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Master

Kurt Vonnegut and the Postmodern Satire

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INTRODUCTION

> Newt remained curled in the chair. He held out his painty hands as though a cat's cradle were strung between them. "No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's…" "And?" "*No damn cat, and no damn cradle*." (Vonnegut, *Novels & Stories 1963-1973* 110).

This excerpt is taken from Kurt Vonnegut's 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle*, and it is an exchange that reveals much about Vonnegut, both as a writer and as a satirist. In the scene we find Newt, whose paintings "[…] cynically depict the meaningless of life" (Hobby, Bloom 60), remarking on how we are able to find - or are compelled to search for - meaning in the meaningless. By extension, Humanity's search for meaning through pointless pursuits seems a recurring theme in Vonnegut's writing, arguably best exemplified in *Cat's Cradle*. However, the fact that this novel is written as a response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, with an opening chapter revolving around an investigation into the bombing of Hiroshima – emphasizing the nuclear threat of this Cold War event – means that *Cat's Cradle* cannot itself be accused of being meaningless. In fact, a brief summary is sufficient to see the influence that these real-world events have on the narrative: on a tropical island under the rule of dictatorship, the children of a renowned scientist (the imagined father of the atom bomb) accidentally unleash a substance called *ice-nine*, which freezes the entire world. Now, from what I have said thus far, it seems like the novel is pushing two conflicting narratives, one that questions our meaning-making systems and one that acts as a warning about the end of the world, with all the gravity that entails. In other words, we are told that certain things we consider significant have been given false significance (no damn cat, and no damn cradle) while events unfolding are of the highest possible stakes. Could it be that the two are connected somehow? If so, what is the message Vonnegut wants to send out into the world?

With this final question I transition to the aim of this thesis, which is to address the elusive aspect of reformative aims in Vonnegut's writing and, more broadly, the form of satire he represents. Through readings of three of his novels, I will examine whether he is able – or indeed wishes – to provide some specific proposals towards social reform, or whether his satire is unable to provide us with such messages. The novels I will be analyzing in an attempt to answer this are *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). The reason I have chosen these particular novels is partly due to the period in which they are written, as the decade they span presents the rise of Black Humor as a literary movement in America, but also because of the continued popularity of these works. This popularity has naturally resulted in the publication of numerous articles on the novels and their cultural significance, as well as their inclusion as examples of Black Humor in a number of academic volumes. In other words, I have chosen to rely on the vast amount of pre-existing material pertaining to these works, as opposed to the less-explored works in Vonnegut's oeuvre. As the objective of this thesis is to reach a conclusion regarding his reformative aims, based on readings and comparisons, the more that can be said for each individual novel, especially by leading scholars in the field, the more confident I can be in my own findings. I will draw on other works by Vonnegut as well, including less known (in relative terms) novels from the 60s, and shorter texts that provide insight into his authorship.

Before looking at the three novels, there are a few things that must be clarified. In fact, quite a lot of things. First, I must explain in what ways Vonnegut should be considered as different from earlier satirists and in what ways he should *not*. To this end, I begin by looking at the use of science-fiction, which we find in most of his writing and have already seen an example of in *ice-nine*. The use of science-fiction awarded Vonnegut a somewhat unfortunate label from the beginning of his career as an author. In *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons (Opinions)*, Vonnegut notes that, following the publication of his debut novel *Player Piano* (1953), "[…] 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 […]" (Vonnegut 1). In other words, he had to wait for the recognition of being, not only a Black Humorist, but a satirist as well. While science-fiction elements such as *ice-nine* are still seen as hallmarks of Vonnegut's writing, although now as something that sets him apart from *other* satirists, the mixture of dread and delight these elements produce results in a quality arguably found in every great satire. For example, one might think of works such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Pope's *The Dunciad* (1728), or even Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), where the fantastic serves both to entertain and unsettle, due to the parallels they draw to periods and events in history (18th century England and the Russian Revolution, respectively). As Griffin notes in his book *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, "[…] the satirist uses historical data as raw material to be re-created or transformed into a fiction." (Griffin 118). We saw such a transformation of historical data into fiction with *Cat's Cradle* as well.

Even though Vonnegut was long mistaken for an author of science-fiction, I argue that his elements of science-fiction really constitute one of his strongest links to satiric tradition.

However, one important thing that Vonnegut does *not* seem to share with the satirists of the past is a narrative voice that, while not necessarily optimistic, at least gives the impression of believing that the sins of the past can in some way be redeemed, that humanity can better itself, and that satire might function as a form of conduit in this regard. There are many who would make such claims for satire, indeed, that the satirist must act upon moral certitude. Griffin considers these features to be fundamental, claiming that "The business of the satirist is to insist on the sharp differences between vice and virtue, between good and bad, between what man *is* and what he *ought* to be" (Griffin 36). In his essay "A Definition of Satire (and Why a Definition Matters)", Declercq considers the element of critique in satire to constitute "[…] a committed moral opposition against a target, sustained by an analysis of that target's perceived social wrongness." (Declercq 323). Both of these claims indicate that the satirist must act upon absolute convictions. He not only proposes how to better our societies but *insists* on the sharp differences between vice and virtue, engages in *committed* moral opposition against targets accused of social wrongness. It seems as though the satirist is expected to act as the custodian of morality, the enforcer of a normative ethos. However, there are those who would disagree with these views, as we shall soon see.

WORKING TOWARDS A SATIRIC DEFINITION

However, I will begin by posing a simple question, which is; how do you think most people would define satire? Perhaps that it is a form of - or even synonymous *with* - political humor? Considering how satire is usually offered to us in current American popular culture, namely in the form of comedic news shows, talk shows, and panel shows with political angles (*The Late Show*, *Late Night*, *Last Week Tonight*, *Real Time*, *The Daily Show*, to name but a few) this would seem like a fair assumption. Furthermore, the political aspect of satire can be traced back to its (presumed) origins in Greek antiquity, thereby appearing to be a determining factor in its naissance. However, such a purely political definition would omit crucial aspects of satire, especially with regard to the modern form of satire discussed in this thesis. The reason why a definition – or at least a better understanding – of satire is important, is that it now seems common to view satire simply as *being* political. In other words, that it

seeks to ridicule politicians, parties, and their policies (the current state of partisanship in American politics is perhaps to blame for this). Furthermore, both its popularity and "potency" seem connected with times of political strife. Indeed, every novel mentioned thus far has a distinctly political backdrop, ranging from Swift's critique of the British Government to Orwell's satire on the rise of dictatorships, to concerns raised by Vonnegut regarding the Cold War. Here I return to the claim made for satire's reformative mission, because the most obvious appeal of a political definition lies in the resulting prospect of satire acting as the vox populi, the purveyor of common sense. Griffin cites this observation made by Elliot, "The greatest satire has been written in periods when ethical and rational norms were sufficiently powerful to attract widespread assent yet not so powerful as to compel absolute conformity" (qtd. in Griffin 134). While Elliot here speaks about a form of satiric equilibrium between agreed-upon norms and the deviance *from* them, we see how this easily translates to conflict between governing forces and the governed, the latter considering themselves to be the moral majority. In effect, even though we are now talking about ethical and rational norms rather than mere political views, we see how naturally satire gravitates towards politics. However, while politics are certainly deeply embedded in satire, it is the element of attack that, in many ways, defines it.

1.1 Target and Attack

In a historical sense, satire might laugh *with*- (Horatian tradition), or *at* (Juvenalian tradition) that which is recognized as deserving of critique and ridicule. Regardless of the approach, satire requires either one – or several – targets which, in the Menippean tradition, take the form of ideas (policies, cultures, values, etc.) and institutions (governments, religions, companies, etc.), as opposed to specific individuals. Indeed, following the Menippean principles, we see why satiric targets should not necessarily be viewed as political. For example, in Pope's mock-heroic *The Dunciad* (1728), Dulness (dullness) and Folly are made goddesses, who seek to spread their influence over Britain (Pope 2-3). They represent negative tendencies that Pope observes in his contemporary culture. In other words, his targets are those who "worship" these goddesses, who themselves are the manifestations – or conceptualizations – of the vice (and in this case quite literally, folly) from which their names are derived. Therefore, *The Dunciad* serves as a prime example of how satiric targets might not only veer from the political to the more general, but how such targets tend to present the failure of ethical and rational norms (human failures) within societies, through the creation of entirely inhuman entities. Griffin notes this important feature of the satiric attack,

> Satirists – unless they seek revenge against a private enemy – implicitly address both the enemies of society (as they define them) and the custodians of the society's laws. The former must be attacked because the latter are unable or unwilling to discharge their responsibilities. If the custodians are unable to act, the moral satirist offers to act in their stead (Griffin 188)

Returning to *Cat's Cradle*, we see that Vonnegut does something similar to Pope, which also corresponds to Griffin's claim, in that he uses *ice-nine* as an inhuman element for the purpose of exposing the normative failings he sees in mankind's relationship with science. Vonnegut must "act" in the stead of those who are supposed to recognize when science has gone too far. However, note that the novel's historical underpinnings also mean that this target appears political, as the doomsday scenario it presents is directly tied to the geopolitical situation of 1963. Nonetheless, we understand that *ice-nine* is emblematic of the science that has the potential to threaten our existence, just as the goddesses of *The Dunciad* are emblematic of the different forms of vice from which they take their names. In both cases, the satirists attack their targets, not through outright denunciation, but by using these entities as the (fantastic) culminations of what they recognize as partially – or completely – normless societies. The targets of these satires are the people who would appear to be agents of Dulness and Folly, or those who themselves play gods through science and unwilfully unleash destructive forces that cannot be contained. In her essay "Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction", Hume points out that, "[…] humor or wit modifies the [satiric] attack and differentiates it from hellfire sermonizing or foul-mouthed name-calling […]" (Hume 305). Considering this, we see how Pope's goddesses humorously modify his attack, for the simple reason that they subvert our expectations of what such entities should be. Rather than being symbols of virtue, they are bringers of vice, but still believe themselves to be virtuous. Pope's targets are thereby ridiculed for sharing in this contradictory mindset. However, where might we find humor or wit in Vonnegut's *ice-nine*? How can the end of the world present us with the kind of modified attack that Hume considers one of the two crucial features of satire?

1.2 Estrangement and Realism

This brings me to an aspect of satire which Vonnegut frequently employs, namely that of estrangement. Note that this is my chosen terminology, as this satiric element might be called different things (abstraction for example). To understand what it means, we return to Hume, who notes that "Since fantasy elements often supply the distortions that *estrange* (my italics)

the world of satire […] we are used to fantasy and irony interacting in satiric scenes. When we meet that combination, we have good reason to expect satire of some sort" (Hume 302). The goddesses in *The Dunciad* are an example of such estrangement, for the simple reason that they distort reality, while the thing they seek to corrupt remains the Britain of our world. Similarly, *ice-nine* and the island of San Lorenzo estrange the world in *Cat's Cradle*. There is a tendency for satires to waver between fantasy and realism (to a point where they might give detailed depictions of the periods in which they are written), which demands a certain skepticism on our part, as opposed to the suspension of disbelief required by most fiction. With that being said, satire also contains what we might describe as a subtler form of estrangement, which pertains to the concealment of truth.

We might already recognize a tendency for the satirists to "hide" their satiric intentions (what the targets are and why they deserve to be attacked), or what positions we, the readers, should take on the issues (although this is often implied through the rhetoric). Therefore, we need to take the things we recognize in the estranged world of satire and somehow apply them to our familiar world, in order to uncover what Hume calls "[…] a hard kernel we are asked to identify as moral or existential truth […] (305). To this end, satirists rely on intertextuality, symbolism, allegory, metaphor, irony, and other elements that might serve, both to provide the distortions that estrange the satiric world, but also the tools necessary to reach that kernel. While literature that seeks to better society (sociopolitical commentary, political science, etc.) not only has the aim of being as comprehensible as possible but tends do so with a strong sense of purpose, satire has a tendency of concealing its intentions. Griffin considers satire to be "[…] more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about the pleasures if offers" (Griffin 5). Despite this inquisitive tendency, satirists naturally want the readers to uncover their hidden meanings, if only so that they may understand the questions being asked. Therefore, estrangement is crucial in our uncovering of the satirist's intended meaning (in terms of what is actually being talked about) because it requires us to see the broader symbolism of fictional events, people, and places. For example, in *Cat's Cradle*, we draw parallels between San Lorenzo and Cuba after factoring in *ice-nine* (the atom bomb), "Papa" Monzano (Fidel Castro) and the ambiguous relationship between the island and the United States. However, while we make these specific connections, Vonnegut is not *only* commenting on the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is rather that he uses these strong associations to form a narrative which feels connected to the real world, but which is really pure fantasy.

However, certain works by Vonnegut, such as *Mother Night* (1961) and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), do not share in the mode of estrangement through fantasy found in works like *Cat's Cradle*. A feature shared by these two works is that they center around individuals affected by The Second World War, which had ended almost two decades before they were written. In this case, implementing certain falsities into this familiar, historical environment forces the reader to approach the works with distrust. Regarding *Cat's Cradle*, it is worth noting that, while the Cuban Missile Crisis happened in 1962 (before it was written), the Cold War continued long after the novel's publication, meaning that the prospect of a nuclear holocaust still loomed large in 1963. However, like *Cat's Cradle*, they utilize the strong associations Americans of the 1960s naturally had to recent world history, in order to satirize contemporary views. What makes these works interesting in the context of this thesis is that they do not use science-fiction to provide "[…] the distortions that estrange the world of satire" (Hume 302). Instead, estrangement is produced from absurd situations arising within the context of realism that the war provides, such as Campbell being pardoned for his involvement in Nazi propaganda, only to hang himself "[…] for crimes against himself" (Vonnegut *Novels & Stories 1950-1962* 708) or Rosewater becoming the father of every child in Rosewater County through the signing of legal documents (*Novels & Stories 1963-1973* 338). The conclusions to these novels show how Vonnegut, the alleged science-fiction writer, sometimes relies on little more than his tragicomic characters for satiric estrangement. With that being said, the three novels I analyze in depth all have some fantastic elements that in this sense make us *expect* satire to a greater degree than in the two aforementioned works. However, they also use historical events as the inspirations for their fantasies.

From these observations, Vonnegut seems conscious about when and how estrangement through fantasy serves a satiric purpose and when a general sense of realism results in more poignant satire. The strongest case in point is how varied his explorations of The Second World War are, from the unusually somber and human (though at times absurd) narrative in *Mother Night*, to the alien philosophies and upheaval of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Although it is evident that this war primarily acts as a setting for the exploration of ideas, Vonnegut's versatility with regard to realism and tone, from the grounded to the outright farcical, reveals a satirist who uses estrangement, not as a prerequisite for his satire, but rather as a means to challenge preconceived notions. While estrangement serves to modify attacks, it does not necessarily provide humor in itself (although there are exceptions, such as the allegorical animals in *Animal Farm*). It is safe to say that satire *requires* elements of humor,

something which leads me back to Hume's argument for the modified attack. The end of the world, a man hanging himself for producing Nazi propaganda, our natural instinct to these scenarios is probably not to laugh. However, these are meant to be humorous elements in Vonnegut's writing. Therefore, when analyzing his novels in detail, it is necessary not only to understand how his approach to estrangement is unique, but also his satiric humor.

1.3 Black Humor and Irony

Here I deviate from my identification of satire's general components, in order to address the specific brand of humor used by Vonnegut and many of his contemporary writers, namely Black Humor. In fact, there are those who would rather call Vonnegut a Black Humorist than a satirist. However, scholars struggle to reach an agreement about the definitions of this form of humor and, by extension, what qualifies as Black Humor in both an authorial and a historical sense. For the sake of clarity, I will base my approach to Black Humor on the view taken by Schulz in his book *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*, where he notes that "More limiting, certainly, but more useful in the long run is to recognize that Black Humor is a phenomenon of the 1960s, comprising a group of writers who share a viewpoint and an aesthetics for pacing off the boundaries of a nuclear-technological world intrinsically without confinement" (Schulz 5). This provides both historical context and, furthermore, a sense that Black Humorists share a common goal. With that being said, what are we to make of the humor itself?

