Chapter-VI

Technique in

Vonnegut's Novels
CHAPTER VI

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The novelty of Vonnegut's writings is that not only the novels are thematically superb they are technically vibrant and vivid too. One thing that is certainly apparent in a survey of Vonnegut's novels is that he refuses to limit himself to a single mode of fiction. In fact each of his novels is an example of modal multiplicity. As a man of profound vision, Vonnegut tries to experiment with brilliant techniques such as science fiction, black humour, satire and modes of absurdity. He skillfully manipulates his theme to spin these techniques in his novels. Thus he highlights the myriads of social flaws—the war horrors and the sufferings of twentieth-century man. He envisions a world devoid of the social evils where the man is not a slave to machines and mechanizations.

Vonnegut dramatizes the role of a cosmic fool, a clown who laughs at the world's failings and sorrows. But he is never overwhelmed by them. His satirical commentaries on business, war, politics, machine technology, organized religion, and organizations in
general expose the foibles and inhumanities of a society of which he is highly critical. His satire and cosmic pessimism are paradoxically countered by his humour, gentleness and kindness, as well as his belief in cosmic energy and optimism. Indeed, these are the essential qualities of his fictional art.

Vonnegut derives his themes from real and psychological events, war experiences, science and technology. He invests his themes with techniques drawn from the novel of manners, from the confessional novel, and from detective novel, devices of soap operas and the slick magazine stories of 1950s. The one form of fiction that is drawn upon more consistently and more fascinatingly than any of the others is, of course, science fiction. He uses the technique of science fiction to delineate human experience and broadens the theme to include within its scope modern technology which forms the staple of his experience. In this context, it may be pointed out that Vonnegut’s science fiction may be viewed not as a prediction of the future but as a hyperbolic description of the present. Therefore, it is wrong to approach Vonnegut as a philosopher with final answers to the meaning and nature of our world. Looking over his novels, we may be
tempted to see them as answering more questions, explaining more of life, or rendering the world more knowable than they do. It is significant that the foundations for Vonnegut’s conception of our world is laid in *Player Piano*, the framework is erected in the subsequent novels and *Slaughterhouse Five* tops off the whole structure. Vonnegut uses the world of technology, builds on established concepts, and returns to familiar themes, images, phrases, incidents and characters in his novels which present a comprehensive vision of his world.

I wish to touch upon science fiction technique in *Player Piano*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *The Siren of Titan*; black humour in *Mother Night*; satire in *Slapstick*, *Jailbird* and *Galapagos*. However, my choice of the novels does not imply that a particular technique is not applicable to other novels.

I

A working definition of science fiction is necessary to understand how Vonnegut operates as a writer of fiction. Science fiction is primarily social criticism, usually veiled in the remoteness of time and alien location. It communicates most effectively by
projecting current problems to their logical future conclusions. In reality, it relies upon its background of credible science to establish its believability. Like all science-fiction writers, Vonnegut uses literature to discover the universe and then the discovery provides the technique.

Vonnegut’s first novel, *Player Piano*, is a brilliant piece of science fiction. It is one of the best science-fiction novels ever written. It features a brilliant utopia of the future in which machines do all the work and mankind enjoys prosperous idleness. The frustration arising from a sense of absolute uselessness and the ills of an affluent society such as social climbing, personal hypocrisy and desire to show off makes a dystopia. In the struggle between man and MANIAC (the control computer’s acronym) man loses simply because he has no unity of purpose. He depends on machines even for aesthetic enjoyment, as the title of the novel emphasizes.

It is significant that *Player Piano* is, in many ways, Vonnegut’s most significant novel. The novel’s structure consists of a series of intricate plots and subplots and then plunges into digression. Dr.
Ewing Halyard, the state department guide for the Shah of Bratpuhr, learns that he has been stripped of his degree because a computer discovered that he never fulfilled his undergraduate physical education requirement. Vonnegut sets aside the Shah's story while he pauses to ridicule misplaced values in academe, particularly the importance of college athletics. Vonnegut consciously breaks the rules for a conventionally structured novel in an attempt to find a narrative mode more conducive to his story and his temperament. It may be aptly suggested that in *Player Piano* the object of Vonnegut's technique is to overthrow the accepted literary conventions of visual imagery, coherent plot, connected characterization, and uniform point of view. It is significant that this technique is a major innovation in Vonnegut's novel.

