includes the founders of the city and business interests as various as radio communications and burger restaurants. Wealthy as he is, though, Dwayne is troubled. His wife committed suicide some years ago by drinking a drain-cleaner called Drano, ironically a company owned by a Hoover subsidiary. He is now involved in an affair with his young secretary, Francine Pfeko, and lives alone in his mansion with the company of his dog, whom he has lengthy conversations with. Dwayne’s biggest challenge, though, is that he suffers from “bad chemicals in his brain” or, more specifically, a mental disorder, most likely paranoid schizophrenia. He has violent and uncontrollable mood swings, hallucinations both auditory and affective and appears at times to be severely depressed. All of these factors are confounded when, at the height of one of his breakdowns he encounters a book written by Kilgore Trout which states that he is the only person in the world with a consciousness and that everyone else around him is simply a machine bending to the conscious decisions which he alone is able to make. Aroused to madness by this prospect, Dwayne runs rampage on the city, setting up the conditions for Vonnegut’s ending involving himself and Kilgore Trout.

What makes Dwayne truly interesting, though, are the similarities between him and his author/creator. Vonnegut, like Dwayne, lost a close family member to suicide by poisoning and is, like Dwayne, at this stage in his career, very rich. Furthermore, we know from works such as *Fates Worse than Death* that Vonnegut’s family was very much involved in the early days of growth in Indianapolis, with an ancestry which stretches far back in to history^{86 87}. Dwayne’s family were big contributors to the building of Midland city, and this is where the majority of his wealth comes from. While they share an extensive family history though,

⁸⁵ Robert Merrill, "Vonnegut’s Breakfast of Champions: The Conversion of Heliogabalus," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 18, no. 3 (1977), 101.

⁸⁶ Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death: An Autobiographical Collage*

⁸⁷ See also the “Chronology” in Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 811-832

Vonnegut's family were struck by the great depression in the early twentieth century, meaning that Vonnegut's wealth comes mostly from his successful writing career. Finally, both Hoover and Vonnegut suffer from mental illness, and for some time before and after the publication of *Breakfast of Champions* the author suffered from severe bouts of depression, culminating in a suicide attempt in 1984. Slight differences notwithstanding then, the similarities between Vonnegut and Hoover, like those between Vonnegut and Trout, allow a semi-autobiographical reading of the character. In addition to the metafictional narrative manoeuvres earlier discussed, these biographical elements allow for a rich and layered text.

But in typical Vonnegut fashion, and in a way which differs slightly from the case of Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Dwayne Hoover performs a function which is more than simply semi-autobiographical. Rather, in conjunction with the movements of Kilgore Trout in the novel, Hoover provides further access and commentary on Vonnegut's relationship to his own writing. Perhaps the most significant episode in the novel is Dwayne's psychological breakdown, brought on by his encounter with one of Trout's novels. Now, if we were to take Trout as representing also in part an aspect of Vonnegut⁸⁸, as he has in previous works, we can begin to formulate the hypothesis which sheds a new light on the Trout/Hoover/Vonnegut relationship.

Dwayne Hoover, able to speed read Trout's novel titled *Now It Can Be Told*, assimilates the notion that he is the only conscious person in the world, and every other person is a machine. After reading the novel, and noticing Trout's presence in the cocktail lounge, Hoover confronts him. This confrontation serves as good starting point for understanding the three way relationship between author and characters:

There in the cocktail lounge, Dwayne Hoover's bad chemicals suddenly decided that it was time for Dwayne to demand from Kilgore Trout the secrets of life.

"Give me the message," cried Dwayne. He tottered up from his own banquette, crashed down again next to Trout, throwing off heat like a steam radiator. "The message, please."

And here Dwayne did something extraordinarily unnatural. He did it because I wanted him to. It was something I had ached to have a character do for years and years. Dwayne did to Trout what the Duchess did to Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. He rested his chin on poor Trout's shoulder, dug in with his chin.

"The message?" he said, digging in his chin, digging in his chin.