First, there is more that needs to be said about the philosophy of these writers. Paraphrasing Robert Scholes, Schulz argues that "[…] the Black Humorist is not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it" (12). This captures the essence of Black Humor and, furthermore, why the works of Black Humorists of the 60s (such as Vonnegut) should not be so easily dismissed as being cynical or nihilistic, despite their tendency to focus on the absurd and meaningless. They might *appear* cynical, certainly, but the satires of writers like Vonnegut are better viewed as explorations of how to live in our nuclear-technological world. Schulz describes the Black Humorist novel as "[…] short on *Entwicklung* and manners, [and] more receptive to the inconclusive exploration of ontological and epistemological questions of being, growth, and knowledge", his conclusion being that, "In this respect, the Black Humor novel continues the quest of the *Pequod*, its route updated and its procedure modernized" (14). So far, I have looked at what might be described as the philosophy of Black Humor, and now we might understand what constitutes the humor in itself.

While I have chosen to view Black Humor as a phenomenon of the 1960s, the satiric roots run much deeper. In other words, there are tendencies in satire predating this decade, even the 20th century, that present certain Black Humor principles in more normative terms. Therefore, such an example proves useful in illustrating how something like the end of the world can constitute humor in the 60s. Furthermore, it is useful to see how Black Humor might be viewed as a natural development from more traditional satire, as opposed to presenting a radical break with tradition. For example, in Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729) we see how humor is produced as a result of – or in conjunction *with* – the dark and grotesque. The text, presented by an unknown speaker, makes the argument that British aristocrats should be allowed to purchase and eat Irish children in order to solve the current poverty crisis, with arguments such as that "[…] no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child […]" (Swift). While being presented as a reasonable argument from the speaker's point of view, we understand that Swift's real argument, his intended meaning, is for a humane solution to the problem. Furthermore, because of the ironic tone, Swift creates an implicit argument that the aristocracy is failing in its philanthropic duty, as this proposal is, at the very least, an *actual* proposal. Here we see how irony achieves a comedic relationship between truth and error. In this sense, the only bond shared between literal meaning and intended meaning is that the crisis is of concern to both Swift and his speaker.

In his *Anthology of Black Humor*, Breton notes that "It has been remarked that Swift 'provokes laughter, but does not share in it'", and that "It is precisely at this price that humor, in the sense we understand it, can externalize the sublime element that, according to Freud, is inherent in it, and transcend the merely comic" (Breton 3). In other words, we see how the satiric humor might be created through the satirists removal of the self. In the case of "A Modest Proposal", the speaker serves to produce shock and laughter through his sheer grotesqueness, while the character is written as though we should take him quite seriously. This transcendence from the comic through speaker/protagonist is interesting to consider with regard to Black Humor, because here we find some common ground between satires of past and present.

However, here we also find a significant difference between the satiric approach of a classic satirist like Swift and a modern, Black Humorist like Vonnegut. This has much to do *with* the role of the speaker/protagonist. Schulz notes that "The Black Humor protagonist is not […] an authorial lens for analyzing the real, corrupt object of the satire […] He is at once observer of, and participant in, the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what

happens around him" (Schulz 12). The speaker in "A Modest Proposal" certainly acts as an authorial lens in this sense, by offering what he considers the best solution to the problem being addressed. The object of the satire is thereby analyzed through his immoral views presented as though being virtuous. However, as he is merely the writer of a short pamphlet, he does not present the best comparison to Vonnegut's novel characters. Therefore, to provide better contrast with the Black Humor protagonist, we might consider Swift's hero Gulliver. In his meeting with the Lilliputians, the humor is provided through Gulliver's unquestioning compliance with their laws. Based on his towering stature, we are aware that he could assume absolute control, but he chooses not to. Indeed, he both acts – and is treated – as though he were the size of the Lilliputians. However, his potential to control the narrative persists and in this we find humor in the resulting power imbalance. By contrast, we have the Black Humor protagonist Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, who comes unstuck in time and thereby loses control over his very existence. Here, the humor arises from Pilgrim's complete apathy in the face of this existential upheaval. There is no hope for control over this cosmic force and yet – or precisely *because* of this fact – he continues with his life as though nothing has changed. Therefore, we see how Pilgrim encapsulates the claim made by Schulz, and how that character is fundamentally different from a satiric character like Gulliver.

One of the primary reasons for considering Black Humor and irony at this stage, is to see what kind of purpose they serve with regard to Hume's statement about the modified attack. In Swift's "A Modest Proposal", we understand that the satirist is relying on irony in order to present vice as a virtue, something which makes it easy to distinguish the literal meaning from the intended meaning. The achieved effect is that the attack is directed at the sort of individuals most similar to the grotesque caricature projected by the satirist. However, while the use of irony in satiric attacks can serve to present the immoral and foolish in sharp contrast to the moral and wise, especially when we see clear dichotomies (war/peace, greed/generosity, child murder/no child murder, etc.), such elements might also serve to produce greater ambiguity. This is often the case with Vonnegut, whose flawed characters are not so easily dismissed as the speaker in "A Modest Proposal". In the foreword to Vonnegut's *Novels and Stories 1963-1973*, editor Sidney Offit notes that "[Vonnegut's] works are remarkably free of villains, being rich instead in dangerous not-quite-unlovable sinners" (Vonnegut, Offit 1). In fact, Vonnegut's use of Black Humor and irony serves to generate a certain degree of compassion, as tragedy befalls these sinners whose immoral and foolish

behavior make them deserving of attack, but not necessarily exempt from the prospect of redemption. By contrast, Hodgart notes of a writer like Dickens, an author with clear satiric qualities, that he seldom achieves pure satire because “His villains are usually total villains, criminals and violators of the human decencies, beyond the reach of ridicule. Their callousness or brutality is exposed and punished, but this is denunciation rather than satire” (Hodgart 229). This last observation is of great significance when considering how Vonnegut’s antiheroes and apparent villains should be understood. Furthermore, the roles that Black Humor and irony play in Vonnegut’s writing is perhaps most interesting to consider with regard to his characters, because they are usually not only the perpetrators of folly and vice, but as we saw with Pilgrim, also the victims. In other words, we not only scorn them for their moral transgressions, but also feel sympathy towards them.

1.4 Parody

A final thing to consider with regard to satire’s components is the element of parody. I will use Swift as an example here as well, as I have already described *what* he’s saying and may now better explain *why* he is saying it the way that he does. In “A Modest Proposal”, Swift uses the form of economic treatise that was popular in his own time as a “host” for his satire, a literary format to utilize. The parodic play on a familiar genre and/or literary format is crucial, because satire is not to be considered a genre in itself. On the functions of this parodic play, Griffin notes that,

> [Satire] can through parody invade any literary form: epic, pastoral, travel book, song, elegy, and so on. When satire takes over another literary structure, it tends not just to borrow it, as when a cuckoo finds another bird’s nest for its eggs, but to subvert it or (in Michael Seidel’s terms) to alter its “potential” and (more like a bodysnatcher) to direct its energies towards alien ends (Griffin 3).

By using the treatise form, Swift is able to create certain expectations in the reader and to subsequently subvert those expectations. Anyone approaching his text unwittingly would first assume that it contains a serious proposal, as there is no disclaimer that this is satire. He therefore alters the potential of this literary form and, like Griffin claims, directs its energies towards alien ends. Although quite consequently relying on the novel as his format, Vonnegut is notorious for taking what Griffin refers to as the invasion of literary form, to new extremes. Schulz notes that, “[It is not] accidental that Kurt Vonnegut has waited longest of the Black Humorists for recognition. His novels are not organized according to one

fictional kind but follow multiple modes, at once novel of manners, confessional journal, science fiction, social satire, detective story, soap opera, and slick magazine tale" (Schulz 15). This is part of the reason why Vonnegut became an icon of the counterculture of the 60s, as his parodic treatment of popular literary forms, indeed of *what* a novel should be, subverted mainstream expectations. With regard to this, Schulz also remarks that Vonnegut's "[…] fandango of literary syntaxes has bewildered and offended both British and American readers, whose expectations are never consistently satisfied" (15). Going by Griffin's assessment, we understand that any satiric text is necessarily going to be an invasion of established literary format and/or genre. Considering how Vonnegut borders on excessive with regard to such invasion, to a point where the "fandango of literary syntaxes" is to be viewed as a defining feature of his writing, I should be conscious about the modes he uses (and what the achieved effects are) when analyzing his novels.

1.5 A Satiric Foundation

Having now seen numerous aspects found in satiric writing, it is now worth taking a step back and note that, no matter how complex Vonnegut's satires might appear to be, there are some fundamental elements that should be present. To summarize what I have hitherto discussed: there needs to be a target, that target must be attacked, and that attack must be modified by the use of estrangement and humor or wit. Furthermore, because satire is not a genre in itself, this attack must occur through the parodic play on pre-existing modes. Having now provided a broader – but also more rigid – definition of satire than "political humor", there should be a foundation upon which to build my thesis. However, it might be useful to also think of satire in more symbolic terms. Miller makes this analogy (paraphrasing Highet) in her essay "The Genre Debate and Satire" that gives an impression of satire's fundamental nature, noting that,

> The word satire is derived from the Latin word *satura*, which has come to mean brimming with a variety of different things. Gilbert Highet likens the word *satura* to the metaphor of the stew, which is a single unit that is full of different elements. A stew is also rich and earthy as compared to a plate of fine dining, which is sophisticated yet sparse, indicating that satire is coarse and varied (Miller 23-24).

The reason this observation might prove useful is because we need to recognize the broadness of satire, how varied it is despite the fundamental principles I have hitherto discussed. I will return to these principles (what we might consider the lowest common denominators) when

analyzing Vonnegut's writing, but also consider satire's broadness. In other words, while having now narrowed things down, the fact that he represents a break with satiric tradition means that my satiric foundation should act more as a guideline than as a rulebook. Like with all forms of art, the existing rules are made to be broken. This brings me to a question which was partially answered in the section on Black Humor, which is *why* we should think of Vonnegut as truly set apart from classical satirists (like a Swift or a Pope) in the first place?

1.6 Generative and Degenerative Satire

The simple answer is that the satirists of the 1960s, or the Black Humorists, in many ways mark a transition, from what Weisenburger calls "generative" satire to "degenerative" satire. What this shift implies is that, rather than believing in satire's generative abilities within the context of a normative ethos or, in other words, a form of satire that believes it has the *potential* to reform society because we share the same moral values (having the same understandings of vice and virtue, good and bad), degenerative satire has little- to no such ambition. Here I return to my thesis question, because whether or not a reformative mission is a fundamental feature of satire is still a matter of debate. While Griffin argued that it is the business of the satirist to "[…] insist on the sharp differences […] between what man *is* and what he *ought* to be" (Griffin 36), scholars like Hume would argue that,

> […] though [the rhetorical aim of reforming the audience's behavior] corresponds to one of the oldest claims made for satire, [it] is perhaps the weakest element if taken at face value, since evidence that satire produces reform is tenuous indeed, and those satirists who relish displaying their wit would be as put out as the biblical Jonah was with repentant Nineveh if their audience did reform (Hume 306).

In other words, societal reform may or may not be the *goal* of the satirist. On the one hand, Griffin is right in his assessment, because without a fixed set of moral values, the satirist cannot exhibit the form of rhetoric necessary for attack. To take this one step further, we might consider that the absence of vice would also mean the absence of virtue and, therefore, that the satirist must believe in both (and in the difference between them). Furthermore, what hope is there to improve our societies if dichotomies like good and evil, right and wrong, cannot be defined by a normative ethos? Like Griffin suggests, we expect the satirist to *insist* on these sharp differences. When Swift mocks the aristocracy in "A Modest Proposal", this is not done out of loving kindness, it is done because their role in the current sociopolitical landscape isn't what it *ought* to be in his eyes. However, going by Hume's argument, while

"A Modest Proposal" is certainly aimed at the aristocracy, Swift does not write it in the belief that his target(s) will see the error of their ways and thereby reform. Rather, the case is made in such a way that it is our translation from Swift's literal meaning to his (assumed) intended meaning that constitutes any real form of criticism. His satiric wit is displayed through the daemonic figure being sold as a saint, the true proposal for reform resting in the words unspoken. Reiterating this point about irony, and now quoting Vonnegut himself from Boon's anthology *At Millenium's End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut*, he notes that "In order to be good readers, we must […] recognize irony – which is when a writer says one thing and really means another, contradicting himself in what he believes to be a beguiling cause" (qtd. in Boon 145). Therefore, we see Vonnegut being conscious of doing the same as Swift, the idea of a beguiling cause justifying any form of deceit exercised upon the reader. He therefore trusts us with recognizing the normative ethos that he operates under.

Before moving on, there is one element I have already discussed which distinguishes Vonnegut from Swift and presents a reformative quality. Returning to Offit's remark on how Vonnegut creates not-quite-unlovable sinners, in other words, characters who are morally ambiguous and flawed (therefore relatable), we see the potential for the *individual's* reform, as opposed to societal reform. While this moral ambiguity appears to be a feature of degenerative satire, as Vonnegut's characters do not seem to operate under the pretext of a normative ethos, this also requires us to seek out our own ethos. For example, the morally charged actions of a character like Howard Campbell Jr. in *Mother Night*, require an introspection on our part in order to determine whether the character was right or wrong in creating propaganda for the Nazis, in order to help his country win the war (what he believes to be a beguiling cause). Furthermore, does it reflect positively on him that he wants to atone, or does it merely strike us as an admission of guilt? These are the forms of questions raised by Vonnegut's characters. By contrast, the speaker in "A Modest Proposal" cannot save face, cannot hope to be given the benefit of the doubt after making his case, which brings me to another element I need to be conscious of when reading Vonnegut's novels. Hodgart notes that "Satire uses the grotesque […] as a means to heighten ridicule and fantasy" (Hodgart 216), another satiric effect that Swift's speaker achieves by his abhorrent normative ethos (for he does operate under an ethos, just not one shared by us). We therefore see that Vonnegut must seek satiric elements like the grotesque elsewhere, somewhere outside of his characters.

Here I leave Swift for the time being, noting how his modest proposal has served to illustrate numerous satiric features, including Black Humor, irony and the difference between literal

and intended meaning, parody as the invasion of literary modes, the interchangeability between historical and universal targets, as well as generative and degenerative satire within the context of a normative ethos. I guess the speaker in his modest proposal has achieved some good after all. Before moving on to Vonnegut's novels, I present an overview of the critical literature used in their analyses, a provisionary conclusion to my findings, as well as a chapter on the historical backdrop to better understand the novel's significance.

SURVEY OF CRITICAL LITERATURE

What follows is an overview of the literature used in my analyses of *The Sirens of* Titan, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse*-Five. To begin with what has already been established as distinct features of Vonnegut's writing, books on irony and Black Humor are crucial. In *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Hutcheon points out that a potential problem with irony is "[…] the inevitability of differences in discursive communities and thus the danger of 'misunderstanding'" (Hutcheon 115). What Hutcheon means by discursive communities in this sense are groups that are,

> […] constituted by shared concepts of the norms of communication: 'a set of rules prescribing the conditions for producing and reception of meanings; which specify who can claim to initiate (produce, communicate) or know (receive, understand) meanings, about what topics under what circumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why) (Hutcheon 99).

In better understanding the function of irony and the place it holds, not only in Vonnegut's writing, but satire in general, Hutcheon's book will act as my main source of reference. For dealing with Black Humor, I will rely on Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion: The American Novel 1930-1980*, as well as Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*.

In order to see how Vonnegut achieves specific effects (entertains, provokes, etc.) I will use Griffin's *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, which will act as my theoretical source when looking closer at satiric features. In other words, this book will act as my main point of reference when considering what satire is and, just as importantly, what it is not. However, Griffin stresses that he does "[…] not offer a new comprehensive and unified 'theory' that tries to account adequately for all of satire's features" (Griffin 4). Regardless, I will be using

his terminology when discussing central satiric elements. For example, terms such as "normative ethos", "inquiry & provocation", and "display & play" are, in my opinion, useful in understanding what satirists are trying to accomplish and on what basis they believe that it *can* be accomplished.