Vonnegut delineates caricatures rather than characters in *Player Piano* and through this mode he focusses the reader's attention on what the characters represent. Paul's boss Kroner represents the technocracy's simple-minded faith in the myth of progress through technology. He tells Paul that "our job is to open new doors at the head of the procession of civilization. That's what the engineer, the
manager does. There is no higher calling”(111). Paul’s subordinate, Bud Calhoun, on the other hand, represents the self destructive American love for gadgetry that results in his automating his job out of existence. Bud is always shown sitting passively, mechanically, willing to accept the computer’s decision concerning his faith. Vonnegut portrays virtually all his characters as mechanical, lifeless, passive, while his machines become hideous parodies of humanity. This new fictional art is a faithful presentation of post-modern society and culture.

Moreover, Vonnegut symbolizes the central conflict of technology and nature in his novel with his description of both player piano and ghost- shirt. When Paul Proteus visits Homestead, the area reserved for the men automated out of jobs, he meets a senile man Rudy Hertz, and the man whose lathe motions had been captured years earlier on computer tape by Paul. Hertz is fascinated by the movements of the piano keys and tells Paul, “you can almost see a ghost sitting there playing his heart out.”(28)
With a double-edged irony, Vonnegut suggests that the engineer's belief in technology and the revolutionaries' belief in mankind are both over zealous. The revolution fails because the group responsible for the destruction of the central computer EPICAC XIV displays too much love for gadgetry. Their plan to place nitroglycerin in the 'coke' bottles in a vending machine is too complicated, and it results in their own destruction. Player Piano is filled with descriptions of machines that do not work properly from the one in Thomas Edison's old laboratory to the microwave oven in a home, visited by the Shah of Bratpur.

With telling irony, Vonnegut aptly suggests that in the world of player piano the humans have been replaced by machines that contain their ghosts, their essences and perhaps because of this touch of inhumanity, the machines are imperfect and mortal. Like his Greek namesake, Paul Proteus is amorphous enough to become both a player piano and a ghost shirt society leader although neither role satisfies him. In the nightmarish world of Ilium, New York, Vonnegut like Paul Proteus is unable to toast the possibilities of a better world. In his next novel Vonnegut turns completely away from the world of
machinery and creates a fantasy world that remains one of his most unique achievements. Since his novels usually are constructed around two diametrically opposed points of view, it not surprising that Slaughterhouse Five is built around the irreconcilable conflict between free will and determinism.

It is significant to note that Slaughterhouse-Five, with its non-linear time scheme and its complex interweaving of science-fiction fantasy, reveals the realities of World War II. The novel functions to reveal viewpoints in somewhat the same way that the theory of relativity brokethrough the concepts of absolute space and time. Slaughterhouse-Five, indeed gains its structure from Vonnegut's essential aesthetic problem—how to describe a reality that is beyond human imagination. The method he chooses is outlined in the explanation given to Billy Pilgrim of the Tralfamadorian novel as he is being transported toward that whimsical planet. The Tralfamadorians allow him to look at some of their novels: they warn him that he cannot begin to understand them. The language in the book is impossible for Billy to understand. He can see that the novel consists of symbols with stars in between. Billy is told that the clumps
function something like telegrams, with each clumps a message about a situation or scene. The clumps are not read sequentially as the chapters are in an earthling novel of the ordinary sort.

It is significant to mention here that in Slaughterhouse-Five the chapters are divided into short sections, seldom more than a few paragraphs long. The time tripping, both by Billy and the narrator, produces an effect somewhat like that achieved in the Tralfamadorian novel. It serves to eliminate suspense. We know not only of Billy’s assassination long before the novel ends, but also how the universe will end. The Tralfamadorians blow it up experimenting with a new fuel for their flying saucers.

Vonnegut’s method accords well with the major changes in the conception of physical reality that have come out of contemporary science. Change, ambiguity, and subjectivity become ways of defining human reality. His Tralfamadorian scheme enables him to overcome the problems of change, ambiguity and subjectivity involved in objectifying the events surrounding the fire-bombing of Dresden and the involvement of Billy Pilgrim and the author in them.
In reality, Vonnegut in the guise of an oral story teller, asks us to ‘listen’. Then, in two paragraphs he introduces Billy. “Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time...He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between”. The language of these dialogues is witty and powerful.

