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Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Few authors in history have been as innovative as Kurt Vonnegut. The unique life he has led has shaped his work and inspired some of the most offbeat concepts ever laid on the page. His distinct and unusual style and outlook have gained him both rabidly loyal fans and antagonistic critics. Originally known as a science fiction writer, Kurt Vonnegut over the last half century has gone beyond the boundaries of his genre to display the shortcomings of modern American society and to mock the faults in the American political system.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., was born on November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis, Indiana. He grew up there as well, thoroughly immersed in middle America, and the “loss of old Indianapolis ... and its way of life” would influence his work for a lifetime as he watched a society “noble in spite of racism, pretentiousness, and abuse and neglect of the poor” slowly but steadily degrade into a “racist, pretentious, exploitative vulgarity” (Brennan 972). Vonnegut’s parents were not religious people; he did not reject a religion, he simply never had one. This too would greatly influence his writing, inspiring blistering satire of the Christian church, religion in general, and even the idea of some meaning to human existence (Allen 58). He attended university at Cornell, the Carnegie Institute of Technology, and later the University of Chicago, but nothing affected Vonnegut so

greatly as his experiences in World War II. Taken prisoner by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, he endured the savage fire-bombing of Dresden sheltered in a meat storage area under a slaughterhouse and was then forced to recover corpses from the rubble (“Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.”). This experience would scar Vonnegut for life, thrusting the institution of war directly into the crosshairs of his satirical genius and initiating an internal struggle to remember the horrors he had repressed that would ultimately culminate in his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse Five*. Upon arriving back in the United States, he honed his writing skills in a short stint as a police reporter in Chicago before going to write for General Electric Company’s public relations division, a position that would result in his common theme of man’s relation to technology. For the last half century Vonnegut has earned his bread as a freelance writer, publishing dozens of novels, short story collections, and plays, as well as lecturing and guest speaking at numerous prestigious universities across the country (Brennan 970).

When Vonnegut began his career in the early 1950’s he was labeled an author of science fiction (“Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.”). This is understandable, as many of his exotic short stories were published in *Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine*, *Galaxy Publishing Corporation*, and the like. However, it is also misleading, as many of his other works were published in forums as diverse as *The New York Times*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Playboy* (Vonnegut). “The weirdness of Vonnegut’s fiction is characteristically sci-fi” and science fiction conventions provide him with a “narrative shell” inviting satire, but this shell does not house the heart of science fiction. In fact, Vonnegut often uses these conventions to parody sci-fi itself, which “generally a romantic concept of

human purpose,” by concluding with the idea that “there is no meaning to the universe, and that there is no god but ‘God the Utterly Indifferent’” (Brennan 971).

Vonnegut’s most obvious tie to the science fiction of the 1950’s and 1960’s is found in Kilgore Trout, a character present in many of his novels. “Trout knows and cares little about science, writes terribly, and has earned neither critical nor popular acclaim: his books can be found, remaindered and misleadingly titled, only in pornographic bookstores” (Brennan 971). Trout is “almost certainly a wicked parody of [science fiction writer Theodore] Sturgeon,” but he is also “an alter ego of Vonnegut” himself (971-2). Trout’s pathetic condition illustrates Vonnegut’s “fear of becoming an old, derelict failure- or of actually being one already,” his fear that “what he has created might just possibly be a bunch of worthless, second-rate sci-fi” (972), but he also claims to have written every science fiction masterpiece except Arthur C. Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*, so his real attitude toward sci-fi remains ambiguous. Whether or not Kurt Vonnegut is a writer of science fiction, whether or not he considers himself to be, he certainly utilizes sci-fi techniques to mock the world (971-2).

He is “our finest Black Humorist” (Nicol 602), a “laughing prophet of doom” (King 602). “He reminds us that we live in the shadow of deep waters” and tries to comfort us, but “his comforts frighten us with their inadequacy, and we laugh in selfdefense” (Nicol 602). He is a pessimist but also an idealist, for his satire is “countered by his humor, gentleness, and kindness, as well as his comic energy and individual optimism” (Mayo 617). This cosmic pessimism is blatantly obvious in one of Vonnegut’s major themes, the absurdity and irrelevance of human existence. He “sees no

hope in a world which does not care either for or about man” and struggles to discover “what makes a worthwhile life in a meaningless, arbitrary, contingent universe” (Mayo 617). He discovers that there can be no answer to this question “because there is no meaning to human existence,” but that man is driven to build “religious and philosophic structures” to explain his existence, to create comforting lies and believe them as his truth (Kennard 613). He suggests that we live from a “perspective which accepts the meaninglessness of the world and says ‘so what?’” (Mayo 619). From this staunch belief in the irrelevance of life comes “the acceptance of death as a part of the natural order” (Mayo 619). In his writing Vonnegut undercuts all absolutes and all preconceived notions and death is no exception. He treats the subject with far less concern than the reader would expect (Kennard 613). In *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, Vonnegut himself makes the two-way trip down the blue tunnel to the pearly gates dozens of times; life and death are seamless and the barrier between them easily traversed. He interviews dead people who are very much alive on the other side and jokes with Saint Peter about his own inevitable one-way journey. The Tralfamadorians of *Slaughterhouse Five* do not even believe in death as a concept. They are able to see fourth dimensionally and consequently know that everything and everyone actively exists at some point in time, which is real immortality. A side effect of this Tralfamadorian view is the idea that the universe is “mechanically preordained” (Brennan 972). From this concept develops another of Vonnegut’s major themes, the idea of “No Pain,” appropriately also his sister’s dying words (Vonnegut). Because pain is both unavoidable and irrelevant, “by

concentrating only on the happy moments of life” one is able to conclude at its end that “everything was beautiful and nothing hurt” (Mayo 619).

