

Elizabethtown College

Kurt Vonnegut:  
An Examination of His Life and Writings

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EN 281

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March 1, 2019

In a simple sentence from his most critically acclaimed novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut is able to instantly immerse his reader in the characteristics that make him perhaps one of the most beloved writers of his time. "And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she was turned into a pillar of salt. So it goes" (Vonnegut, 21-22). In this style of prose that is very typical of Vonnegut, he is able to accurately and succinctly paint a picture of his personal morals, the general morals of human beings as he saw it, and the writing style that he relies upon to convey these messages in his novels and short stories. What is perhaps most striking about Vonnegut's work is the punch he is able to deliver between such seemingly simple phrases and dialogues, which has been attributed by many critics to Vonnegut's beginnings in journalism. Always one to preach about the power of understated but direct writing, Vonnegut viewed his literature simply as a portal through which to convey his thoughts and concerns about the state of the human condition, the dangers of science and technological advancement, the beautiful power and horrific devastation that human beings are capable of, and what causes them to act one way or the other.

A label is difficult to assign to Vonnegut's works due to the complex nature of his subject matter and the interconnectedness of the themes that are recurrent in both his novels and short stories. While it might be tempting to assign Vonnegut to the broadly defined "science fiction" category, many literary critics, along with Vonnegut himself, object to this simplification. Unlike a typical science fiction novel, Vonnegut does not introduce utopias, deep-learning computers, and dehumanizing technologies for the sheer entertainment of his readers. Rather, these subjects are introduced in a deliberate and thoughtful fashion to act as a vehicle for the more complex and controversial topics that undertone his writings (Marvin, 14). Vonnegut is further set apart from

typical science fiction in that much of his writing has a strong basis in reality. Vonnegut alluded to this fact when he said “all of this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true” (Vonnegut, 1). While Vonnegut’s characters and their dilemmas are purely fictional, the grounds in which they and their situations are based are wholly tangible.

In 1943, Vonnegut enlisted in WWII, which allowed him to escape the responsibilities of his studies at Cornell that his father desperately wished for him. It is unlikely that Vonnegut realized at the time the impact that his experience on the battleground would have on him, both personally and professionally. Shortly after his enlistment, in 1944, Vonnegut was captured by German troops during the Battle of the Bulge (O’Conner). It was this moment that Vonnegut came to an honest understanding of his place in this moment of history. “Vonnegut...realized he was not a hero-scout doing something fine but a kind of flotsam floating on the surface of events” (Shields, 58). On the eve of Lint, in 1945, Allied bombs rained down on Dresden, where Vonnegut and his fellow soldiers were spending their days cleaning the streets of previous bomb raids and hauling bags of oats to storage areas (69). Vonnegut arose from their underground meat locker to discover a site that would forever change him. Dresden had been flattened, dead bodies were strewn across what was left of the streets and sidewalks. Buildings had been reduced to broken pieces of mortar and stone. Fires were left blazing in the wake of the bombs. Vonnegut was assigned a new work detail – clearing charred bodies from the crumbled streets – which he described as a “terribly elaborate Easter egg hunt” (Vonnegut and McCarten, 19).

The witness that Vonnegut had been forced to bear to these tragedies had a profound influence on his writing after his repatriation in the United States. He felt inspired to write about the nonsensical destruction of a perfectly beautiful city, and even more so to write about the importance of individuals, whether innocent or involved, taking action in the face of unjust war

(Rich). Vonnegut often struggled with the ethics of the bombing and the role he and others played in the aftermath, and this conflict can often be read between the lines in writings such as *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut talks often about “what infants they really were” (Vonnegut and McCartan, 23) during the war as a whole and the Dresden attack, specifically. He struggles with the fact that Allies had bombed Dresden, destroying the city and killing of 135,000 people in a couple of hours, in response to the much larger death toll that concentration camps had conjured (Vonnegut and McCartan, 23). This sense of disillusion and uncertainty is felt in many of Vonnegut’s war writings, including his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Armageddon in Retrospect*, a collection of short stories and essays.