The second chapter begins the story of Billy Pilgrim, the combination of Jesus Christ (he is self crucified), Billy Budd (vulnerable primal innocence), and American Adam who, like Vonnegut, was born in 1922, in Ilium, New York. During World War II Billy becomes a Chaplain’s assistant and in 1944, is cut off behind enemy lines with Roland Weary. Billy, who “wanted to quit” not just the war but living as well, becomes for the first time “unstuck in time” and begins his time travels into his own past and future. After capture by the German soldier Billy, along with other American and Russian prisoners, is housed with fifty British officers who are in strong contrast to the Americans. Billy is put to work in Slaughterhouse Five, bottling a honey like vitamin supplement for pregnant women.
After the war, it is Eliot who introduces Billy to Kilgore Trout’s science fiction novels. The key Trout story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is ‘The Gospel from Outer Space’ in which a visitor from outer space studies Christianity and concludes that Christians are cruel partly because of slipshod story telling in the New Testament. According to Trout’s extraterrestrial perception, there should be new Gospel in which Christ is really a nobody. Billy meets Trout himself, who turns out to be a ‘cowardly’, ‘dangerous’, ‘paranoid’, ‘cracked messiah’. Trout works in Billy’s home town as a circulation man for *The Ilium Gazette*, manages newspaper delivery boys, bullies and flatters and cheats little kids.

Vonnegut points out that the next major “time window” for Billy is 1967. On the night of Barbara’s wedding he is taken on a flying saucer to Tralfamadore, where he is mated with the movie star Montana Widhack in a Tralfamadore. In 1968 Billy survives an airplane crash in which everyone is killed. Valencia is killed in an automobile accident and dies of carbon-monoxide poisoning as she rushes towards him. And finally, on February 13, 1976, exactly
twenty one years after the Dresden bombing, Billy is shot and killed by a gunman hired by Paul Lazzaro.

It may be stated here that in the last chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* there is a return to the voice of Vonnegut as author, and the present tense of the novel. The novel ends with a return to Billy Pilgrim in the spring of 1945 outside of Dresden's. The war is over, and the familiar bird of ironic awareness echoes and reaches in the expression: "Poo-tee-weet?"

It may be argued that though there is a strong moral tone in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut has certainly abandoned most of the tools of slick and pop fiction. There is no beginning, middle or end to the novel—neither in terms of chronological time-scheme nor of plot development. The Tralfamadorians frequently tell Billy that men are "machines" and "bugs in amber", and that Earthlings are the universe's "great explainers," who utter artificial answers to the question "why" rather than accept the irrelevance of the question. Both Billy Pilgrim and Kilgore Trout express another crucial concern for Vonnegut's reinventing himself and his Universe in his fiction.
Since both had found life meaningless, they used science fiction to help create Bokononist foma, harmless lies which would make them more brave and kind and healthy.

Indeed, another sequence is indicated in one of the most touching scenes in all of Vonnegut's fiction. Billy sees the war movie backwards, and watches as bombers stuck up the bombs from a flaming German city and return to their bases in the U.S. The factories in the U.S operate round the clock to dismantle the bombs into minerals and they ship minerals to remote areas where they are put back into the ground and hidden "so they would never hurt anybody". Billy by 'expolating' imagines that everyone is turned into a baby, and "all humanity without exception conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve". This change of perspective is produced by Billy's own kind of chronosynclastic infundibulum. This stream of science fiction is further carried over to his next novel.

In his novel, The Sirens of Titan, man's quest for meaning in the universe and for the purpose in his existence undergoes a more direct exploration. In fact the future provides the setting of the novel.
The questions probed are cosmic. This novel follows the science fiction form more consistently than any of Vonnegut's other novels and it goes farthest into the future. There is very little emphasis on prediction. In fact, the novel remains less concerned with social commentary be it in past, present or future, than with the timeless question of man's relationship to his Universe and to his own inner being. One of the strengths of this novel, which might well be considered Vonnegut's best, is the extraordinary command with which the science fiction technique is employed.