In her article "Diffused Satire in Contemporary Fiction", Hume provides some interesting perspectives on satire. Although I will not be using her principal idea, which is that of nine categories that serve to identify the *satiric* (hence the term diffused satire), I find her assessments to make certain aspects of satire become more understandable. The reason why I refrain from using her nine categories is that the question asked with regard to Vonnegut's writing is not whether or not his works can be viewed as satires (something the categories would have been useful for), but how they compare with more generative satires.

When looking at the period in American history in which Vonnegut produced the novels I analyze, notable contemporary writers, and the ideas and techniques that set them all apart from their predecessors, I will again use Weisenburger as my primary source. In his *Fables of Subversion: The American Novel 1930-1980*, he also makes a critical analysis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Weighing his arguments against my own might reveal a common understanding of Vonnegut's vision, or it might serve to produce greater ambiguity in this regard. Regardless, the fact that Weisenburger analyzes Vonnegut's writing means that he can pose the kind of questions worth considering in my own analyses – not only of *Slaughterhouse-Five* – but the other novels as well. Boon's *At Millennium's End: New Essays on the Work of Kurt Vonnegut* should also provide valuable insights and perspectives on Vonnegut's writing and what it tries to say about the 20th century.

In terms of literary theory, I believe it most fruitful to consider Vonnegut's works as products of their contemporary environment. Therefore, it seems reasonable to use Derrida's theory of deconstruction, in which meaning is viewed as *unstable*, allowing for different interpretations by different speech communities (something which might be tied to Hutcheon's discursive communities). It is also interesting to note that Boon considers Vonnegut a precursor *to* deconstruction, claiming that,

> Long before Derrida and the theoretical project of deconstruction reached its peak in the English departments of American universities, Vonnegut made use of deconstructive principles in order to subvert the structures of his culture, showing the

absence of any real center behind the truth espoused in worker's manuals and newspapers, in the speeches of CEOs and ministers (Boon 152).

Taking this into consideration I must, to the best of my abilities, assume the role of a reader who understands the cultural and historical setting that Vonnegut is reacting to. It is worth noting that, because satire is commonly considered to operate with both historical- and universal targets, it is equally important to identify whether themes and targets mostly apply to 1960s America, or whether they can be applied anytime, anywhere.

PROVISIONARY CONCLUSION

Moving forward with my analyses, I expect to find ways in which one might view Vonnegut's style of degenerative, postmodern satires as actually presenting proposals for social reform, or at the very least a hope that humanity has the potential to change. A simple reason for assuming that this is the case is that it is hard to understand why a writer like Vonnegut would commit his entire authorship to the exposure of folly and vice, if the prospect of reform was wholly unrealistic to him. Furthermore, there is the matter of vice and virtue within a satiric context. Griffin raises the point that "It is not possible to think of a virtue without implicitly identifying a vice, if only as the absence of virtue" (Griffin 37). Like other forms of dichotomies, vice and virtue are so connected that we think of both when mentioning one or the other. This basic fact means that a work of degenerative satire, no matter how much it emphasizes what is wrong with the world, is bound to also insinuate what virtues the satirist finds lacking. Therefore, some potential for reform is necessarily present. However, considering how certain things we identify as immoral and wrong do not have direct opposites, and therefore elude such dichotomies, complications can arise even though the main argument appears sound. For example, in *Mother Night*, Vonnegut's double agent (Campbell) plays his role so well as to become a central part of the very group he is trying to infiltrate and dismantle. Although Vonnegut claims that this is the only novel where he actually knows the moral, which is that "[…] we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (Vonnegut *Novels & Stories 1950-1962* 535), there is an ambiguity to the figure of Campbell, as he clearly believes that the ends justify the means and that he is indeed doing his moral duty. With this mentality, virtue and vice are interlocked, to a point where Campbell himself cannot separate between truth or lie, good or bad. I expect to

find similar forms of ambiguity in Vonnegut's other works, that are not just created through the not-quite-unlovable sinners like Campbell, but by the philosophies offered to us as well, such as the one presented by Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Furthermore, this open-endedness is a pervading feature of degenerative satire, not offering the kind of implied conclusion (on the basis of a normative ethos) that we associate with Menippean satires.

However, an initial counterpoint to this assumption can be found in Vonnegut's tendency of ending his novels on objectively tragic notes (institutionalization or death of the protagonist, end of civilization or of the world itself, etc.), something which suggests clear indications about what paths he wants us to avoid. These outcomes are necessarily based on societal tendencies that Vonnegut observes, where his estrangements through fantasy might still be viewed as natural developments *from* these observations. For example, the end of the world in *Cat's Cradle* is the result of new discoveries within atomic/molecular science. Therefore, a case is implicitly made for the deceleration – or complete abandonment – of such science. In this assessment I once again recognize a simple moral dichotomy pertaining to vice and virtue. Because the end of the world is an obvious vice, its cause must also be a vice, thereby making the removal of this cause inherently virtuous. Although degenerative satire presents a plethora of possible interpretations, one might still be able to arrive at logical conclusions like this. Indeed, Boon identifies a clear message throughout Vonnegut's authorship, claiming that "The moral at the heart of his dichotomy is inscribed on Kilgore Trout's gravestone: "We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane" […] This is the message Vonnegut sends into the next millennium" (Boon 10).

Regarding his messages and proposals there is, of course, much that can be understood from things that Vonnegut has said outside of his work as well, where he makes his authorial intentions clear. For example, he "[…] has often stated that his persuasive intentions are focused not toward those already in power, but to the youth who will one day assume possession of the world" (Boon 142). From this statement alone, I can eliminate certain factors when approaching Vonnegut's works, knowing that his messages are intended for the generation that will one day assume control of such things as religion, science, industry, and even entire nations, hoping that these inheritors will recognize the errors of their predecessors. Returning to the point about satire's historic and universal targets, I expect to discover whether this means the next generation in a literal sense (the generation after Vonnegut) or whether there are universal qualities that make the novels retain this target

audience (the ones who inherit the world and not those who already possess it) after several decades in print.

Lastly, I expect to find a lack of specific moral dichotomies, first and foremost, a clear distinction between good and evil. His Black Humor protagonists will likely be the ones providing the strongest arguments in this regard. However, this is not to say that I believe Vonnegut has no fundamental beliefs. On the contrary, the not-quite-unlovable sinners of his novels ought to reveal strong messages for how we should act towards each other despite – or exactly because of – the notion that we are living in an indifferent universe. However, should this prove *not* to be the case, it stands to reason that Vonnegut is better viewed as a satirist who takes on different ironic personas, for example channeling vice through his speakers like Swift does in "A Modest Proposal", rather than one who operates under a fixed set of values.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

In order to understand where Vonnegut is coming from, I now look more closely at the reasons why there was a shift from generative- to degenerative satire and, since we are talking about a *postmodern* form of satire, what postmodern actually means in this context.

Towards the middle of the 1900s, Northrop Frye claimed that "Satire [had] grown stale and moldy", because it "[was] unable to speak for the 20th century" (qtd. in Weisenburger 1). When Frye makes his assessment on the state of satire, he does so in a postwar world where there have been numerous developments within literature, from the stream of consciousness writing of the 1920s, the absurdism of writers like Kafka, to explorations of the human psyche largely based on the works of Freud and Jung. Despite these developments, satire seems to remain much the same, and it is not surprising that Orwell is viewed as the most distinguished satirist of the 1940s and 1950s. Exploring the rise of dictatorships, his satires provide answers to a world reeling from the impact of figures like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini. In other words, they "speak for the 20th century" in a thematic way, but not necessarily in terms of their literary expression. Towards the 1960s, postmodernism can be seen as complicating matters further, because it is skeptical towards the idea of grand narratives that modernism had kept from the prewar world. In effect, this fundamental idea (or break *with* an idea) means that the belief in a normative ethos becomes weaker, as there is

no longer the sense that universal truths can be found. Because postmodernism is central to the development of Black Humor and, by effect, degenerative satire, it is necessary to understand what it represents. In his book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson implores us to make these distinctions with regard to postmodern thought,

> I cannot stress too greatly the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism: the two approaches in fact generate two very different ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon as a whole: on the one hand, moral judgments (about which it is indifferent whether they are positive or negative), and, on the other, a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in history (Jameson 45-46)

From this we see that there are different ways of viewing postmodernism, either as the cultural dominant of the 1960s onwards, or as one school of thought among several. With regard to Black Humorists (like Vonnegut), we must assume that the view of these writers is that postmodernism is the "cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism" and thereby that their literature presents "a dialectical attempt to think [their] present of time in history". Although there is no specific moment that marks the transition from generative to degenerative satire, the cultural and ideological shift of postmodernism must be considered the root cause. In his review of *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel 1930-1980*, Mellard summarizes the principal ideas of degenerative satire as understood by Weisenburger, stating that "The new "degenerative" mode aims at no cure of social ills, but "delegitimizes" ideologies. Indeed, says Weisenburger, degenerative satire is compatible with postmodern deconstruction because it subverts hierarchies of value and "suspects all ways of making meaning, including its own"" (Mellard 885). What it means for satire to suspect its own ways of making meaning is that it no longer draws on the assumption that humanity has a shared normative ethos, or in fact any form of shared universal understanding, which means that satire's reformative mission (if there ever was such a thing) no longer has a foundation upon which it can hope to manifest. One can argue that this ideological change and the resulting literature means that Frye's claim becomes forfeit, that satire indeed finds a voice better suited to speak for the 20th century through postmodernism, Black Humor, and the resulting degenerative mode. However, a new problem arises, because regardless of whether one chooses to believe in satire's rhetorical aim of reforming the audience's behavior (to use

Hume's words) or not, this new suspicion towards producing meaning serves to cast doubt on other aspects that I identified as fundamental to satire. For example, and as we shall see more of in Vonnegut's writing, there are instances where even the element of attack is affected by this meaning-making suspicion, to a point where we might question what the satiric targets are.

I return to the example of Howard Campbell Jr. in *Mother Night*, who we are unsure whether to condemn or praise. This character is an example of the dangerous not-quite-unlovable sinner that frequently appears in Vonnegut's works. In the eyes of his employer, the U.S. government, Campbell has made a great contribution to the war effort, but to the American public he is a war criminal. Which of these views we hold as true determines how we perceive the satiric attack, or it is perhaps therein that the satiric attack lies. By comparison, Swift is quite explicit in his attack in "A Modest Proposal", condemning the aristocracy and its response to a domestic humanitarian crisis. Although these examples represent two different satiric forms, they reveal some key differences between attacks in generative satire and degenerative satire, primarily that degenerative satire values ambiguity over satiric clarity. However, we might obtain some clarity by keeping in mind that "To assess the satirist's purpose and strategy, we need to know for whom and against whom the satire is written" (Griffin 188). Therefore, I might consider certain things that I would not when reading Swift. For example, in *Mother Night*, I would argue that the Nazis are in fact *not* the satiric targets because, in addition to their values quite obviously going against those of the post-war world, the novel was published long after the Second World War had ended. Therefore, such a target would be all but irrelevant with regard to Vonnegut's satiric commentary and also in terms of any reformative aspect. It is the retrospective look at Campbell's involvement in the war that presents any reformative prospect, as well as the fact that the ongoing Cold War was producing an atmosphere of distrust, as exemplified by the many pretenders and double agents that enter into his life. Considering the moral of the story as stated by Vonnegut himself (we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be), we understand that the target is quite universal.

I now come to the analyses of *The Sirens of Titan*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, after having discussed satiric terminology, the transition from generative to degenerative satire resulting from postmodernism and the Black Humor fiction of the 1960s, my approach to the process of analysis, as well as my expected findings. We now step back to 1959, to an

era where America is engaged in war against communism, and the resulting Space Race is evoking visions of humanity's conquest of space.

THE SIRENS OF TITAN

> Mankind, ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward-pushed ever outward. What mankind hoped to learn in its outward push was who was actually in charge of all creation, and what all creation was all about (Vonnegut *Novels and Stories 1950-1962* 313).

These words appear on the first page of Vonnegut's second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, a note of warning to an ignorant humanity seeking the wrong answers in all the wrong places. In order to prove this point to us, Vonnegut takes us on a wild journey through our solar system, where the heroes from the optimistic form of 20th century science-fiction that it parodies are nowhere to be found. They are, in fact, replaced by highly questionable characters, who represent post capitalist society in the least flattering of ways: pointlessly rich, spoilt, and narcissistic. However, perhaps even such characters have a shot at redemption and, indeed, might guide humanity towards the discovery of "the truths that lie within every human being"?

2.1 Identifying Form & Themes

In *The Sirens of Titan*, we encounter themes and ideas that come to define Vonnegut's authorship. Furthermore, it introduces names and places that reappear in later works, most notably the Rumfoord dynasty, the planet Tralfamadore and the city of Ilium N.Y. (interestingly, Ilium is one of the Greek names for Troy), which are all central in Vonnegut's metafiction. I use the term metafiction because fictional elements like those just mentioned, as well as concepts and philosophies (like coming unstuck in time), serve to remind us that his novels *are* works of fiction, with little pretention of realism. The reason for considering these elements at this stage is that *The Sirens of Titan* introduces some of the most important ideas in Vonnegut's intertextual metafiction, which his later works build upon. For example, in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965), Tralfamadore appears in a science fiction novel by Kilgore Trout, and the aliens living on this planet provide the philosophies that form the backbone of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (more on that later). One can assume that Vonnegut's

metafiction contributes to some overarching, intertextual symbolisms. This is something to consider when analyzing the three novels in this thesis, because it should help in understanding the messages that he is trying to send.

Furthermore, because *The Sirens of Titan* is the earliest work I will analyze, it is worth noting how it sets a precedence in terms of narrative structure. Vonnegut avoids traditional structures (or shapes), as he identifies them in his "Shapes of Stories" theory, in favor of what he calls the Which Way Is Up narrative, where there is a "[…] lifelike ambiguity that keeps us from knowing if new developments are good or bad" (Eilam, Vonnegut). Unlike narratives where the characters' fortunes follow a predictable pattern, Vonnegut makes us uncertain – not only about the fates of his characters – but whether they *deserve* them. Because his flat narrative shape enables such uncertainties, it stands in contrast to all other shapes, in which failures and successes are made transparently obvious. For example, the Cinderella shape (to continue using Vonnegut's terminology) illustrates the rags-to-riches narrative that we find, not only within the world of literature, but which arguably forms the basis of the American dream (a master narrative), with its conviction that hard work leads to success. At the very least, one might find similarities in how poor/rich is turned into a dichotomy, with seemingly nothing in between. The reason for discussing this narrative shape in particular, is that it plays a crucial role in *The Sirens of Titan*. Let me explain. Considering the principles of Which Way Is Up, one might assume that Vonnegut would simply dismiss other narrative shapes as being unrepresentative of the 20th century, indeed of life itself. However, rather than simply ignoring these familiar shapes (in this case the Cinderella shape), he chooses to subvert them.

Indeed, the subversion of narratives (and what may in some cases be considered their underlying *morals*) like this one, which claims that hard work and decency will lead to success, are given the Black Humor treatment by Vonnegut. Not because the morals are viewed as bad, but because 1960s America (indeed the 20th century) have turned them into illusions (one is reminded of West's *A Cool Million*). For example, in his depictions of successful American dreamers, Vonnegut tends to focus on the inheritors of wealth rather than those who are self-made (the Cinderellas this dream envisions). In other words, those who have skipped the rags and gone straight to the riches. Through them, he illustrates how the heroic narratives of the past are idealistic illusions in the contemporary world. Malachi Constant in *The sirens of Titan* is the prime example of such a character.

The unravelling of the American dream, anticipated by works such as *The Great Gatsby* (1925), comes to an inglorious close in Vonnegut's writing. Constant is not only an undeserving inheritor of wealth, but a narcissistic billionaire playboy, whose introduction does not make us hopeful with regard to his moral improvement. Compared to a figure like Gatsby who, despite his questionable methods might still be viewed as an example of the romantic hero, Constant has no redeemable qualities and therefore subverts our expectations of the hero figure, as well as the American dream. On this final point, it is also worth remembering that Vonnegut's Black Humor is a product of postmodernism, which is founded on the belief that the 1960s (I include 1959 here) presented the end of traditional ideologies. Therefore, the western ideals pertaining to heroes and grand narratives are not only seen as outdated but are in fact reduced to something even beyond the mock heroic of works like *The Dunciad*. We can see this in *The Sirens of Titan*, as the novel is not only free of heroes, but reduces the grand narrative to non-narrative, in the sense that its lack of any definable shape leaves it a wholly ambiguous parody of the epic.