Trout made no reply. He had hoped to get through what remained of his life without ever having to touch another human being again. Dwayne's chin on his shoulder was as shattering as buggery to Trout.⁸⁹

I offer this extract here as one of particular import for several reasons. The first is that it is the first moment which sees Trout and Hoover actually meet. After about two-hundred pages of alternating chapters offering their two points of view, the parallel plots now converge for the first time and we begin to see the impact of Vonnegut's metafictional technique. This

⁸⁸ Josh Simpson, "'This Promising of Great Secrets': Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* Or 'Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World': Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45, no. 3 (/Spring, 2004), 261-271.

⁸⁹ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 701

confrontation serves as the catalyst for the chaos of Hoover's breakdown which further serves as the moment when Vonnegut enters the narrative and suffers the consequences of his own characters' actions, as discussed earlier. Secondly, I would like to note particularly Trout's disgust at physical contact with Hoover. The resting of the chin is "as shattering as buggery to Trout". Later on, we see another physical encounter between Trout and Hoover, where Trout suffers the loss of his finger. I would argue that these moments of physical contact stand for a particular understanding on the part of Vonnegut of his relationship to his characters: it is one of violence and discomfort.

If we take Trout as a part of Vonnegut's own persona (as well as his own creation) and compound this with Hoover as Vonnegut's creation, but also as semi-autobiographical, we begin to see emerging a new picture of the three way relationship. In most cases in *Breakfast of Champions*, when Vonnegut meets his characters, the encounter is either violent or difficult for him. This relates to an earlier point in our discussion of Vonnegut's lack of control in the world which he created. He is commenting on the violence which an author must endure in the act of writing, the task set out for the "canary in the coal mine". In the act of writing as exposure once again, we see the suffering endured by the author, be it through violence or loss of control, and this is particularly true in the encounter between Dwayne and Kilgore as two aspects of Vonnegut's persona. Furthermore, we see in the extract quoted a reminder of what Vonnegut sets out for the reader in the Preface. *Breakfast of Champions* is being written as a way of "clearing out the cobwebs" in Vonnegut's mind, and this extract provides an instance of exactly that: Vonnegut allows Dwayne to "do something [he] had ached to have a character do for years and years". In this brief instance of authorial intrusion we are reminded of the metafictional assessment of writing about writing which pervades the whole novel, and it has particular significance in the context of the Trout/Hoover encounter. It serves to foreground the fact (and is indeed evidence of the fact) that this encounter *is itself about the writer*. Vonnegut allows an episode which would ordinarily, that is in the realist tradition, be solely concerned with character and plot progression, to be about the role of this very plot and character in the life of their writer/creator and his own psychological development. The act of writing Dwayne resting his chin on Trout's shoulder is not as significant in what it is, so much as for what it reminds us of: Vonnegut is always present in his created worlds.

The tracing of Dwayne Hoover's life and the events in the novel which shape his character have a two-fold importance then. Both of these elements of the narrative draw our focus back to the original impetus of the novel, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter — that is, the blurred lines between Vonnegut as writer, and Vonnegut as character as well as the interaction of the multiple caricatures of Vonnegut which appear throughout his fiction. But while these issues of meta- and hyperfiction are addressed at multiple moments in *Breakfast of Champions*, and on multiple levels, the one which stands out in particular are the sketches and works of art which interrupt the prose on the page. No discussion of *Breakfast of Champions* would be complete without a discussion of these.

Art as Writing

In the late seventies and early eighties, when Vonnegut was at the height of his success, he began to experiment with drawings and art works in addition to his experiments in fiction. Some years after the publication of *Breakfast of Champions*, he would embark on exhibitions of his work aided by his wife Jill Krementz and others. This particular novel signals what is likely his first venture in the graphic or illustrative world and the drawings are uniquely “Vonnegutian” in both their simplicity and their purpose. As a way of closing off this chapter, I wish to discuss these drawings and to consider firstly, the function they perform within the text on the page and secondly, how this function can be tied into the broader postmodern project which the novel undertakes, and which has been discussed up to this point.