Vonnegut makes use of a number of science fiction techniques in the *Sirens of Titan*, both satirically and seriously: Space travel and fabulous voyage (to Mars, Mercury, Titan), teleportation (Rumfoord materializes, dematerializes and rematerializes; Vonnegut characterizes materializations, like hangings, as being 'pornographically enhanced by morbid imaginations'), man-machine relationships (Salo and his humanization), telepathy (Rumfoord reads minds), alien encounters (Salo; the harmoniums of Mercury which are the only known form of life there—"a more gracious creature would be hard to imagine"(184)), and various science fantasy devices, such as
Schliemann Breathing ("a technique that enables human beings to survive in a vacuum or in an inhospitable atmosphere without the use of helmets or other cumbersome respiratory gear" (148)), the chronosynclastic infundibula ("places... where all the different kinds of truths fit together as nicely as the parts in your Daddy's solar watch" (14) ), and the Universal Will to Become ("UWTB is what makes universes out of nothingness—that make nothingness insist on becoming something ness" (138)).

The novel begins with a device which recurs in Vonnegut as a narrator who provides a perspective in time and space outside the novels framework, much like that of "the visitor from outer space". In the case when the narrator points backward in time to a past in which men did not realize that all expressions of truth come from within. In his first line Vonnegut writes, "Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within him, but mankind was not always so lucky" (7). This expression is precise and profoundly meaningful. He goes on to tell "a true story from the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly....between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression", when people had not explored their souls (8). Vonnegut
also points out that the mankind has searched all creations for meaning but has arrived at the point of meaningless ness. They have left inwardness and given themselves over to “gimcrack religion”.

Vonnegut then focusses his story on Malachi Constant, a rich man’s Siddhartha, who is also the richest man in America. He is a tycoon and playboy. He is summoned to the Rumfoord estate in Newport, Rhode Island to the materialization by Beatrice Rumfoord. Her husband Winston Niles Rumfoord materializes at various times and places in space at regular intervals. Rumfoord materializes and tells Malachi what future holds for him, including the fact that he will marry Beatrice on Mars. To moderate Malachi’s discomfort with the future, Rumfoord tells him that he will visit Mercury and then to Earth before reaching Titan.

In reality, Beatrice and Constant both resist the prediction of Winston Niles Rumfoord. Neither Malachi nor Bee want to participate in their own futures. They are kidnapped and taken to Mars, where Malachi is brain washed (most of his memory destroyed) and given the name “Unk” by Rumfoord. Moreover, on Mars, Rumfoord has
created a large suicide army staffed with people decoyed from Earth. They are rendered virtually robots by means of antennae placed in their skulls. The Martian armies leave for Earth for a sort of war to end all wars. Rumfoord’s idea is that attack from space will unite all on Earth. In fact, the war does achieve this end. On Mars Unk, under Rumfoord’s orders, strangles his best friend, Stoney Stevenson, though he does not know it. From Mars he goes to Mercury with another soldier, Boaz, where he is kept by Rumfoord for three years. He is then allowed to return to Earth as the space Wanderer (another manipulated Messiah), a functionary for Rumfoord’s “Church of God the Utterly Indifferent” (180).

Since we are all victims of a “series of accidents” (229), Rumfoord tells the people that the space Wanderer Unk is really Malachi Constant. The manipulated Messiah is now crucified (rejected) and is sent into space with Bee and their son Chrono to Titan. There he meets the Tralfamadorian messenger, Salo, who is Rumfoord’s Crony on Titan. Salo explains the ‘meaning’ of most of Earth’s great artifacts as messages from Tralfamadore, and there Malachi, Bee, Chrono and even Salo learn to love. Salo’s final gift to
Malachi, as he dies, is the utopian illusion of being reunited with his friend Stoney, and going to a paradise in which every-body is happy forever.

It is significant to note that the events portrayed in *The Sirens of Titan* are scattered around the universe, reflecting the protagonist’s aimless wanderings. The narrative development of the story remains straightforward. This novel with its science fiction-filled encounters, with its robots and near-robot humans, and with its central characters is intentionally presented as cold-hearted but they generate more warmth. The topic which becomes central in *The Sirens of Titan* is the question of the meaning of existence.

It may be argued that both Beatrice and Rumfoord reflect Vonnegut’s sense of time in this novel, and recreate the techniques of science fiction. Bee publishes a slim volume of poems called *Between Timid and Timbuktu*. The title is derived from the fact that “all the words between timid and Timbuktu in very small dictionaries relate to time” (12). Rumfoord’s understanding of time, which he discovers in a moment of insight within the chrono-synclastic infundibulum (CSI),
is that "everything that ever has been always will be and everything that ever will be always has been" (26). Or, in a different context, everything is perfect just the way it is. As a consequence of this time-reality, "life for a punctual person is like a roller coaster" (57) and even if you know all the twists and turns, you "still have to take the roller-coaster ride", says Rumfoord: "I did not design the roller-coaster, I don't own it, and I don't say who rides and who does not. I just know what it's shaped like" (58).