There are other instances where Vonnegut's subversion of expectations is facilitated, not through his parodic play on familiar narratives, but by the introduction to new schools of thought. The Tralafamadorians introduced in *The Sirens of Titan* do not share in our concepts of value or time, instead experiencing existence as one continuous movement, without highs or lows, without beginning or end. Because of this, they provide an alternative to our meaning-making systems, as their "[…] logic […] dispenses with *why* in favor of *what*" (Schulz 51). Therefore, the Tralfamadorians can be seen as manifesting principles of Which Way Is Up, where the meaning of an action is of less interest than the action itself, and where time (a chronological narrative structuring) is arbitrary. I will even suggest that, in creating his alien species, Vonnegut is building on the deconstructionist subversion of literary hierarchies. Somewhat ironically, the fiction Vonnegut presents us with is capable of providing more genuine representations of the world, by manifesting deconstructionist principles in the form of such outlandish beings as the Tralfamadorians. While their philosophies are best described in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the dispensing of *why* in favor of *what* forms the crux of *The Sirens of Titan*.

2.2 I Guess Someone Up There Likes Us

As the novel's conclusion provides perspective on past events, it is the most appropriate place to begin an analysis. Niles Rumfoord, who has seemingly pulled the strings throughout the

narrative by the use of the "magical" powers of the *chrono-synclastic infundibulum* (thereby generating the plot like Shakespeare's Prospero), discovers that his Godlike interventions, and the entire history of our species, have been parts of a Tralfamadorian plan to retrieve the missing part of a stranded spaceship. The purpose of this spaceship is to deliver a single dot across the universe, a dot which translates to "Greetings" in Tralfamadorian (Vonnegut 518). In this sense, all human achievement can be ascribed to the "[…] purposive random […] Tralfamadorian postal system […]" (Schulz 58). Salo, the machine who is supposed to deliver this message, ends up destroying himself upon learning this truth, having adopted human behavior through his interactions with Rumfoord. This sequence shows that finding the answer to one's "purpose" might not necessarily be a good thing, as "The little machine from Tralfamadore, having delivered this message […] over a distance of one hundred and fifty thousand light years, bounded […] onto the beach outside. He killed himself out there. He took himself apart and threw his parts in all directions" (Vonnegut 518). Salo's reaction is a visceral demonstration of Vonnegut's conviction that "The bounties of space [are] empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death" (313). Salo has always believed his quest to be noble, and when it proves not to be (although it needs to be said that the *nature* of the quest remains the same), his whole existence unravels, resulting in an annihilation of the self.

With this outcome in mind and considering the natures of Constant and Rumfoord as well, I view vanity (both on an individual level and in the sense that humanity believes it has some higher purpose) as the primary vice that *The Sirens of Titan* seeks to confront, because it is the common denominator between the actions and fates of all its characters. Furthermore, they are all humbled in some way when faced with the true nature of their universe. Everything that is ascribed some higher purpose or worth, from Salo's quest to Constant's business empire, to the Martian invasion and Rumfoord's master plan; these are all components in a potentially meaningless machine (by humanity's standards), for there is no guarantee that the Tralfamadorian message will even be received (although they should know, given their perception of time). While this results in Black Humor on the basis that it produces a comical relationship between our system of value and an imagined non-system, it also does something fundamental to the characters themselves.

First, considering the unique positions Constant and Rumfoord have in relation to the rest of society, in that they are both excessively rich and therefore do with others as they like, we might view them as humor individuals in the satiric tradition of New Comedy. Paraphrasing Frye, Schulz remarks that "New Comedy, according to [Frye], always worked toward a

reconciliation of the individual with society. Either the normal individual was freed from the bonds of an arbitrary humor society, or a normal society was rescued from the whims imposed by humor individuals" (Schulz 7). While New Comedy and Black Humor appear to have little in common, there is a thought worth entertaining here. Going by Frye's assessment of New Comedy we see that, in *The Sirens of Titan*, what we may call the humor society of the Tralfamadorians is what causes a form of reconciliation between the humor individuals (Constant and Rumfoord) and normal, human society. Their alien manipulation of our affairs, combined with a lack of anything resembling vanity (which is discernible from the mundane nature of Salo's message) that exposes the true nature of the character's actions.

The novel's religious aspects can also be viewed within the context of vanity. Rumfoord believes his monopolization of religion will end human conflict forever, his church of God the Utterly Indifferent serving as an institution that unifies the world following the Martian invasion. As Vonnegut describes the planet Constant returns to, "There was not a country in the world that did not have graveyards with Earthlings and Martians buried side by side", and that "All living things were brothers, and all dead things were even more so" (460). The Martian massacre serves to make brotherhood from bloodshed, turning Rumfoord into an ambiguous and utilitarian figure, willing to commit evils for what he considers to be the greater good. One can also argue that he is made out to be the antagonist of the novel for the simple reason that he acts as the antithesis to the protagonist, but we know that Constant is a morally questionable character himself. To a certain extent, Constant is even made to look worse than Rumfoord. This passage illustrates my point, "Everything Rumfoord did he did *with* style, making all mankind look good. Everything Constant did he did *in* style – aggressively, loudly, childishly, wastefully – making himself and mankind look bad" (328).

Furthermore, Rumfoord commits one sin that seems irredeemable, in that he acts in the same anti-Kantian mode as the Tralfamadorians, where human beings are treated as a means rather than ends in themselves, and this direct connection makes such conduct seem *inhuman*. This presents a reformative argument if we consider the form of uncompromising Kantian ethos – as opposed to utilitarianism – to constitute Vonnegut's own normative ethos. In simpler terms, there is evidence here suggesting that he believes only good can achieve good. However, I am not proposing that Vonnegut is providing a philosophical argument here, as this would naturally undermine his satire. In fact, this would go against one of the oldest claims made for satire.

2.3 Building Satiric Arguments

Returning to Griffin, one can make the distinction that "[…] pagan moralists and Christian preachers […] arguments (unlike those of the satirists) are [implicitly] bolstered by a philosophical system or the threat of divine punishment" (Griffin 38). This brings me back to Hume's argument for the necessity of a modified attack, as the aim of satire is not subjecting the readers to "hellfire sermonizing". With that being said, while Rumfoord appears to be the character most deserving of attack in *The Sirens of Titan*, I don't believe Vonnegut intends for us to simply dismiss him as immoral. Rather, he is a king made into a fool, given a great gift (the *chrono-synclastic infundibulum*) that makes him believe he can change the world. Through the infundibulum, he creates (and partakes) in the illusion of being sent from the heavens, materializing from outer space unto earth like an angel come to save humanity. However, when the most crucial step in his plan (the Martian massacre) is completed, it is remarked that "Shame, as Rumfoord had planned it, began to set in" (Vonnegut 432). The reformative aspect becomes weaker – but the satire arguably stronger – when viewing him as one of noble intentions who, drunk on power, is only able to see and act according to grand narratives. In other words, only capable of the outwardness Vonnegut explicitly warns us about at the beginning of the novel. Like Salo, he cannot accept the non-narrative of the Tralfamadorians, to which his existence is ultimately bound. However, we are hard pressed not to view his – or other characters' actions for that matter – in light of moral philosophy.

In addition to vanity, a dichotomy of the individual and the collective plays an important role in the novel. For example, parallels can be drawn between the Martian invasion and historical conflicts, where militarized ideologies and subsequent brainwashing all but erase the individual, in order to create obedient members of the collective cause. An obvious example, and the most relevant with regard to Vonnegut's writing, is Nazi Germany (i.e. *Mother Night*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*), where ordinary people came to view certain vices as collective virtues, due to utilitarianism. In *The Sirens of Titan*, this form of indoctrination is best exemplified by Unk (Constant) being forced to kill his friend Stony Stevenson, after having had his memories erased (Vonnegut 377-380). Considering that the Martian cause which demands such extreme action is, in fact, doomed from the very start, we are presented with a degenerative form of argument, through a situation where there cannot be victory on either an individual or collective level. In such hopelessness, all that someone like Constant can do is remain true to himself in the face of pointless death and destruction, or to perpetuate such things through blind obedience. At least in this, there may be some form

of victory of the individual (one might say of the human spirit) *over* the collective. Our desire to resist such militarism is ironically enforced by the most important rule of the Martian army, which is to "Always obey a direct order without a moment's hesitation" (379). In *The Sirens of Titan*, the relationship between individuals and institutions is explored in different forms, as Vonnegut illustrates how both militaries and religions have the potential to turn individuals into parts of collective entities, to some degree foreshadowing his concept of the *granfalloon* in *Cat's Cradle*, which is a "[…] proud and meaningless association of human beings" (Vonnegut *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons* 1). The difference here is that someone like Unk (Constant) is never given the choice of being a non-combatant, of not being part of the Martian army. In fact, he is not given a choice about anything.

A preference for the individual looms large in Vonnegut's writing, although characters like Rumfoord and Constant (as he is first introduced to us) are *too* individualistic, to a point where they devolve into selfishness. Boon notes that, "You get the sense, perusing the body of his work, that through the decades Vonnegut's respect for the individual has increased as his approval of humanity as a whole has declined" (Boon 10). In this regard, *The Sirens of Titan*, despite only being Vonnegut's second novel, illustrates Boon's point by exploring human behavior through the extremes of individualism and collectivism, and what happens to one when governed by the other. For example, Constant is literally not himself after becoming Unk, while Rumfoord becomes something of a dictatorial figure, who decides the fate of people like him. By extension, this shows the extremes of the human experience. Although the "respect for the individual" that Boon notes of Vonnegut's authorship, has not developed into an apparent motif by 1959, there already appears to be a preference for the individual's *potential* to go against the stream, as opposed to the collective conformity that so many of us choose, for in that lies a triumph of inwardness over outwardness. The respect Boon identifies will perhaps become more discernable after analyzing the other two novels, as well as other texts, and thereby present a theme in Vonnegut's authorship as a whole.

2.4 Black Humor Individuals

Exploring the characters in greater detail, I first return to Rumfoord and his plan. His church views God as an indifferent creator who has abandoned his own universe, an idea which in some ways unite deism with humanism, as the theistic principle that there is a divine plan has been replaced with the idea that humanity controls its own destiny. Rumfoord's vision is realized through the failed Martian invasion, which ironically means that a meaningless act

results in something meaningful, on the basis that Humanity is unable to accept that the Martian sacrifice *is* meaningless. This is another example of Black Humor, as humanity's need to hold on to familiar meaning-making systems is part of Rumfoord's (but really the Tralfamadorian's) plan. We see how Rumfoord becomes more similar to the old Constant, someone convinced of being chosen by a higher power and therefore free to do whatever he wants. In fact, Rumfoord has gone one step further by casting God aside and, for all intents and purposes, taken his place. After bringing Constant to Titan, the self-appointed "Master of Newport" (Vonnegut 463) learns that, rather than pulling the strings, he has had strings attached to him, reducing this "Master" to servant.

Constant based his former success on the idea that "[…] somebody up there [liked him]" (322), something which turns out to be true, but this is merely because of his involuntary contribution in repairing the Tralfamadorian spaceship. His entire existence, for better or worse, has been orchestrated down to the most minute detail for this *one* purpose. The elaborate chain of events that the novel presents us with, full of imagined significance, yet ultimately signifying nothing at all (reminiscent of *Cat's Cradle*), sets a precedence for Vonnegut's display and play, subverting expectations by introducing seemingly unrelated pieces which eventually fall into place, forming a coherent image. In *The Sirens of Titan*, this "image" first begins to form when Constant is brought back to Earth. Returning there after many years, he declares "I was a victim of a series of accidents […] as are we all" (468). While this has the appearance of being a message that Vonnegut is sending into the 20th century (his intended meaning), we also know it to be untrue within the context of the novel because, as it turns out, there are no such things as accidents. Furthermore, the fact that the message is prophesied arguably negates it, because it promotes a chaos (all is accidental) that is at odds with the order of the predestined (all is planned). However, the fundamental idea that Constant's statement represents ties together with the Which Way Is Up narrative, because *accidents* (as they are perceived) means that, instead of the rises and falls of traditional narrative structures, we have characters heading towards uncertain fates where tragedy and triumph are not so easily distinguished. For example, we might envy Constant for his unearned fortune, and later take pity on him for his perhaps equally unearned misfortune, while both stem from the same source. As a result of this, he is bound to appear more like a victim than as either hero or villain. As do we all. Here, it is worth repeating Schulz's observation that "[The Black Humor protagonist] is at once observer of, and participant in,

the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what happens around him" (Schulz 12). Does this not seem like an apt description of Constant?

Continuing with the exploration of our protagonist, it is interesting to note that, switching between identities (Constant, Unk, disillusioned Constant), he resorts to different philosophies and views on the nature of reality. As a billionaire, he believes that he is chosen by "somebody up there", resulting in him doing whatever he wants with no concern for consequences (I also interpret this as a critique of individuals pertaining to the 1%). As a soldier of Mars, later taken to Mercury and then back to Earth, he comes to see himself as the victim of accidents (his nonchalant faith replaced by nihilism) and, upon learning that he has been exploited all his life, sees that the line between chosen (positive) and victim (negative) is a very thin one. Through Constant, Vonnegut questions how we perceive our personal narratives and may radically shift our perspectives based on our current situations, thereby producing a dichotomy of absolute order, or absolute chaos. However, when Unk finds the letter written by himself before his memory was erased, he is given the motivation to continue fighting, no matter how hopeless his situation seems, noting that "It was literature in its finest sense, since it made [him] courageous, watchful, and secretly free. It made him his own hero in very trying times" (Vonnegut 401). In other words, despite the misfortunes that befall him, there exists physical proof that he has the potential to obtain knowledge of the world around him. In turn, this relates to Vonnegut's observation that the way we find fulfilment is through inwardness, because it is only when Constant is forced to accept his insignificance *within* the universe that he discovers his own significance to those around him, which in the end is Beatrice, the person who has had most reason to hate him.

Salo is an interesting character, because he serves as the connection between Tralfamadore and Earth, between our world and the estranged world of satire. Furthermore, his retelling of the legend about how Tralfamadorians came to be, offers an interesting parallel to human history. He recalls that there were creatures "[…] obsessed by the idea that everything that existed had to have a purpose, and that some purposes were higher than others" (500). Every time the creatures discover new purposes, these seem so low that they create machines to serve them. The same happens when they discover higher purposes, because these never seem high enough. Finally, the machines are tasked with discovering the single highest purpose and conclude that the creatures "[…] couldn't be said to have any purpose at all" (500). As a result of this revelation, the creatures have a similar reaction as Salo later has when reading his message, only that they start killing each other instead and, once again

relying on machines to do their work, are wiped out "[…] in less time than it takes to say, "Tralfamadore"" (500). In this short story, Salo offers a clear warning to outwardness, of making the strive for higher purpose the very goal of one's existence.

2.5 Reformative Mission

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut playfully shifts the balance of power, in terms of who believes to be in charge, illustrating how fortunes can change without presenting something resembling a predictable – or indeed meaningful – narrative shape. This makes it difficult to find clear morals in the novel. However, as we have discovered, there are instances where Vonnegut's use of the degenerative mode dissuades us from seeking outwardness, by presenting disillusionment and pointless death as the only result of such pursuits. However, a revelation that resembles a clear moral presents itself to Constant in the final chapter, following the death of Beatrice. He rebuilds Salo in order to return to Earth and, in what I interpret as Vonnegut's unironic, intended meaning, declares that "[…] a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (528). Vonnegut thereby offers a specific way in which an answer to the initial question of "[…] what all creation was all about" (313), can be found in inwardness (in the form of one's emotional life and introspection, not isolation as it might also suggest). The argument is that the "purpose" that humanity so desperately seeks does not exist, or at least that the answer will not satisfy us. However, the purpose of a human *life* (on an individual level) is love and compassion, rather than outwardness, which is a doomed search for purpose outside of humanity itself. Other themes also connect with this, most notably the element of exploitation. As Beatrice tells Constant before her death, "The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody […] would be not to be used for anything by anybody" (526). Here we see an element that the novel previously made out to be negative, namely exploitation, also having a positive aspect, but within the context of basic human interaction, where being "used" means to be saved from an indifferent universe.