The vessels through which Vonnegut communicates these themes, his characters, may be divided into three distinct categories. The first is the villains, though this title is somewhat misleading because “Vonnegut has no real villains” and often not even a real conflict (Mayo 225). “His villains are simple egotists, indifferent to other people.” Second are his protagonists, “men who adapt events to their own discontent with the system, rolling with the times to create change,” whether or not this actually improves anything (Nicol 602). Third, and central to Vonnegut’s writing, are his saints. They exemplify the doctrine of “being-for-itself” (Kennard 613) for “their relevance is only the undeniable fact that they exist.” These saints “are content to aid others in their own small world, unaware of the larger actions that swirl around them. They fail to participate in events, [but] nevertheless become the focus of all activity” (Nicol 602). Many critics are disenchanted with Vonnegut’s characters. They often seem to be “flat and stereotypic, to lack depth in their thinking and feeling.” As a result they fail to make the reader deeply care about them, “but this misses the point, for Vonnegut’s characters ... embody and reflect the ideas and values which come under scrutiny in his work; they do not come into any ‘full life’ of their own” because they serve their purpose without doing so (Mayo 617).

In order to “remind [him/her] of the fictional nature of all experience, Vonnegut constantly moves the reader between real life and fiction” (Kennard 613). In doing so he incorporates into his work real celebrities, authors, politicians, and scientists, both dead

and alive, as well as a host of fictitious characters including a few like Kilgore Trout, make routine appearances. Twenty-one historical figures grace the pages of *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian*, from Adolph Hitler to William Shakespeare to Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who plays such a major role in the novel that his name encompasses two fifths of its title. Kurt Vonnegut himself, as in many of his novels, is a character. He is not only the author and the narrator, but also the framework for the entire novel. He does not write an introduction and an afterward, but personally intrudes into the story as the beginning and the end of the actual novel:

Astrid Goodstein, a Gallaudet faculty member, entered the beauty salon for her regular appointment proudly wearing her DPN button. ("I was married to that button that week!" she later confided.) When Sandy, her regular hairdresser, saw the button, he spoke and gestured, "Never! Never! Never!" Offended, Astrid turned around and headed for the door, but stopped short of leaving. She decided to keep her appointment, confessing later that at that moment her sense of principles had lost out to her vanity. Later she realized that her hairdresser had thought she was pushing for a deaf U.S. President! (187)

Such unconventional structure is characteristic of Vonnegut's technique. "He establishes throughout his writings a point of view intended to be outside our own moment in time and space," often through the eyes of "a visitor from another planet," to allow the reader the opportunity to gain a new perspective on the world and experience some higher degree of self-realization (Mayo 617). To so detach his novels from our perception of

reality, often Vonnegut writes without a chronological time-scheme of plot development and without “the cause and effect relationships of realistic fiction” (619). This reinforces the idea of what is, is, and when combined with Vonnegut’s short chapter form creates “a clump of images, if not symbols, which come together in the mind of the reader as a montage which often produces an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep” (619). Such innovative style, along with genuine idealism and zany fiction packing scorching satire, has won Kurt Vonnegut the adoration of two generations of American youth. The young have embraced his work as true genius and a must-read for aspiring intellectuals. While some critics agree with these idealistic youths, also admiring Vonnegut’s idealism and innovation, others criticize his work for “not being deep enough to warrant the seriousness with which readers take his books” (Mayo 600). They point to his flat and often superficial characters, to his sometimes gratuitous sentimentality, and to extraordinary scenarios played out in his writing that they feel are simply too unbelievable (600).

Today, almost eighty years old, Vonnegut continues to write and his work continues to be embraced by the young. He continues to push the envelope: to innovate, to evolve literature, to criticize and laugh at every aspect of society, and to consequently create controversy. There seems to be no end in sight, except possibly his death, though if one is to believe God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian, this will hardly slow him down.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Thesis Statement: Originally known as a science fiction writer, Kurt Vonnegut over the last half century has gone beyond the boundaries of his genre to display the shortcomings of modern American society and to mock the faults in the American political system.

I. Introduction

II. Biographical information

- A. Early life in Indianapolis
- B. Religion and affect on his early development
- C. Education
- D. Participation in World War II
- E. Non-literary occupations

III. Early stages of writing

- A. Experiments in different types of fiction
- B. Science Fiction
 - 1. Vonnegut as Sci-Fi writer
 - 2. Vonnegut against Sci-Fi movement in US
 - 3. His novel *Kilgore Trout* and its affects on 1960's culture

IV. Cultural influences on Vonnegut's growing up in the 1950's South

- A. Racial tensions
- B. Segregation
- C. Korean War
- D. Martin Luther King's influence on social issues

V. Kurt Vonnegut's *Kilgore Trout*

- A. Novel Summary
- B. Themes
- C. Connections to other writers

VI. Characteristics of Vonnegut's writing

- A. Dark humor
- B. Themes/satire
- C. Characters and descriptions
- D. Structure of novels

VII. Critical reception

- A. American youth give praise
- B. Fellow writers' opinions of *Kilgore Trout*
 - 1. James Vial's influence on Vonnegut's style
 - 2. Ray Bradbury's friendship with Vonnegut 1960's

VIII. Vonnegut's influence on science fiction today

- A. Stephen King's *Hearts in Atlantis* written in Vonnegut style
- B. Dean Koontz gives tribute to Vonnegut in article 1997

IX. Conclusion

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