Time, with standard linear sense, is unimportant. One is in time (and on time) because one lives from moment to moment. As Salo says to Rumfoord, he "would rather see the wonderful colours at the far ends of the spectrum than either the past or the future". Thus, fate and accidents are simply a part of the natural order. At one point Rumfoord mollifies Bee by saying, "If I seem indifferent to your misfortunes, it is only because I know how well things are going to turn out in the end" (63). The way "things turn out" for Bee is that she and Malachi are "bred like farm animals" (27) on Titan and that "in the end", like all of us, she will be dead. And what Malachi comes to recognize as a lieutenant-colonel on Mars (when he
kills Stony), is, as Rumfoord says, “What most people never realize about themselves that he was not only a victim of outrageous fortune, but one of outrageous fortune’s cruelest agents as well”. Even “dumb-luck” (73) (Noel Constant’s use of the Bible as an investment counselor) is really part of the system. Rumfoord defines luck as “the way the wind swirls and the dust settles cons after God has passed by (252). Salo suggests that luck is the residue of design, in this case the design of the universe. Everything is simply the way it is, and man must give up his illusory sense of free will, and accept the natural order.

In The Sirens of Titan, the bleaker and more negative aspects in the view of the Universe presented are associated with Rumfoord, while the total vision includes affirmative possibilities as well. Consequently, the novel’s emphasis falls not on asserting the absurdity of existence, but upon the possibilities of giving life in an absurd universe some meaning, dignity and human warmth. Boaz finds a way to love and does benefit the harmoniums, even if the love becomes flawed and the benefit qualified.
It may be argued that the tone of the novel alternates between irony and sentimentality, and frequently combines the two. The epigraph, for example, a quotation from Ransom K. Ferm (whom we later learn is a “philosophical mouse” (69) employed by Malachi), ironically suggests that the speed of the solar system (replacing the industrial technology of Player Piano) is equivalent to progress. Throughout the novel, man’s place in the physical universe is seen as basically insignificant. The bounties of space, of infinite outwardness are explained by the narrator as “Empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death” (8).

It is necessary to emphasize the fallible warmth of human emotions. Sentiment frequently emerges in Vonnegut where he contrasts the human with the machine or machine-like objects. This effect is seen in the portrayal of that persevering Tralfamadorian messenger, Salo. There is sentimentality in the depiction of this lovable tangerine of a Tralfamadorean, but in this particular context of comic science fiction it seems far more acceptable than that which surrounds the characterization of Finnerty in the greater social-realism of Player Piano.
Vonnegut preserves the balance in the perspective of the narration by investing comedy with irony. At the level of the world within the fiction, some sentiment is what we hope to find in these cold recesses of time and space. Salo seems to have the right answer, when he tells Rumford that he lives “punctually”—that is one moment at a time. He would rather see the colours at the end of the spectrum than know the future. When he wishes Constant “Good Luck”, Constant tells him that the expression is no longer approved “down here” in the world of God the Utterly Indifferent, Salo winless and says, “I am not from down here” (317). In all of this Vonnegut comes close to the sentimentality he displays in his short story (“Epicac”) of the computer suicide. Salo’s actions roughly parallel the affirmative turn in Constant’s life. It thus becomes part of the thematic assertion of the purpose and meaning in loving whatever is around to be loved.

In conclusion, it may be stated that The Sirens of Titan offers many of the attractions of Vonnegut, like social satire, comedy, disillusionment with middle class norms, a delight in the preposterous, and so on. Science fiction allows his inventiveness full rein, with chrono synclastic infundibula, the Universal will to become,
harmoniums, Tralfamadore and its government by “hypnotic anarchy”, Martian invasion and antennae-controlled legions. Finally, The Sirens of Titan emphasizes the need to recognize the apparently indifferent, frequently adverse Universe as the shared environment of all men, and also to perceive that this makes concern, compassion and love imperatives. Man and robot have both refused to be reduced to machines by a mechanical Universe. This does not imply optimism or hope. But it does mean that the novel provides a basis of moral purpose and affirms the possibility of a meaningful life. The science fiction serves not only as a source of interest, energy and fancy in The Sirens of Titan, but as an effective instrument of Vonnegut’s moral and human concerns.