In addition to the universal targets of the novel, *The Sirens of Titan* also contains historical targets from Vonnegut's contemporary America. Because these historical targets necessarily intertwine with the universal targets, they can be hard to distinguish from one another. The space race of the 1950s and 1960s is central to the narrative, being the historical backdrop that makes the novel seem less like *War of the Worlds* (1898) and more like a prospect of the near future. However, Vonnegut uses the more fantastic elements, such as the

Tralfamadorians and the Martian invasion, to underscore the "[…] empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death" (313) which he believes is all to be found in the vastness of space. From a more grounded perspective, he claims that "[…] on the basis of horse sense and the best scientific information, there was nothing good to be said for the exploration of space" (329). After this denouncement of space travel follows a description of the latest rocket mankind has produced, called *The Whale*, which draws on the symbolism of *Moby Dick* (1851), thereby signifying both the white whale itself and the motivations of the crew aboard the *Pequod*. Vonnegut uses science-fiction, intertextual reference, and a good old plea for common sense, resulting in a degenerative (although somewhat didactic) argument where he wants us to dismiss the space race as madness.

Another aspect that can be tied to the Cold War is the unification of mankind, which happens as a result of the Martian invasion. The solution to a divided world is to manufacture an army that, in a grotesque parody of the Passion, unites mankind through its sacrifice. Here, fiction and biblical intertextuality serve to create Black Humor, as this "sacrifice" in no way alleviates humanity's sins, but rather serves to *highlight* our sinful nature, as the Martians are slaughtered without mercy, unarmed women and children among them (432). Regarding the historical concerns that Vonnegut voices in *The Sirens of Titan*, it is interesting to note that, while he outright opposes space exploration, he does not condemn his other targets in the same manner. As noted earlier, his attacks on religious- and military institutions are seen through their effects on the individual, but he also depicts how bad faith might detach individuals from their communities as well.

For example, before we know about the Tralfamadorian plan, we are made to believe that Constant's father became rich as a result of a Bible-based investment scheme. Billions of people are devoted to God(s), but for some reason, the Constants deserve to become billionaires on no other basis than their faith. The rise and fall of their financial empire depicts a pious beginning and a Babylonian end, where the hedonist Malachi goes bankrupt after giving away company shares to his guests during a drunken stupor. It is clear that his carefree upbringing has convinced him that bad things cannot happen, although he does not have an ounce of his father's faith. The mantra "I guess somebody up there likes me" is given special significance, as it is both the first and final sentence of the novel, thereby framing the narrative. Constant explains this mantra in his meeting with Rumfoord (322), which means that this idea exists in *his* consciousness as well. When the novel ends, the repetition of these words forces us to ask whether we, as individuals, would want our existence to be governed

by exterior forces if it benefited us like the Constants, or to question those forces whether they benefit us or not. With this, I return to Vonnegut's focus on the individual, because *The Sirens of Titan* is ultimately about Malachi Constant and his struggles against an inevitable fate, his continued fight when there is no battle to be won. This results in a degenerative satire that attempts to extract hope from a disillusioned (Black Humor) individual, to whom outwardness has been proven to be a lie and who must therefore accept inwardness.

The meeting between human ambitions and Tralfamadorian haphazardness is what forms the strongest element of Black Humor in Vonnegut's work. It forces us to adapt to an alien mindset and, simultaneously, come to realize that some of our endeavors might truly be as pointless as Salo's mission. Faced with Tralfamadorian logic, our tragedies and triumphs are put in the perspective of Vonnegut's dichotomy of inwardness and outwardness, because we are made conscious of asking *why* (inwardness) rather than *what* (outwardness). There is little doubt that our search for "purpose" in exterior sources (space, science, religion, etc.) is viewed as a flaw in the collective human psyche, something ironically primitive and yet – or perhaps exactly *because* it is such a primal feature – seemingly impossible to rid ourselves of. Therefore, *The Sirens of Titan* remains relevant, and will continue to be relevant until this vain pursuit is struck from our minds. For example, consider how we are in the process of colonizing Mars, only because we see space as something we are destined to explore and conquer, while there is an ongoing climate crisis on Earth. Asking ourselves a simple *why* means challenging the preconceived notions of purpose and destiny, accepting the same form of disillusionment as Constant, and to love whoever is around to be loved before it is too late.

Somewhat surprisingly, I find strong arguments for viewing *The Sirens of Titan* as having a reformative mission. From a distant future, Vonnegut describes an age of inwardness where "Everyone […] knows how to find the meaning of life within themselves" (313). The narrator in the prologue writes to us from an age where mankind *is* reformed, and Vonnegut's novel seems to provide arguments to somehow hasten its arrival. With that being said, the novel does not offer us real closure, no roadmap towards this utopian future. Paraphrasing Frye, Schulz notes that "The moral quality of society – the aim of satire – is not […] the point of the comic resolution of an individual and a group. Nor is it the objective of Black Humor, which resists any final accommodation (12). Furthermore, Griffin points out that, "[…] satiric endings are often obtrusively open, not because the end of one story is always the beginning of another, or because literary constructions are subject to deconstructing or unraveling, but because the form and purpose of satire seem to resist conclusiveness" (Griffin 96). In other

words, the novel's open-endedness is to be expected, regardless of whether one chooses to view the work as a conventional satire (generative) or a Black Humor novel (degenerative).

However, in a purely structural sense, the novel provides a somewhat satisfying conclusion by connecting the end with the beginning. As Constant dies, his mantra is uttered one last time by the apparition of Stony (532). In this sense, the novel comes full circle and the empty sentiment that was "I guess somebody up there likes me" (313, 322), has suddenly taken on a whole new meaning. Furthermore, Vonnegut's view on the bounties of space are made manifest in Salo's suicide and in Rumfoord's fate at the hands of the *chrono-synclastic infundibulum* (517). In other words, the sentiments expressed in the opening chapter have been explored and given their natural conclusions. Our protagonist can even be seen as having reformed from his former selfish arrogance and come to unselfishly love at least *one* other human being. However, this realization comes far too late. Compared with Salo, who has patiently waited thousands of years to continue on his meaningless quest, we, like Constant, cannot live under the illusion that the universe will throw us in the right direction. We must correct our own course.

CAT'S CRADLE

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut continues his exploration of humanity's relationships with science, technology, and religion. However, rather than relying on space and aliens as the "[…] fantasy elements [that] supply the distortions that estrange the world of satire" (Hume 302), this novel is set on Earth, contains only human characters, and is therefore substantially more grounded. Except, this would be a lie.

3.1 Introducing the Anti-Novel

"Nothing in this book is true", so reads the novel's epigraph, a quote from *The Books of Bokonon*, the fictitious holy text that lies at the narrative's heart (Vonnegut *Novels & Stories 1963-1973* 3). This disclaimer is significant because, above all else, *Cat's Cradle* seeks to expose the belief systems we create in order to make sense of the world, as well as our place in it, regardless of whether they are conscious lies or not. To this end, Vonnegut once again subverts our expectations surrounding a normative ethos, what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, by advocating for the usefulness of such lies. After all, a Bokonist might view the

belief in a normative ethos as *foma* in itself. However, that discussion happens, or as Bokonon would say, is *meant* to happen, later in this chapter. For now, the most important thing to understand is how *Cat's Cradle*, despite its apparent lack of estrangement through fantasy, pushes the satiric boundaries to an even greater extent than *The Sirens of Titan*.

However, *Cat's Cradle* opens with a stronger sense of realism than that novel, making its fictional nature known only by changing certain historical details and by teasing us with its fake religion. The narrator (John) echoes the opening line of *Moby Dick* ("Call me Ishmael") with "Call me Jonah", before reminiscing about when he was a younger man, gathering information for a book on the 6th of August 1945, the day the first nuclear weapon was used on a city (5). In his essay, "Black Humor in *Cat's Cradle*", Hobby points out the significance of this by describing John as being "[…] obsessed with a single cataclysmic moment in human history: […] the day the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb […] on Hiroshima (Hobby, Bloom 59). John/Jonah also talks of being a Bokonist, but this means little to us for the time being. In order to write his book on Hiroshima, he makes an investigation into the life of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the imagined father of the atom bomb (Vonnegut 8). This introduction tricks the reader into viewing the novel as being concerned with verisimilitude, the scientific/realistic grounding associated with American realist fiction (for example, the taxonomical descriptions of whales in *Moby Dick*). However, Hobby considers Vonnegut's novel to have "[…] no pretentions of verisimilitude" (Hobby, Bloom 61), effectively making it an "anti-novel". Although one can argue to what extent scientific facts must be presented in order to give "[…] the appearance of reality in fiction" (61), Vonnegut at least uses an historical event as his foundation, placing his fiction within the context of history and fact. Notwithstanding, Hobby's main point is that the "[…] anti-novel is often bizarre and absurd and relies on the reader to provide both concrete references and to supply meaning" (61), something which is definitely true of *Cat's Cradle*. Furthermore, he points out that with the book's epigraph, "Nothing in this book is true", Vonnegut "[…] breaks with the tradition of representing reality in fiction" (62).

Despite the grounded appearance of its opening chapters (certainly compared with *The Sirens of Titan*, and Rumfoord's materialization at the hands of the *chrono-synclastic infundibulum*), the qualities that make *Cat's Cradle* an anti-novel nonetheless become apparent early in the narrative. John's investigation into the 6th of August 1945, soon comes to include an investigation of Felix Hoenikker, a fictitious character from Ilium, New York, Vonnegut's recurring made-up town, while citations from the bogus Bokonist religion attempt to

contextualize and in some way validate the assumed significance of John's experiences. From the grounding provided by Hiroshima and the atom bomb, Vonnegut's ironic play on what initially appears to be investigative journalism allows for a satire that, in Hobby's words "[replaces] the conventions of realism with grotesque characters, an unbelievable plot, and an apocalyptic setting" (63), while reverting our attention back to the 6th of August 1945, to the infamous date that sets the novel in motion. It serves to remind us of the destructive capabilities mankind already possesses, but more importantly, the convictions and reasonings that facilitate such destruction.

Hiroshima is therefore given a significant contextual purpose despite being little more than a sidenote because, right after his adventures in Ilium, John abandons the investigation for his book and is sent by a magazine to San Lorenzo for an interview with the millionaire Julian Castle (Vonnegut 58). However, this endeavor ends up leading him back to Hoenikker and fatefully, to *ice-nine*, the substance that freezes the entire globe. We come to learn that the book John ultimately produces is a retrospective look at events that led to the end of the world at the hands of this substance. As Vonnegut's anti-novel concludes, no sense of realism remains, save for a recollection that a book on Hiroshima, fittingly titled *The Day the World Ended* (5), was what prompted John to write in the first place. In this way, the beginning and end of *Cat's Cradle* connect, reminding us that humanity has already altered the building blocks of the universe, that *ice-nine* is merely a continuation of mankind's tampering with matter.

3.2 Theme, Form, and Satiric Truth

Considering where the novel begins and where it ends necessitates an awareness surrounding its style and form. First, it is worth noting that *Cat's Cradle* is a metafictive work in that Vonnegut has the protagonist be the writer of the novel itself. Consisting of 127 short entries similar to Bible verses also give it the appearance of a religious text, especially as Bokonism becomes more prominent in the narrative. These features should make the reader suspicious of ulterior motives and thereby cautious to the novel's "truth". Therefore, *Cat's Cradle* presents an interesting variation on a classic feature of satire. Using Lucian and Swift as examples, Griffin notes how "We are actively encouraged not to trust (or to take literally) the speaker in Lucian's *True History* or in Swift's satires. If the satiric 'truth' is not located in a reliable narrator, we as readers must seek it out" (Griffin 41). We might recall the speaker in "A Modest Proposal" and how Swift encourages complete distrust on our part, as the

proposal being offered to us stands in opposition to what most would consider fundamental moral values. In addition to our skepticism towards John the Bokonist as a reliable narrator, the epigraph explicitly tells us that everything in his book is lies. Therefore, our task of seeking out the satiric "truth" seems daunting, if not impossible. However, because this anti-novel requires the reader "to provide both concrete references and to supply meaning", we must place it within other contexts, for example history and literature, in order to find something resembling truth among the lies. First, we know that the historical context of *Cat's Cradle* is the Cold War (more specifically, the Cuban Missile Crisis). And if we once again consider the role Hiroshima plays in the novel, this nuclear crisis becomes our point of reference, our best chance at dismissing the narrative John wants us to accept at face value, and to find some "kernel of truth", as Hume would say.

Vonnegut's unique style also contributes to a satiric distrust, in that we are unable to navigate through the twists and turns that lie ahead. Similar to *The Sirens of Titan*, his use of Which Way Is Up structuring (no defined narrative shape) leads to a work where fortunes cannot be traced in predictable fashion. This becomes most apparent when considering the role of the protagonist, someone we expect to have a concrete goal. The intertextual reference to *Moby Dick* with which the novel opens ("Call me Jonah"), also creates certain expectations in this regard, with its implication that John has his own "white whale" to hunt down. Additionally, there is a reference to the biblical Jonah who becomes trapped *inside* a whale, a character without agency, something which adds layers to the symbolism. In order to understand what this signifies, it's necessary to analyze John as a character.

The reason why *Cat's Cradle* lacks a defined narrative shape is due to his development (or lack thereof), as he's always searching for *something* but incapable of either finding or holding on to that something. "Call me Jonah" might therefore encapsulate the dual nature of the character, both searching for the whale and being trapped inside it. Looking at his quest(s) throughout the novel illustrates how he transitions between agency and non-agency. The initial goal is to write a book on the bombing of Hiroshima, until he abandons this pursuit and travels to San Lorenzo, before abandoning his assignment for a new opportunity that miraculously presents itself, and so on. In this sense, he reminds us of Bokonon, who is said to have "[…] stayed in Newport for a while to see if he had a destiny there. He worked as a gardener and carpenter on the famous Rumfoord estate" (Vonnegut 72) (sidenote: there we have Rumfoord again). In other words, both Bokonon and John are constantly moving around searching for a sense of destiny, no matter how trivial their quests might be. Vonnegut also

exploits the lack of narrative predictability to progress the story through the protagonist's unearned fortunes and misfortunes. For example, without having spoken to one another, Frank Hoenikker asks John to take his place as the next ruler of San Lorenzo, with the only "catch" being that John should marry Mona Monzano, the woman he most desires (134). Likewise, John's misfortunes are the product of chance, most notably when a plane – not only destroys the castle which is about to become his – but causes *ice-nine* to be unleashed upon the world (169-172).

These sudden and unpredictable developments ironically have the effect of making the narrative seem as though it's following a predestined path, something which is further enhanced by John's Bokonist conviction of destiny, best illustrated by the mantra "As it happened […] As it was *supposed* to happen" (58). However, we can be quite certain that Vonnegut wants us to dismiss any such notion of destiny, as *The Sirens of Titan* makes his opinions on such matters quite clear. However, in *Cat's Cradle*, the book becomes a dismissal of destiny in itself. The retroactive incorporation of the aforementioned mantra, and other Bokonist philosophies with regard to events that have already come to pass, leads to a narrative where John applies significance to everything, thereby creating a false sense of purpose and destiny. Unlike the prescient Tralfamadorians who control and predict the future in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle* contains only people, people who are fools to talk about *zah-mah-ki-bo*, about "Fate – inevitable destiny" (122). Considering how, at the end of the novel, the lack of radio broadcasts "[…] to this day" suggest that the last survivors of *ice-nine* are the handful of people left on San Lorenzo (174), John's book becomes contextualized as nothing more than a fool's bible, a note of warning for a world that has already ended. With all this in mind, Hobby notes how "[…] Jonah in the Bible, John/Jonah in his novel about the end of the world, Bokonon in his sacred books, and Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* perform prophetic roles for lost worlds" (Hobby, Bloom 60). Here is another reason why "Call me Jonah" carries such significance. Furthermore, recalling Newt's monologue on the cat's cradle, the story relayed to us by John can be viewed as 127 narrative threads that produce only the illusion of meaning.