The majority of *Breakfast of Champions* is interspersed with illustrations done by the author using felt-tipped markers. They can be variously classified as crude, satirical, illustrative, humorous and sarcastic, and they add what I would consider a unique dimension to the novel. In the majority, the illustrations serve quite literally to *illustrate* — that is, to provide a visual depiction of something which Vonnegut considers important to the story. Since the act of reading is itself one of imagination, these illustrations go hand in hand with the text in providing the reader with a very particular imaginative realisation of a particular object. Quite often, the illustrations are often mundane objects which most readers would already be familiar with such as the American Flag, a beaver or a pair of underpants. In other cases, the illustrations are context specific, depicting things like Kilgore Trout’s gravestone (including his epitaph) or a sign which Trout may pass on his way to Midland City. In almost every case though, the illustrations seem to be designed for a reader who is completely ignorant of the world and may be introduced with a simple “like this” or “looked like this”.

The effect of this is two-fold. In the first case, simplistic introductions of illustrations of everyday objects serve to distance the reader and assume an element of ignorance on their part. It is as if the novel were addressed to children. However, this is not the case and the implicit assumption is in most cases that the reader is fully aware of what the American flag may look like. The resulting effect of the illustrations is similar to that achieved by the simplistic descriptions and language discussed earlier in this chapter. By “stripping down” an image or idea to its most basic form, Vonnegut is able to draw even more attention to the inherent flaws in these objects and our interpretations of them — he is, in truth, alerting us to the absurdity of the world and, more specifically, the sign systems we use to understand and describe it. As Saussure noted, the connection between an object and its name is arbitrary and the progression from concept to “sound-image” or in this case picture or text can be manipulated in certain ways to produce certain effects.⁹⁰

These breakdowns in the signifying chain, or confusions created between word and object (sign and signified) are what Vonnegut takes advantage of in a bid to illustrate the way perceptions can be manipulated. This is perhaps most true in the case of the “wide-open

⁹⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2010), 850-866.

beaver” illustrations. Vonnegut describes the “wide-open beaver” as “a photograph of a woman not wearing underpants, and with her legs far apart, so that the mouth of her vagina could be seen.”⁹¹ This is followed by a simple illustration of a “wide-open beaver” and the statement that “This is where babies come from”. Included also is a drawing of an actual beaver, a “large rodent” who “loved damns”.⁹² The contrast here is particularly important as it firstly serves to demonstrate the absurdity of the term “beaver” to denote two completely disparate things, and secondly it is an example of Vonnegut’s drastic simplification of contentious (yet mundane) terms and objects in order to explicitly draw our attention to the foolishness of the terms. We are reminded of the objectification of woman as well, their genitalia being named after an animal and thus de-valued as an object and further, separating them linguistically from the woman who they belong to. Once again, interspersed in the text containing Vonnegut’s simplified language and borderline sarcastic tone, the absurdity of human language and the world described by it is emphasized here.

But these examples of illustrations serve to demonstrate more than the fact of Vonnegut’s critique of modern society and a satire of contemporary politics. I would argue that the use of illustrations in some ways draws further attention to the critique of writing inherent in the novel as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. While the illustrations themselves “add to” the text in that they provide a visual representation of, say, the world which Trout sees out of the window of the Hertz truck, the basic fact of their inclusion draws our attention to the inadequacy of words themselves to create a full picture of the world. It is necessary for Vonnegut, if he wishes for the reader to see and understand with accuracy the world as he sees it, to include these illustrations in addition to the text. William E. H. Meyer, Jr. attributes this to the fact that most American artists have an “innate need to ‘show’ and not ‘tell’” of their experience in the New World. Thus, *Breakfast of Champions* is a kind of “modern American ‘cave drawing’” allowing for enlightenment as to the true appearance of the landscape.⁹³ In this configuration, the drawings become a collection of artefacts which can be examined in a kind of archaeological manner. Thus, the drawings are themselves a “Text”, demanding a *reading* and simultaneously reconfiguring the act of reading itself.

Therefore, while we acknowledge the importance of the text, and are able to glean some semblance of the Vonnegutian universe, the illustrations make it all the more clear and simple (as noted) and this, while aiding the written sections, also functions as a signal of the inadequacy of these words. Without the drawings you may say the text falls short in its descriptive power and thus, we have a critique of the adequacy of textual production. Consequently, we may also see a relationship here between the effect of the drawings’ inclusion, and Vonnegut’s own ideas about the effectiveness of fiction as discussed earlier.