II

It may be aptly stated that Vonnegut tries to maintain a thematic linkage with the use of different narrative techniques in his novels. In the first two novels, Player Piano and The Sirens of Titan, he uses a conventional narrative style and a third person point of view. Paul Proteus and Malachi Constant lack a three-dimensional quality because Vonnegut has always been more concerned with the ideas
than with characterization—common with many of the science fiction writers. However, *Mother Night* is different. Here Vonnegut uses a first person point of view in the portrayal of Campbell's character. A series of very short chapters build his novel around a series of jokes. In order to understand how these jokes function, it is necessary to consider Black Humor. In this context I wish to define Black Humor and then highlight its treatment in *Mother Night*.

The term "Black Humour" gained currency in the twentieth-century. The presence of intellectual comedy, violence and experimentation are characteristic traits of Black Humour fiction. The Black Humour writers like to satirize human foibles, follies and dislocation of norms of life since the point is to sustain an illusion of living in the face of an impersonal absurd universe. They share existentialist belief as well as there is no God or higher authority to make sense of the human condition. With such an outlook of life and universe man is abandoned as an alien to his own fate. To face up to this meaninglessness of human existence man has three strategies for survival. The first is to accept and exploit like a cynic the state of loss of values with no absolute values left to guide the course of human
destiny. The second is to stage withdrawal in despair and develop nihilistic view of life. The third is to assume a stance of defiant laughter, the ultimate human response to the apparent absurdity of existence – i.e. to mock at absurd situations in life scornfully with an explicit gesture of defiance. Therefore, it is significant that in the face of holocausts of war and the collapse of culture and civilization, the Western intellectuals looked at the elements of Black Humour as the only psychic remonstrance against nuclear devastation, the onslaught of political bossism and bureaucratization of institutions on the minds of helpless people.

Before we proceed further it is important to analyse the writing of the fifties and the sixties of the twentieth century when there emerged a group of writers who reflected in their writings a ‘sick vision of life’. They were the progenitors of Black Humour fiction. A good number of critics have put forward their respective viewpoints regarding the perceptions that fired their imagination and enlivened the philosophical foundations of Black Humour. A close study of Heller, Barth, Pynchon and Vonnegut reflects that Black Humour fiction came into existence as a response of the artist to face up a
meaningless universe, made absurd by the 'new logic' of modern science, technological control of life, social and political madness and a general loss of self. Much of the despair that we come across in post-war American fiction results from disillusionment with the war and from disgust with the depression of the period. Thus post war experimental fiction provided the writers an opportunity to deal with the theme of violence, alienation, fragmentation, meaninglessness, satire and absurdity.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. projects a very pessimistic vision of life in his novel, according to which all human efforts to save mankind from the ravages of time are futile; the dream of socio-economic renaissance for improving the lot of humanity is rendered meaningless. Vonnegut wants to suggest that man is unable to make any improvement in his predicament or to change it. Passivity, acceptance, resignation, and denial are offered as solutions in Vonnegut's novels in the face of helplessness situation. History bears testimony to the fact that man has been struggling for his existence for a better life and thus he has been trying to discover the inimical forces so as to crush them. He has to face various defeats at the hands of the
cruel forces of history, yet he has never accepted the defeat. But like a
typical Black humourist, Vonnegut is sceptical about the heroic
crude character of man. On the contrary, man is impotent in the face of
uncontrollable and untractable circumstances. Thus in Vonnegut’s
world there can be no transition from suffering to action, from victim
to fighter.