The resulting tapestry of lies consists of a number of literary styles, which also makes the novel difficult to label. This is to be expected from Vonnegut, if we remember Schulz's remark that "[his] novels are not organized according to one fictional kind but follow multiple modes, at once novel of manners, confessional journal, science fiction, social satire, detective story, soap opera, and slick magazine tale" (Schulz 15). *Cat's Cradle* is still

somewhat unique in this regard, because it draws on such a number of modes (arguably all those mentioned by Schulz), that no single one appears to be dominant. By comparison, *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* rely on their science fiction elements to such a degree that there would be no plot without them, since they initiate the stories (Rumfoord's use of the *chrono-synclastic infundibulum* and Pilgrim coming unstuck in time). One might say the same about *Cat's Cradle*, considering how *ice-nine* acts as a constant threat that precipitates the end of the world. However, it still has the appearance of being one piece in a greater puzzle, a device that allows other themes and ideas to manifest. This is another reason why *Cat's Cradle* should be viewed as an anti-novel, as the reader must supply references in terms of modality as well. Furthermore, the shifting and interweaving of modes might also be viewed as a form of meaning-making illusion, because while we expect these narrative choices to signify something, Vonnegut ultimately presents us with neither cat nor cradle. The novel opens with investigative journalism, which evolves into a form of detective story that eventually connects to the science-fiction element of *ice-nine*, while observations made in Ilium, on the plane, and on San Lorenzo offer doses of social satire. All this while viewed under the religious lens of Bokonism. In short, *Cat's Cradle* takes the ironic invasion of genre to the extreme. By contrast, Menippean satires tend to rely on a single mode for their ironic subversion. Within the context of social reform, the most interesting aspect of *Cat's Cradle* is Bokonism, because it affects every other element in the novel. When we have better understood the teachings of Bokonon, it will become clear why a Bokonist would view the idea of a normative ethos as *foma*, a "[…] harmless [untruth], intended to comfort simple souls" (Vonnegut 12-13), as it is described in Vonnegut's *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*.

3.3 Deconstructing Bokonism

While the novel is written from a Bokonist perspective, the protagonist's first meeting with the religion is through Philip Castle's book *San Lorenzo: the Land, the History, the People* (Vonnegut 68). In addition to presenting Bokonon's principal ideas, it introduces us to central characters and to the island of San Lorenzo itself. This book serves a clear expository purpose, and the flight that surrounds John's reading of it also provides dialogues that put Bokonist thought into practice. For example, as Hazel Crosby talks to John about Hoosiers (natives of Indiana), we are given examples of the Bokonist terms of *granfalloon* and *karass*. Hazel's belief that Hoosiers share some fundamental bond of kinship and must "stick together" (63), is an example of a *granfalloon*, as it creates a community of people based on false premises. Hazel goes so far as to offer a maternal role to any Hoosier, exemplified by

making John and Newt call her mom (76), despite the fact that John's heritage is that of recently migrated Europeans (51) and that Newt only recently moved to Indiana. She even considers Lincoln to be a Hoosier (62), despite Illinois famously being the Land of Lincoln. This illustrates how selective such communal though can be, suggesting how desperate we are to find a sense of belonging and purpose outside of ourselves, even in communities that do not exist. Other *granfalloons* are said to be "[…] the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, General Electric, […] – and any nation, anytime, anywhere" (63). A *karass*, on the other hand, is a community consisting of people tied to a shared destiny. Therefore, John comes to view the people who share in his fate, like the Hoenikker children, as members of his *karass*. Ironically, religions should also be viewed as examples of granfalloons, making Bokonism a victim of its own teachings. While we find things that appear "true" in Bokonism, so that certain ideas can be read as Vonnegut's intended meaning (the *granfalloon* for example), the point of this religion is ultimately to expose the falsehoods that we are willing to accept, but how those lies will never actually *become* truth, as expressed by the Bokonist paradox of "[…] the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it" (186). With this statement, Bokonism both validates and negates its own teachings.

When John arrives at San Lorenzo, it appears to be a Christian nation, where Bokonists are being persecuted and put to the dreaded *hy-u-o-ook-kuh* (hook). However, Julian Castle reveals to him that "Everybody on San Lorenzo is a devout Bokonist, the *hy-u-o-ook-kuh* notwithstanding" (114). Later, we learn that even "Papa" Monzano is a Bokonist, the one man capable of ending the religious persecution. There is a simple reason why the island nation continues its false war on Bokonism. McCabe, once friend of Bokonon and governor on San Lorenzo, realized that "[…] without the holy man to war against, he himself would become meaningless" (116). Vonnegut thereby uses the microcosm of San Lorenzo to illustrate how the Bokonist paradox of lying about reality works in practice, and how it might have negative effects on our societies. Apart from being a tool to those in power, like McCabe and Monzano, it suggests that our societies find scapegoats, create boogeymen like Bokonon, in order to divert our attention from our true struggles and woes. In other words, that we tell collective lies which are repeated so often that we become unable to recognize their hypocrisy. What was once *foma* turns out not to be so harmless after all. Another example of this is the ceremony of the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy. These "martyrs" were sent by a dictatorship to fight alongside the Allies in a war for democracy but were sunk

right after their departure from San Lorenzo (100). In addition to their name being ironic (and ripe with Black Humor), the ceremony in their honor has cardboard figures of what H. Lowe Crosby describes as "[…] practically every enemy that freedom ever had […]" (152). This includes the late Fidel Castro, while the ceremony is being held at the castle of an island dictator. The entire scene verges on excessive in its ironic undertones. The fact that both the islanders and the American visitors are unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge these ironies, only seeing what they *want* to see, constitutes not only *foma*, but an illusion similar to the cat's cradle.

John's illusion of love towards Mona is another example of *foma*. From a single image of her, he becomes so infatuated that he "[…] might, with equal effect, have [been struck] in the groin" upon learning that Frank Hoenikker is marrying her (77). In my reading of *The Sirens of Titan*, I concluded that love was an important part of the novel's message. However, the love on display in *Cat's Cradle* is superficial, even treated as a form of transaction, serving as yet another example of how a harmless lie might not be so harmless after all. If all objects of desire – even love – can be bought, then consumerism has become the crux of mankind's existence. True love requires something beyond this, beyond the form of lies that "[…] feed the soul's hunger", as Schulz notes on *foma* (Schulz 60). In this regard, John's "appetite" is stirred through mere desire of ownership and his love therefore dismissible as a lie. Furthermore, he can't stand the idea of Mona loving everyone else, in a Bokonist sense, or engaging in the ritual of *Boko-maru* with other men (Vonnegut 137), suggesting that John merely seeks control over someone/something he finds valuable in its beauty, while in truth having as much in common with Mona as she has with Frank. A contrast to this can be found in Malachi Constant's realization at the end of *The Sirens of Titan*, that "[…] a purpose of human life […] is to love whoever is around to be loved" (Vonnegut *Novels & Stories 1950-1962* 528). It takes Constant a lifetime to reach this simple conclusion. In this context we see that love offers purity and simplicity, something inherently *good*, in a postmodern world where things of such qualities seem hard to find. In *Cat's Cradle*, love is corrupted and stripped of its appeal, best illustrated when John forces himself upon Mona (though calling it lovemaking), and afterward notes that "[…] I was both repulsive and repulsed" (175).

A symbolic feature of Bokonism is the Calypso. In terms of intertextuality, this is both a West Indian form of music and the nymph that held Odysseus captured on the island of Ogygia in *The Odyssey*, which is fitting, as John becomes trapped on San Lorenzo. By drawing this comparison to a classic questing hero like Odysseus, the postmodern subversion

of the hero figure is complete, as we struggle to find any other parallels between Homer's character and John. The Calypsos themselves are simple, cynical songs that John wants to convince us contain deep meaning. This is another trick Bokonism is able to pull by the use of subversion. For example, "If you want to study a *granfalloon*, just remove the skin of a toy balloon" (63), illustrates the childlike simplicity of the Calypso, while it somehow gives the impression that the message is profound. In questioning its own validity, Bokonism mimics what Mellard noted on degenerative satire, in that it "[…] suspects all ways of making meaning, including its own" (Weisenburger, Mellard 3). Considering how Bokonism questions its own truth, is aware of being both *foma* and *granfalloon*, it invites us to look at all things with similar skepticism. For example, the purpose of my readings is to see whether Vonnegut presents us with any prospects towards social reform. One could argue that such prospects require a normative ethos as foundation, as common ground upon which satires can speak their "truth" and thereby improve our societies. Therefore, it is disheartening to realize that anything recognized as a normative ethos should be viewed as *foma*, a harmless lie that makes us believe we have reached common ground, found something universal and constant. If the world of ideas contains nothing but lies, only the physical world presents "truth", in the sense that it follows the laws of nature. However, *Cat's Cradle* questions even such material truth.

3.4 Deconstructing Science

It's with Bokonism in mind that we're meant to approach the novel's scientific element, the novum of *ice-nine*, described at the beginning of my thesis. Similar to how it addresses the falsities of belief systems, Bokonism inadvertently explains the science which produces tools of destruction like *ice-nine* and the atom bomb as well. While conflicts between *granfalloons* based on nationality and ideology give birth to such weapons, *Cat's Cradle* has the father of both be a man detached from any community, even that of his own family. This gives him the appearance of being the closest thing we come to an antagonist (except maybe for "Papa" Monzano). However, in classic Vonnegut fashion, Felix Hoenikker is made out to be neither a selfish nor evil man. He is a man of pure science, compelled to discover solutions to scientific problems and inquiries not matter what forms they take. His nature is best illustrated through Angela's retelling of the time he abandoned the Manhattan project in order to figure out whether turtles buckle or retract their spines when pulling in their heads (14). What this suggests is that, on his own, Hoenikker would pose no threat to the world. Only when *granfalloons* like the U.S. Army approach him with short-sighted solutions to military

problems, does his science produce anything dangerous. Similar to *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is not so much the individuals (like Hoenikker) who come under scrutiny, but rather, the collective mindsets that go unquestioned in their strives for progress and "greatness". In this case, both the scientific and military establishments are only willing to see the benefits of new weapons/devices (again, only seeing what they *want* to see) and not the potential danger of such developments. Although they share certain themes, a crucial difference between *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, is that Bokonism provides us with terminology to better understand Vonnegut's thoughts surrounding the relationships between individuals and such *granfalloons*.

John begins his inquiry into Hoenikker while researching his book on the bombing of Hiroshima and ends up finding his *karass* through the *wampeter* that is *ice-nine*, meaning "[…] an object around which the lives of otherwise unrelated people may revolve. The Holy Grail [being] a case in point" (Vonnegut *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons* 12). In this way, his Bokonist faith tells him that he shares a deep connection with the Hoenikkers. However, it is evident that *ice-nine* shouldn't exist, no matter how convinced John might be about *zah-mah-ki-bo*, about inevitable destiny. During the conversation between him and Dr. Breed, it does not take long before a description of the substance's function leads to the realization of its full destructive potential, that *all* bodies of water will be contaminated by *ice-nine* (36). This is an obvious criticism of science; in that it addresses how scientists produce genies that cannot be put back in their bottles. Applying the same logic to the atom bomb, we might question the worth of creating such a weapon to win a single war, when at the time of the novel's writing, that same weapon was threatening the entire world. In fact, it seems as though this particular genie will remain a threat for all foreseeable future. Furthermore, this form of atomic/molecular science creates an uneasiness towards our objective reality. As Schulz notes, "*Cat's Cradle* forces [the man on the street] to face up to the radical instability of a world in which even the molecular structure of matter is potentially inconstant" (Schulz 57). Therefore, it addresses not only the lies of belief systems through Bokonism, but the lack of "truth" in physics through its exploration of science as well. Having now discussed the roles of science and religion in *Cat's Cradle*, we might consider how the two tie together so as to provide a coherent message, a single satiric truth. Schulz makes this observation,

> The entire novel in a sense is a parody of "The Books of Bokonon," its short, page-length chapters, although not rendered in Bokonon's Calypso jingles, aping their quizzical cynicism – which further cautions about accepting the narrative at face

> value. The skepticism of *Cat's Cradle* calls into question even physical substance, the basic stuff of reality, which ordinarily represents for us the last word in stability. Dr. Hoenikker's discovery of *ice-nine*, which stacks and locks the atoms of liquid in a different, orderly way, so that water is frozen into a new rigid form, assumes that the molecular arrangement of matter, as we know it, is not pre-emptive of other possible arrangements (Schulz 56-57).

This builds upon the idea presented in *The Sirens of Titan*, where Vonnegut suggests that mankind's outward expansion (developing technology, exploring space, etc.) is an attempt at understanding "[…] what all creation [is] all about" (Vonnegut *Novels & Stories 1950-1962* 313). As we can see from Schulz assessment, these attempts at understanding creation through religion and science might not only prove unfruitful, but indeed harmful to both moral and physical "truth". If everything has the potential of being a lie then we are truly living in a postmodern world.

3.5 Reformative Mission

To reach some form of conclusion surrounding *Cat's Cradle*'s reformative function, the simple answer would be that there is none. The skepticism towards meaning-making systems might even leave the reader less hopeful with regard to social change, as it convinces us that the forms of normative ethos and common sense which generative satires build upon are nothing but *foma*. However, Vonnegut provides arguments that cut through such potential lies, that appeal not to the simple dichotomies of good/bad, right/wrong, or smart/dumb, but instead show how lies can be valuable in moderation, how people might turn themselves – or be made into – villains in the hope of achieving something good (as in the example given by Bokonon and McCabe). Indeed, Vonnegut seems to be saying that the world should not be viewed in black and white. Furthermore, his satire once again provides a wildly creative way to illustrate how humanity's thirst for knowledge and understanding can lead to a self-negating end, to the *loss* of understanding. I leave *Cat's Cradle* with this observation by Hobby, "[…] Vonnegut often touches upon the limits of reason, the illusion of progress, the horrors of war, the absurdity of nuclear proliferation, the reality of class difference, the construct of race, and the need for human beings to erect meaning-making systems, such as the facetious religion of Bokonon in *Cat's Cradle*" (Hobby, Bloom 58).

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

> "Why me?" "That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? […] Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*" (Vonnegut *Novels & Stories 1963-1973* 396).

After this introduction to Tralfamadorian existentialism, Billy Pilgrim is anesthetized, before regaining consciousness as a soldier of the American army in a boxcar crossing Germany. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut's most celebrated work, is based on his own experiences as a P.O.W. in a Dresden slaughterhouse during the Second World War. A city without strategic value, Dresden was nonetheless destroyed by Allied bombing towards the end of the war, a decision Vonnegut struggled to understand. While the estimated casualties ranged between 35.000-130.000 at the time, a German commission have now placed the number at around 25.000 (SNL). Although *Slaughterhouse* is written under the false assumption that the bombing was the deadliest of the war, it is ultimately a small comfort to the American soldiers who had to dig bodies out from the rubble. Even less so to the civilians who perished. So it goes. While centering around Vonnegut's memories of the war, the novel is also about time travel, alien philosophies, and the inevitability of all things. The biblical-sounding opening line of the second chapter, "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time" (Vonnegut 360), prepares us for the protagonist's journey, in which he no longer experiences moments in chronological order. Instead, he jumps between moments in his past, present, and future, resulting in a disjointed narrative that makes about as much sense as the bombing of Dresden.

4.1 Deconstructing the Anti-War Novel

Considering how *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war novel, as is made clear in its opening chapter, the existential dilemma posed by Pilgrim might be viewed as a degenerative argument against the perceived inevitability of war. Inevitability is a key word in this context, because it is the thing that prompts Vonnegut to approach the issue in the way he does. Once when discussing the anti-war message of his novel, he was confronted with the argument that one might "[…] write an anti-*glacier* book instead", suggesting that "[…] there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers […]", to which he notes "I believe that too" (Vonnegut 346). So how does Vonnegut challenge the enterprise of war, when he admits that

such an opposition is a lost cause in the context of societal reform? And what are the functions of Billy Pilgrim and the Tralfamadorians with regard *to* the anti-war message?