The success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* remained hidden in the counterculture movement until 1969, when the novel was featured on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* (Tally, 42). This was a noteworthy achievement for Vonnegut, who was not new to writing but who had just begun to dive into the world of novels in need of a more reliable paycheck. In fact, Feidler noted in his review of Vonnegut that in the years between 1952-1963, not a single review existed for any of Vonnegut’s published works (qtd. in Tally, 42). This newly discovered Vonnegut ushered in a multitude of praise sung by revered critics – Granville Hicks denoted Vonnegut as the current generation’s “own Mark Twain” (43), a title which was even further perpetrated after Vonnegut’s death.

The themes that are ever-present in Vonnegut’s anti-war writing began to blend into his other areas of interest, especially those which were concerned with the rapid advancement of science and technology and the effect it had on American morale. Shortly after his return from war, Vonnegut’s brother, a physicist for General Electric, recommended his brother for a science journalism position with the company, which Vonnegut accepted readily. Vonnegut revered his

new position and felt great pride in the work that General Electric was doing to further improve the conditions of human existence.

One afternoon, Vonnegut visited Building 49, where a completely automated machine was busy cutting away rotor blades for jet engines. He took notice to the fact that there was no human involvement – the machine steadily ticked away, delicately carving the blades and spitting them out. The site offended Vonnegut, and he noted that having “a little clicking box make all the decisions wasn’t a vicious thing to do, but it was too bad for the human beings who got their dignity from their jobs” (Shields, 103). After that fateful afternoon, Vonnegut began his foray into science fiction writing, and the short story *Report on the Barnhouse Effect* was born.

While Vonnegut's interest in using science fiction as a vehicle to deliver his message on the degradation of society became fully developed after his stint at General Electric, his experience in the writing style had been cultivating since he began writing "slick fiction" for popular magazines in the 1950s. The writing style that Vonnegut began to cultivate drew a variety of opinions from both critics and Vonnegut’s reader base as the public was trying to navigate and understand this new form of fiction that Vonnegut had broken into. The popular critic Peter J. Reed noted in his essay that science fiction allowed Vonnegut “an outside perspective on human affairs,” and a dramatized “general condition of man in an absurd universe” (qtd. in Morse, 45). Other critics mistakenly drew parallels between Vonnegut’s short stories and novels and the mainstream science fiction of the era, which further perpetrated the misplacement of Vonnegut’s unique and innovative style. Vonnegut, however, had no intentions of his writing being lined up on the bookshelf alongside other science fiction writers of the time. In fact, he detested the label as being overly simplistic and unrepresentative of what he sought to accomplish in his writing, which was an honest representation of the abstruse realities of the day

and age – including nuclear capabilities, Cold War mentalities, and American conformities. In Shield’s biography, Vonnegut is quoted as saying, “No one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works, just as no gentleman wears a brown suit in the city...Mature relationships, even with machines, do not titillate the unwashed majority” (189).

Vonnegut has been recognized as one of the few American writers who were able to escalate “from obscurity to celebrity” during his lifetime (Morse, 42). By 2005, his 1963 novel *Cat’s Cradle* had sold 34,000 copies and his 1969 novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 66,000 copies. *A Man Without a Country*, a collection of essays, drawings, and speeches, was published in 2005 and spent six weeks on the list of the top fifteen nonfiction books in the *New York Times* (Shields, 413-414). His professional writing career served as an inspiration for change for many decades – beginning in 1952, when he began working as a science journalist at General Electric and submitting short stories on the side, to the publishing of *A Man Without a Country* in 2005.

Tally notes in his analysis of the effect Vonnegut has had on American culture that he “continues to be read, almost as a rite of passage, by young people experiencing their first serious doubts about religion, the American way of life, the nature of good and evil, the use and misuse of science, and the purpose of life itself” (24). Vonnegut acted like a grandfather figure of the counterculture movement in the 1960s and beyond – a person that the youth of American could both relate to and aspire to. Throughout all his writing, whether they were tinged with sarcasm, concern, dismay, disillusion, hope, wit, or all these things combined, a particular sense of “Vonnegut-ism” rings throughout – “Hello babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. On the outside, babies, you’ve got a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies – God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (Vonnegut, 129).

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