What can be said finally of *Breakfast of Champions* quite simply is that it is a layered work. The use of multiple narratives, authorial intrusion and illustrations as well as Vonnegut allowing his own character to be harmed physically, each draw our attention to different aspects of metafiction. Without a doubt, *Breakfast of Champions* is the most experimental of

⁹¹ Vonnegut, *Novels and Short Stories: 1963-1973*, 518-519

⁹² *Ibid.*, 518

⁹³ Meyer Jr, *Kurt Vonnegut: The Man with Nothing to Say*, 95-109

the three novels discussed here and forms a neat bow at the end of a string of postmodern literary experiments for the author. However, it is not without its own elements of social and political critique and should not be side-lined as purely experimental. Rather, we can say that its experiments are what provide the very foundation which the upon which the social critique is built.

*Jokes work this way: The jokester frightens the listener just a little bit, by mentioning something challenging, such as sex or physical danger, or suggesting that the listener is having his or her intelligence tested. Step two: the jokester makes clear that no intelligent response is required of the listener. This leaves the listener stuck with useless fight-or-flee chemicals in his or her bloodstream, which must be gotten rid of somehow, unless the listener wants to slug the jokester or do jumping jacks.*⁹⁴

Kurt Vonnegut loved jokes, and often said that many of his novels were nothing more than elaborate jokes. For Vonnegut, a joke was comprised of three parts: a proposition, usually ridiculous. In *Cat's Cradle*, it is *ice-nine*, in *Slaughterhouse* it is warfare; in *Breakfast*, insanity. Secondly, it is made clear that “no intelligent response is required”. We are faced with the problem and there is no way we can respond other than — and this is part three — to “expel those chemicals through the lungs with quick expansions and contractions of the chest cavity, accompanied by grotesque facial expressions and barking sounds”⁹⁵

When reading the works of Kurt Vonnegut it is difficult not to see these three elements come to the fore. As I have hopefully demonstrated, each novel uses a specific trope (or number of tropes) in an elaborate prank to get the reader to see things in a certain way. Be it the realisation that religion and science go hand in hand, or that nuclear war is a dangerous and pointless thing, or perhaps that all of us are going a little insane — the joke is always executed with tremendous clarity and skill. It would seem, too, the postmodern moves which Vonnegut makes are what really make up the joke. What I have termed his “postmodern simplicity” is the way in which he constructs in the readers mind a certain idea of the proposition, and in doing so in a simple way, draws our attention to the way we have chosen to view the proposition — then he flips it on its head. We are aware of the fiction of the stories and aware of our complicity in its production, our role in making it funny. We know every bit and piece that makes it up, but we laugh anyway.

For Vonnegut then the role of fiction in the world was two-fold. He wanted to make us aware of what was happening around us. He wanted us to know of the horrors of war, of the exploitative practices of American political practice and of the dangers of letting go of our moral values. But, he was a light-hearted reader and writer of these things. He wanted us to see the problems, but also to laugh at them; sometimes at their absurdity and sometimes as a way of coping. Vonnegut is quoted as saying that the only way he could deal with his depression sometimes was to joke about it, and I think that urge certainly bleeds through in his fiction.

I believe that this study demonstrates this. From *Cat's Cradle* through to *Breakfast of Champions* we see a clear pattern: both reader and author are complicit in the way the novel's action works. Through a self-conscious fiction and the insertion of various kinds of narrative voice, these three novels draw a unique kind of attention to the social situations they are

⁹⁴ Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death: An Autobiographical Collage*, 184

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 184

about. The two go hand in hand. I have also shown how the author's own history and biography play an important role in the way he writes his characters and the subject matter he chooses to focus on. Alongside his unique writing style and challenging of the boundaries of genre, the novels offer us a decidedly "Vonnegutian" insight into 1960s and 70s America.

In an interview with Playboy Vonnegut said that "writers are the means of introducing new ideas into the society, and also a means of responding symbolically to life." It is these new ideas, and the *how* of these symbolic responses which I believe I have demonstrated here.

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