First, I wish to examine the novel's structure, or un-structuring, and what that might signify. In terms of form, it once again illustrates Vonnegut's principles of Which Way Is Up, where the upheaval of time provides little chance for the reader to predict narrative developments. The only opportunities given in this regard are when events are relayed in advance. For example, Pilgrim boards a plane "[knowing] it was going to crash, but he didn't want to make a fool of himself by saying so" (449). Here, we can also see how the protagonist is turned into the now familiar "victim of events", rather than a character with agency, as Pilgrim transitions between different moments in his life, unable (or unwilling) to change their outcomes. We return to the actual plane crash later in the novel, and other events unfold in the same way, while all we can do is wait for them to happen, knowing that he will not do anything to change their outcomes. In addition to offering us a certain degree of predictability in an otherwise unpredictable narrative, *Bloom's Guides: Slaughterhouse-Five* points out that "Making events familiar before they are fully narrated reflects […] the time sense of the novel. Everything that happens has happened already and will happen again and again" (Bloom 25). However, rather than thinking about a loop where events keep recurring, it is better to compare the narrative to the "[…] rarefied luminous spaghetti" (Vonnegut 403) that the Tralfamadorians see when they look at the stars, the astral trajectories visible and all their moments accessible. Pilgrim's life might also be viewed as a string of spaghetti (albeit a much shorter one), where the *now* occurs anywhere along its length. In the context of Vonnegut's war experience, we are made to wonder how existence would seem to us if, at any moment, we were forced to relive our most traumatic experiences. And what if we were powerless to alter anything along that string of spaghetti?

Pilgrim's capture by the Germans, and subsequent exposure to the human extremes of war, become the reference points to which his leaps in time and space are measured. Formulations like "[…] the steel spaghetti of the railroad yard" (446) show how Tralfamadorian principles manifest on Earth, as Pilgrim is sent backwards and forwards in time, while events linked to the train bound for Dresden follow a chronological ordering that makes it seem as inevitable as the path of a star. After being captured by the Tralfamadorians (395), they explain to Pilgrim how everything appears inevitable to them, that "All time is all time" and "[…] does not change" (402). Pilgrim adopts this worldview and later preaches the Tralfamadorian gospel on Earth. Passing through the moments of his existence as a prisoner of armies, of

aliens, and of time itself, he presents us with a dilemma between complacency- and dissatisfaction about the world or, rather, whether our response to a seemingly indifferent universe should *be* indifference. This is a coping mechanism that Vonnegut creates, but also seems to dissuade us from adopting ourselves.

4.2 Juxtaposition and Intertextuality

Listen: if we buy into the Tralfamadorian perspective of trading *why* with *what* (as explained in the chapter on *The Sirens of Titan*), then Dresden, and all instances of mass-death, might be viewed as inevitable. This acceptance, this abandonment of why, provides a way to deal with their senselessness and horror. Otherwise, we are forced to keep asking why, and pose other questions that might seem pointless to a species like the Tralfamadorians. However, there are instances where humanity also seems only to think about *what* and not about *why*, as when Lance Rumfoord describes the Dresden bombing as something that "[…] *had* to be done" (Vonnegut 478). Quite the Tralfamadorian sentiment. One can argue that Vonnegut relies on a normative ethos in this sense, as he expects us to feel a natural resistance to such sentiments. The "why me?" from the opening quote of this chapter, appears to us a valid question when considering Pilgrim's predicament (396). It's also the question asked by an American soldier beaten by a German guard, who then answers "Vy you? Vy anybody?" (406). Such episodes put Tralfamadorian thinking into human practice. This is important because, like the symbolic relationship between the luminous spaghetti of the stars and the steel spaghetti of the railroad yard, the repetition of "why me" serves as a form of juxtaposition that connects Tralfamadore and Earth. Furthermore, it contextualizes and organizes an otherwise unorganized narrative. Although it would certainly be interesting to connect all such juxtaposed elements, it would also require an entire chapter of its own. Suffice to say that it's not only Vonnegut's wording that provides the intertextual glue of the story, but rather "[the] way one vignette, one image, one nugget of the story reflects, connects to, and is played of the others [that] enhances the meaning, depth, and dimension of each element" (Bloom 35). In other words, the absence of a linear narrative and a lack of action means that it's the way different sections relate back (or forward) to each other that provide a sense of progression and meaning in *Slaughterhouse*. Furthermore, it allows Tralfamadore to influence the way we perceive the war.

Touching upon intertextuality, *Slaughterhouse* includes numerous references to other works by Vonnegut, something which serves as part of his display and play. Names like Rumfoord,

Rosewater, Campbell, and Trout, are familiar to those who have read his earlier works. Rumfoord, who writes a one volume history of the U.S.A.A.F. is, similar to his namesake in *The Sirens of Titan*, a millionaire concerned with controlling the narrative. The protagonist of *Mother Night*, Howard J. Campbell, Jr also makes an appearance (431). Having read this novel adds layers of symbolism to an otherwise villainous character. Eliot Rosewater, the man who introduces Pilgrim to science-fiction, and the protagonist of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, is himself traumatized by the war after killing three German firefighters, mistaking them for Nazi soldiers. Pilgrim and Rosewater are similar for several reasons. For one thing, they are both "[…] gentle despite pressure to be competitive and cruel" (Giannone, Bloom 65). Furthermore, they feel a need to reinvent themselves as a response to the harrowing experience of war, the difference being that Rosewater appears to atone for his *own* actions, seen in his absolute reverence for firefighters.

On a bit of a sidenote, it is interesting that both *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* include the image of a bird asking "Poo-tee-weet?" in their final chapters (Vonnegut 336 & 490). Furthermore, this question appears when *ice-nine* is unleashed in *Cat's Cradle* (171). In *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties*, Olderman notes that "[…] poo-tee-weet represents a 'cosmic cool', a way of viewing life with the distance necessary to cope with the horrors that both [Pilgrim and Rosewater] experience" (Olderman 43). This "cosmic cool" might be seen as an idea that grows stronger through Vonnegut's repetition of theme, by intertextual reference to his own works. It is especially important in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as the first chapter explicitly tells us that the novel ends with a bird saying "Poo-tee-weet?" (Vonnegut 359). Furthermore, I view it is an empty question posed at indescribable moments where human words do not suffice, leaving us to interpret it in a number of ways. In addition to creating a certain distance in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I believe it takes the unfathomable nature of Dresden (and perhaps the novel itself) and reduces it to a simple "what happened here?", or "what does this mean?".

4.3 There Is No *Why*

Continuing with Tralfamadorian logic, the *what* that replaces the *why* constitutes much of the humor in the novel, as Pilgrim is unable to understand the simplest things when they're taken at face value. For example, when Wild Bob asks him if he's "[…] from the Four-fifty-first", Billy replies with "Four-fifty-first what?" (389), unable to make the connection between the question and the situation he's in, because there's no *why* to provide a reason for it being

asked. In addition to such logical/semantic issues, his responses of "oh" and "um" when his own questions are answered, similarly reveal a desire for knowing only *what* is being talked about and not *why* it's being talked about. The humor appears banal, because it revolves around Pilgrim's inability – both to understand and to *be* understood – effectively making him look like an idiot. However, we come to understand that he might be the sanest and most sensible person in the novel. Contrasting him with his fellow soldiers, he has neither the glorified view of war that Weary has, the sadism and vengefulness of Lazaro, nor the need for dignity displayed by Darby. These characters can be seen as representing different aspects of war, both valiant and vicious, and create their own narratives based on what they romanticize, while Pilgrim is a complete blank with regard to such narratives. He thereby becomes the true face of war in Vonnegut's eyes – not big, brutal, and brave – but weak, wimpy and wretched.

While we take pity on Pilgrim, we are also provoked by his unwillingness to oppose the forces that rob him of freedom. Here we might find black humor in the way our protagonist is portrayed. Like Malachi Constant, he is a distortion of the hero figure in that he never acts – or is *allowed* to act – according to meaningful, transformative narratives. This is also a feature of postmodernism, where characters find themselves at the mercy of an unpredictable universe, forced to adjust according to unfamiliar rules and realities. One might draw comparisons to more traditional literature as well. Similar to the biblical Jonah, both Pilgrim and Constant become trapped, and their prospects of freedom rest in the hands of the exterior force(s) that ensnared them. It is tempting to also include John from *Cat's Cradle* in this analogy ("call me Jonah" (5)), but he's not a prisoner in the same sense, as his Bokonist conviction of fate is a prison of his own making. The key difference here is whether there are forces present that keep the characters – or even humanity itself – prisoner in some form of scheme, such as in the case of God trapping Jonah in the whale until he complies with the holy order given to him. Despite the characters' lack of agency, it is through them alone that we find some hope for development and, ultimately, resolve within the narratives. There are only two alternatives in this regard; either they are provided with an escape from their respective whales, or they learn to accept their captivity and find ways to keep on living. In the case of Pilgrim, we find acceptance almost at once, because his coming unstuck in time creates an alternative reality that enables him to make sense of the bombing of Dresden, to process an experience that cannot otherwise be understood, as it defies the earthling logic under which it operates.

4.4 Distance and Closeness

In author Kevin Powers's foreword to the Kindle edition of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he proposes that the novel "[…] has few if any equals in creating the kind of distance that can offer insight into the mass insanity of modern warfare" (Powers, Vonnegut 9). One can argue that it's primarily through Pilgrim's experience of time that this distance is created. However, he also acts as a bridge between the Tralfamadorian perception of the universe and ours, as he experiences being "trapped in amber" as they do, while remaining committed to his work and the mundane tasks of modern life. Interestingly, Pilgrim is an optometrist (his work consists of providing people with corrective lenses), suggesting that his character is meant to correct our vision in a more metaphorical sense. In addition to distance, one should also consider the closeness of the novel, offered by Vonnegut's personal experiences, which we are reminded of when he notes "That was me. That was the author of this book" (Vonnegut 430), or "That was I" (445). This "forced" realism is unusual for a satire but can be viewed as a literary device for making us question what's real and what's not and, by extension, what is sensible and absurd. It's with the lenses he offers through Pilgrim that the strangeness of reality is exposed, as war makes more sense to him (and the Tralfamadorians) than to any other human character, despite the fact that he is the only one who does not attach any significance to it.

There are other aspects to Pilgrim that make him interesting, both as a satiric humor individual and as a response to a disillusioned postwar world. In his *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*, Schulz proposes that a character like Pilgrim offers an alternative to meaning-making systems of the past, arguing that "[if] traditional cultural systems have lost their perspicuity, what does man do for a sense of purpose in life? If he is a Vonnegut, […] he does like Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim, he re-invents himself and his universe" (Schulz 51). Here, Schulz alludes to the scene where Rosewater and Pilgrim are hospitalized and it is remarked that, in their attempt to reinvent themselves, "Science-fiction was a big help" (Vonnegut 412). The science fiction in question is the work of Kilgore Trout, whose novels depict scenarios that are suspiciously similar to Pilgrim's own experiences. This calls the legitimacy of Pilgrim's narrative into question and suggests that his coming unstuck in time, the planet Tralfamadore, and his prophecies, are all the ramblings of a madman. However, as he hallucinates about ice skating while dying in the snows of Luxembourg, it is remarked that "This wasn't time-travel. It had never happened, never would happen" (377), something which suggests that Pilgrim *is* sane, although there is no way to confirm this, as he commits himself to the hospital on grounds of being insane (412).

Regardless, Pilgrim's reinvention is aided by science fiction and, while *Slaughterhouse-Five* doesn't operate with clear beginnings or ends, the hospital sequence is a point where fantasy and reality become somewhat distinct from each other, because we're told that *fiction* becomes a way for Pilgrim to deal with *fact*. By reinventing himself in order to make sense of the universe, he becomes a form of humor individual in response to a humor society or, rather, to a society where he can no longer *be* a normal individual. Perhaps this is also how Vonnegut felt after the war. Pilgrim's sense of purpose becomes an intrinsic part of the new certainty surrounding – what used to be an uncertain – future. In other words, his response to a violent and chaotic world is a complete surrender, where he might believe that there is order to the chaos.

The recurring phrase "so it goes" becomes the mantra for this surrender, taking on a sacral quality as it "[…] follows every account of a death the way "Amen" follows every blessing uttered during a religious service" (Bloom 25). This strikes us as a dismissive and provocative response to death, considering how most of us are familiar with loss and are therefore unable to view death without emotional investment. In the context of war, where death becomes statistic, "so it goes" implies that the countless lives lost will- and were always going to *be* lost. This means that future wars could be viewed in the same detached, prophetic way as the holy text that it ironically draws inspiration from. While the Tralfamadorians have their perception of time, making this outlook on death appear beautiful (everything that dies remains alive in certain moments on the spaghetti string), it ultimately loses its beauty when Pilgrim applies it, because life is turned into a trivial thing. As a satiric device, this generates provocation by the implied expectation that we remain unprovoked. When all events lose their significance, lose their connection to anything else, even the "luminous spaghetti" of the Tralfamadorians comes undone and is reduced to fragments. Be it a weakness or a strength, humanity cannot operate, cannot function, under such a nihilistic worldview. The aliens consider it sufficient that we "focus on the good moments" (Vonnegut), which adds to the provocation. With such a view, the bad moments will keep happening, might even threaten to

In this provocation I also identify an unspoken argument that, because we cannot see the future, we must choose to believe that every moment presents possibilities for the living, especially to prevent the kind of meaningless death that war presents.

4.5 Generative or Degenerative?

The clearest aspect of the novel's degenerative satire stems from the relationship between its historical source material and its fiction, combined with Vonnegut's admission that his anti-war novel is as purposeful as an anti-glacier book. This combination creates a tension that remains unresolved, even when we understand how Pilgrim's need to reinvent himself relates to the bombing of Dresden. However, the novel also appears generative, with its strong arguments for choosing possibility over certainty. For example, when Pilgrim is aboard the plane that he knows will crash, it's remarked that "[…] the moment was structured that way" (Vonnegut 449), juxtaposing the conversation with the Tralfamadorian who tells him about the inevitable end of the universe at the hands of a Tralfamadorian pilot (423). This shows how detached Pilgrim is from the human experience and how he is as likely to be anti-peace as he is to be anti-war. Anti-*war*? anti-*glacier*? Anti-*end of the universe*? Why anti-*anything*? Furthermore, we might draw a parallel between Pilgrim's absolute willingness to walk into certain disaster, and the individuals who are sent to certain death, because they inhabit a world in which war is not only seen as inevitable, but where it's romanticized and glamorized. So it goes.

Returning to Powers's remark on *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s ability to create distance, I wish to make a comparison to Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), as these works appear to share similar ambitions. Both novels present a provocative concept or, the introduction to a new system of thought, which we must temporarily accept for the narratives to make sense, with the effect of making us see war in a new light. While we understand that the applications of these systems are the driving forces within the narratives, we come to reject these systems because we understand that they don't serve humanity's best interests. However, in both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22*, there is a certain recognition that war requires the abandonment of any normative ethos (or ethics at the very least) under which people would *normally* operate, which causes difficulty regarding satires mission of serving a reformative function. In other words, because it's inherent that war requires unpeaceful and often immoral actions, generative arguments based on reason and morality are impossible, because such arguments necessarily call for ordinary attitudes under extraordinary circumstance. Therefore, it becomes more purposeful to craft extraordinary attitudes like Vonnegut and Heller do, turning towards degenerative arguments when addressing war in a postwar era.

Heller uses the unsolvable paradox of *Catch-22* to emphasize the relationship between sanity and insanity in times of war. Vonnegut uses the Tralfamadorian view of everything being inevitable to achieve a similar relationship between order and chaos. In neither case can the apparent opposites be separated so as to form satisfying dichotomies. If the pilots of *Catch-22* plead insane to avoid flying, they are considered sane for wanting to stop and must therefore continue flying. The nature of this paradox is expanded upon by Orr. He imagines seeing flies in Appleby's eyes and when Yossarian asks why Appleby can't see them, Orr replies "How can he see he's got flies in his eyes when he's got flies in his eyes?" (Heller 46). This illustrates how Catch-22 serves to validate views no matter how absurd they seem. When Billy Pilgrim accepts the order of all things, it's to cope with the chaos that surrounds him, thereby seeing the chaos of war as inevitable (orderly). Similar to how Orr is able to make perfect sense of Appleby's inability to see the flies in his eyes, so Pilgrim has no problem with viewing a paradox – not as a problem – but as a solution. However, both novels are of course unable to resolve their "conflicts", instead offering false arguments that are presented as fundamental truths (one is reminded of Bokonism). In a satiric sense, our unwillingness to accept the arguments being presented, results in an opposition against the thing they attempt to validate (one is reminded of "A Modest Proposal"). Our best hope is to face these upheavals of reason with great skepticism, and this is the primary reason why the novels should be viewed as degenerative.

Unlike satires of the past, where the exposure of folly and vice within the framework of a normative ethos allowed for a collective potential to solve societal issues, postmodern, degenerative satires like *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be seen as rejecting such moral certainty in favor of addressing uncertainty. To explain the purpose of this, it is necessary to understand the fundamental philosophies of satirists like Vonnegut. While we must be careful in distinguishing between Black Humorists and satirists, there are some interesting observations regarding the former that also concern the latter, and which become useful within this context. Paraphrasing the scholar Robert Scholes, Schulz remarks that the black humorist "[…] is not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it" (Schulz 12). He proceeds to use Vonnegut as an example when describing the method and mission of the Black Humorist, noting that "[…] he does not ordinarily urge choice on us. He seeks rather a comedic perspective on both tragic fact and moralistic certitude. In extreme instances, for example some of Kurt Vonnegut's writings, this attitude of mind will lead to the novel's refusal to take its implied moral position seriously" (13). While Schulz speaks about

Vonnegut as Black Humorist, not as satirist, in this context, he still addresses the degenerative aspect of his satire, thereby providing an interesting perspective on how to view his moral position.

For example, considering how we are unable to take the character of Pilgrim seriously, despite the seriousness of the situations he falls victim to, why should we be expected to take his moral position seriously either? Although he embodies the sentiment of not being "concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it", it is difficult to know which aspects of the character constitute the novel's "truth", when the ironic tone makes it difficult to discern literal meaning from intended meaning. This is another reason why *Slaughterhouse-Five* might be viewed as a degenerative satire. However, in *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, Weisenburger describes *Slaughterhouse-Five* as "[…] a conventionally didactic satire […]" that "[…] lacks the courage to explore its degenerative, negative satire" (Weisenburger 178). When comparing the works of Vonnegut and Heller, he suggests that both novels balance between different modes of expressions, but whereas "[…] *Catch-22* wavers between the conflicting demands of comedy and satire […] *Slaughterhouse-Five* [wavers] between those of generative and degenerative satire" (178). This supposed wavering can be seen as a conflict between the clear mission of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as presented in the opening chapter, where Vonnegut clearly states that we are reading an anti-war novel, and the degenerative nature of the universe he subsequently presents us with. While I agree that there is an imbalance between the novel's clear moral mission and the apparent lack of a normative ethos throughout the narrative, I believe the need to defamiliarize the familiar validates such wavering, because there is necessarily going to be an impossible balance to strike between fact and fiction, certainty and incertitude.

Comparing *Slaughterhouse-Five* with *Catch-22* means looking at two works from the same decade that deal with the same subject matter. In other words, there is necessarily going to be similarities between them. Therefore, it might be equally useful to compare *Slaughterhouse-Five* with an earlier, more distinctly generative satire, like *Gulliver's Travels*. First, we might recognize that both novels create estrangement through fantasy but that they achieve different effects by doing so. Where Swift creates the state of Lilliput in order to accentuate and ridicule practices of the British government in the 18th century, Vonnegut creates the planet of Tralfamadore in order to legitimize every act that humanity has ever committed. On the basis of my own analysis, I suggest that this is done in an ironic way, in order to *delegitimize*

and ridicule these sentiments when they are expressed by actual people. Both these fictional places serve as distancing tools, but while there is a direct connection between Lilliput and the British government, Tralfamadore does not represent any state, but rather a state of mind. Furthermore, I wish to entertain the thought of how this would appear through the lens of New Comedy. While Swift attempts to expose folly and vice by having a normal individual operating under a normative ethos (Gulliver) be rescued from a humor society (Lilliput), Vonnegut has his humor society (Tralfamadore) effectively turn its normal individual (Pilgrim) *into* a humor individual. From this simple comparison, we can see how Swift relies on a normative ethos in order to construct an argument based on what he believes to be the readers' shared views on morality (and common sense), and their inability to find these views met in Lilliput (ergo, Gulliver must save himself from it), while the lack of a normative ethos in Vonnegut's writing means that we approach every view we are introduced to with skepticism. We trust neither Pilgrim, the Tralfamadorians, nor any other characters to provide us with moral or existential truth.

4.6 Reformative Mission

Compared to *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has greater reformative potential because, where the degenerative aspects of the former two rely on creating *granfalloons* in order to dismantle belief systems (cultural, religious, etc.), the latter creates a belief system that enables us to view our past, presence, and future in a new light. This means that, while the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent and Bokonism are meant to expose the pitfalls of meaningless ideas and practices under collective meaning-making systems, "Tralfamadorian metaphysics offers the readjustment of perception necessitated by the reality of Dresden to keep a kind of sanity through madness" (Bloom 31). It therefore becomes a lens for seeing truth, in this case that war is madness because the only perception that makes it seem sane is itself *insane* (which is why Pilgrim's mental state is called into question throughout the novel), rather than acting as a tool for exposing the lies of similar philosophies. This is not to say that *Slaughterhouse-Five* necessarily constitutes a stronger satire than Vonnegut's other works, but that it is more accessible in terms of uncovering its messages, even though the reformative function seems equally elusive to that of *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle.*

CONCLUSION

Having now analyzed my selection of Vonnegut's novels, it is time to further discuss and summarize how they compare. First, I wish to look at the purely structural aspects of form (narrative shape) and modality, where there are some striking, though not altogether surprising, similarities. As I first mentioned in the chapter on *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut is interested in the narrative shape he calls Which Way Is Up, largely due to its perceived trueness to life (Eilam, Vonnegut). Although he considers Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to be the classic example of this shape, Which Way Is Up presents features that are more commonly found in postmodernism, the Theatre of the Absurd, and in Black Humor. This narrative shape is characterized by ambiguity, in terms of whether narrative developments are good or bad. Oftentimes, this leads to an apparent lack of direction, as characters strive towards an understanding or acceptance of their situations, rather than try to obtain some tangible thing throughout a neatly structured narrative. As a result of this, the (oftentimes two-dimensional) protagonists we are used to are no longer to be found. Be it an Odysseus, a Cinderella, or even a Gatsby, these characters represent values that are supposed to be perceived as inherently good (courage, strength, kindness, dedication, perseverance, etc.), while Which Way Is Up have us questioning the protagonist's values. To use the classic, Shakespearean example Vonnegut mentions, we quickly get a sense of what this means. Hamlet is given his vengeful quest by a ghost and, while we cannot know if the ghost is good or bad, it certainly does not act in the young prince's best interest. The fixation on revenge gradually drives Hamlet mad and what began as a matter of honor and justice (what we consider the products of good values) devolves into murder and bloodshed. Consequently, *Hamlet* becomes a cautionary tale of virtue devolving into vice, rather than one about a morally incorruptible individual persevering in the face of adversity. Interestingly, we might therefore note that vice can be the product of a normative ethos as well. With this in mind, I return to Vonnegut, who uses Which Way Is Up in all of his novels, not just the ones that I have discussed in detail. For example, Rosewater and Campbell Jr. share the ambiguity of characters like Constant, John, and Pilgrim. Despite their immoral behavior (rape, murder, war crimes, etc.) their tragic fates still seem unearned, as though they are never given the opportunity to repent or reform. Perhaps this is to be read as a plea for compassion towards the sinners of the world on our part?

To reiterate the key features of Vonnegut's narrative shape, the novels are all ambiguous about positive and negative developments, our protagonists are not questing heroes working towards some final goal, but despite this they stand to gain or lose "everything" in the blink of an eye. Let us observe the narrative developments in a simplified way. Malachi Constant is reduced from carefree billionaire to soldier from one page to the next, John is unexpectedly given San Lorenzo and Mona but loses both as suddenly as he obtains them, in what has the appearance of a parody on the fairytale ending (losing the princess and the kingdom), while Billy Pilgrim might in one moment be experiencing his honeymoon and be exhibited at a zoo on Tralfamadore in the next. Furthermore, pilgrim is simply indifferent to both the positive and negative events unfolding in his life, no matter how extreme they are.

Each of the protagonists' narratives explore destiny in some form, be it through the schemes of the Tralfamadorians, *zah-mah-ki-bo*, or by coming unstuck in time. We are forced to play along with the idea that everything happens for a reason, as this is crucial to the narrative structures themselves. By extension, the distortion of time can be viewed as an element Vonnegut relies upon to break up narrative linearity (another feature of Which Way Is Up), but also as a strong thematic device upon which his philosophies might be given complete freedom. To reiterate a crucial remark by Schulz "[The Black Humor protagonist] is at once observer of, and participant in, the drama of dissidence, detached from and yet affected by what happens around him" (Schulz 12). This is an accurate description of the protagonists in all three novels, the force they become enveloped in (as both observants and participants) being inevitable destiny. In this sense, *The Sirens of Titan*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* share principle ideas in terms of both form and theme.

Despite these similarities, the novels still appear unique. Aside from the creative variety displayed in the stories themselves, Vonnegut's play with genre and mode offers different explorations of the novel as literary form. Here I return to the features that make Hobby consider *Cat's Cradle* an anti-novel, namely that it is "[…] bizarre and absurd and relies on the reader to provide both concrete references and to supply meaning" (Hobby, Bloom 61). These features are, of course, also present in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, although these novels are not quite as freewheeling as *Cat's Cradle* in terms of modality, nor quite as open-ended in their conclusions. However, the reader is still required to provide references and supply meaning in all of these novels. For example, without knowledge about the Space Race of the late 50s to mid-70s, certain messages in *The Sirens of Titan* would be lost to the reader. Similarly, The Second World War forms the basis for Vonnegut's critique

of war in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while Hiroshima, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Cold War are central to understanding *Cat's Cradle*. In other words, references to specific events form the basis for his satires. Therefore, one might argue that Vonnegut's works do not share that universal quality found in the "pure" fantasies of satiric novels like *Gulliver's Travels*, or *Animal Farm*, who estrange their worlds to a point where the issues of their contemporary periods are revealed *through* fantasy (Lilliput symbolizing Britain, the animals of Animal Farm serving to illustrate the rise of communism following the Russian Revolution) resulting in a form of fairytale timelessness. However, I would argue that the science-fiction Vonnegut employs achieves a similar effect. Although these elements affect what seems to be the familiar world of the 40s, 50s, or 60s, their implications in human affairs are usually so beyond what is familiar to us (alien planets controlling humanity, the upheaval of time, etc.) that it is like stepping into another dimension. Indeed, Vonnegut's use of intertextual elements (most notably Ilium, the Troy of suburban America) remind us that his are alternate versions of Earth, their fates imploring us to do better with the one Earth we actually have. It does not get more universal than this.

Equally important in understanding why Vonnegut's works are anti-novels, is to consider satire's relationship with the traditional novel. Hodgart makes this distinction between the mission of the satirist and the novelist, noting that "Whereas the novelist aims at understanding the complexities of life, satire aims at simplification, at a pretense of misunderstanding and at denunciation" (Hodgart 214). On the basis of this observation, we see that the anti-novel as literary format, and satire as mode, share the trait of being unconcerned with presenting "truth". Therefore, we gain further understanding with regard to Vonnegut's apparent lack of any reformative mission. Despite being a Black Humorist, he cannot so easily be dismissed as not having such a mission, but rather that his intended meanings tend to evade us through estrangement on multiple levels. Vonnegut's does not aim for an understanding of life's complexities (he even views humanity's search for purpose as a vice). Instead, he highlights the grave mistakes we continue to make in our search *for* understanding, unwilling to accept our existence on Earth for what it is (we must push ever onward by exploring space, advancing our science, etc.), and at the same time believing that human nature itself cannot change, exemplified by the recurring idea that everything happens for a reason and the resulting (ironic) sentiment that we therefore should not even bother trying to change for the better. Indeed, what can the modern satirist hope to achieve but to

quite casually point at the misery, death, and destruction resulting from such folly (imagined or otherwise) and act as though nothing of significance has happened.

We expect the postmodern satirists to work under no pretention of a normative ethos, their artistic ambitions resisting such confinement, their own moral certitude being questioned alongside that of others. However, there are indications that Vonnegut wants us to reach kernels of truth within his writing that, if not in the vain hope of improving our societies, at the very least attempt to offer the kind of answers that his characters so desperately seek. Sometimes, these messages are even clearly stated. For instance, in his essay collection *A Man Without a Country*, he notes that "We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is" (Vonnegut). This message about compassion has the appearance of universal truth, something which might make the Bokonist in us skeptical, but let us entertain this sentiment. Although we understand that "this thing" means life, the use of "whatever it is" provides it with Vonnegut's familiar ambiguity, as he has no pretentions of knowing what our place in the universe is all about. However, what he provides us with here is nothing short of an answer to the question that inadvertently haunts his heroes, namely "what is the meaning of life?". Vonnegut's answer? Well, he seems to think that we do not need to know, matter of fact, *should* not know (ask the lost civilization on Tralfamadore) what "it" is about. He suggests that all we should be concerned about is what to *do* with it. This answer builds upon conclusions already reached in his novels, as I will now explain.

Recalling Malachi Constant's realization about love towards the end of *The Sirens of Titan*, we see that it shares qualities with Vonnegut's answer to the meaning of life. Furthermore, *Slaughterhouse-Five* provides us with a similar conclusion. In one of his chapters in the Bloom's Guide to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Schatt compares the protagonists in these works and thereby finds a shared message between the novels themselves, claiming that "The message of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the need for compassion; Malachi Constant […] and Billy Pilgrim both learn that the purpose of life, no matter whether there is free will or not, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (Schatt, Bloom 62). Although this message appears banal, we must consider that in a postmodern world where nothing is universal or constant, being able to reach such a conclusion has a similar quality as cogito ergo sum: we exist, therefore we must love. In other words, even such a simple form of "truth" should be viewed as an accomplishment, a means of *control* for Vonnegut's characters and, by extension, for other victims of accidents that exist in an indifferent universe. For us. However, this is not the form of control displayed by characters like Rumfoord, "Papa" Monzano, or the Tralfamadorians

who, in their search for grand narratives, primarily seek to control others. Instead, the form of control Vonnegut advocates for constitutes a symbiotic relationship of using others and of *being* used, for the purpose of collectively crafting a meaningful narrative, whatever it is. Indeed, this is where Vonnegut's greatest strength reveals itself because, despite the conflicting demands of satire's reformative mission and those constituted by the delegitimizing nature of postmodernism and Black Humor, he is able to make a myriad of modes, methods and themes converge into simple messages that appeal, not only to reason, but to the erratic needs of humanity.

These needs are the most difficult for satire to address, as they seem more naturally met by existential philosophy than by moral philosophy. "What are people for?" is the question Vonnegut asks in his first novel *Player Piano* (1952), a question which carries over to the pondering over "[…] what all creation was all about" (Vonnegut 313) in *The Sirens of Titan* and even the "Why me?" in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. These questions deal with things that cannot be quantified or measured. Therefore, we are either unable to answer them, or worse, are given answers we cannot accept. This is exemplified by the story of Tralfamadore (*Novels & Stories 1950-1962* 500), or when Billy Pilgrim gets lectured on the true nature of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (*Novels & Stories 1963-1973* 396), his acceptance of this "truth" leading to a loss of his humanity. Regardless, the erratic need for "understanding" our place in the universe persists, and Vonnegut recognizes this as a source of vice rather than virtue. Therefore, it is no coincidence why a common theme throughout his novels are people of science, faith, or exorbitant wealth, who are all set on finding the answers to life's big questions through exterior means, and naturally end up disappointed. After coming to underwhelming realizations about humanity's place in the universe, the characters resolve to the simple truths, or harmless *foma*, that make life worth living. This is the closest Vonnegut comes to presenting us with generative proposals for societal reform, in a world that is perceived as degenerative by nature. Furthermore, he is questioning the existential questions themselves. Why do people need to exist for a specific *reason*? Why does creation need to be *about* anything? Why *you*? Why *me*? Why *us*? Why *anything* for that matter? The Tralfamadorians are at least onto something in this regard.

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