It is significant to mention that Player Piano is an excellent
example of social satire. Vonnegut shows the horrors that could result
from overvaluing technology and efficiency and from undervaluing
people. By satirizing what is wrong with the present American
society, Vonnegut hopes to prevent the events in his novel from
actually taking place. By examining outsiders like Adolph Eichmann
and Howard W. Campbell, Jr., Vonnegut probes the question of why
men commit atrocities and how they are able to live with their own
consciences. *Mother Night* ends with Campbell’s decision to commit
suicide. The novel while comic certainly does not represent Northrop
Frye’s ‘New Comedy’ which would include a mythic victory of spring
over winter and life over death.
Vonnegut often softens the feeling of hopelessness by focusing his novel on Howard W. Campbell, a man who observes hilarious incidents but is incapable of understanding the jokes. Two typical Vonnegut joke sequences illustrate how this technique works in *Mother Night*. Campbell's diary of his life with Helga is discovered by a Russian writer named Bodovskov who plagiarizes it and publishes it as "Memoirs of a Monogamous Casanova". Later, Campbell learns that Bodovskov had become famous by plagiarizing all this work. Finally, Campbell learns that Bodovskov has been arrested and executed; his crime has not been plagiarism but originality. When he ran out of Campbell's material, Bodovskov wrote a two-thousand page satire on the Red Army, written in a style "distinctly un-Bodovskovian" (157). In another joke sequence, Resi Noth throws away a noose that the American Legion has left in Campbell's mailbox. A garbage man named Szombathy finds it in the next morning and hangs himself. Szombathy kills himself because he is not permitted to practise veterinary medicine. Finally, Vonnegut reveals that the real reason the garbage man is despondent is that he has a cure for cancer that the world has ignored.
Vonnegut aptly states that the Nazis in *Mother Night* are comic rather than frightening and this effect is heightened by Campbell’s detached narration. At one point, for example, Paul Joseph Goebbels asks Campbell to write a pageant honoring the German soldiers who died during the Warsaw uprising by the Jews. When Campbell responds by translating Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address into German, Goebbels is so impressed by such a “very fine piece of propaganda” that he gives it to Hitler to read. He does so with a certain amount of apprehension that Lincoln might have been Jewish. Hitler responds by writing that “Some parts of this almost made me weep. All Northern peoples are one in their deep feelings for soldiers. It is perhaps our greatest bond” (16). Campbell does not seem to see the ironic contrast between Lincoln’s effort to free slaves and Hitler’s effort to eliminate the Jews. Also, he can’t see the similarity between Hitler’s use of Lincoln’s speech and Bodovskov’s use of Campbell’s own material. The ‘greatest bond’ of which Hitler speaks that holds all Northern peoples together is to a great extent responsible for the war raging in Europe at the time.
It is significant that Black humourists usually view the world as so complex and so fragmented that any answer can only be tentative. The best answer offered to the readers is how to smile through their tears at the absurdities of the world. Vonnegut uses this technique of Black Humour to enable him to deal with subjects too painful to handle in any other way. Thus Vonnegut believes that laughter acts as an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential sorrow, pain and anguish.

III

Thematically and technically, *Slapstick* functions as a coda to Vonnegut's fiction. It is significant that this novel is concerned with harmony and loneliness. Vonnegut's inspiration is his sister Alice Vonnegut, who gives his fiction its harmony and direction. The thrust of Vonnegut's fiction has moved from detached ironic observation to impassioned participation. His early works, *Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan*, were concerned with the external environment like the dangers of technology and the glorification of the machine. In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut began to concern himself more with internal state of consciousness and the problem of schizophrenia, as well as the
epistemological question of what can be perceived as real and as simple illusory.

I wish to point out the salient features of the technique of comedy in Slapstick to reveal Vonnegut’s disenchantment with the lack of supportive culture in America, particularly the disenfranchisement brought by the breaking down of regionalism. Slapstick is explicit with Vonnegut’s search for a philosophy of life that would explain its cruelties and injustices.

In reality, by the time Vonnegut began writing Slapstick, his perception of life had changed to that of a slapstick comedy in which he again and again confides that he and his sister never achieved successful harmonious living. The resonance of the Slapstick comedy is that life is based on the Bokononist “fundamental joke”. Although Laurel and Hardy did their best with every test and never failed to bargain in good faith with their destinies, they constantly made mistakes and failed because they were not “really very good at life”. This comment closes a circle begun with Vonnegut’s first novel, Player Piano, in which the ‘Ghost-Shirt Society’ pleaded with the
‘Organization’ to see the virtues in imperfection, frailty, inefficiency, and a brilliance followed by stupidity. The “Organization” is now an indifferent cosmos rather than an industrial bureaucracy. It still creates situations, according to Vonnegut, in which we are losers.

Indeed, at the beginning of *Slapstick*, Vonnegut likens his attitude toward love to that found in the films of Laurel and Hardy:

There was very little love in their films. There was often the situational poetry of marriage, which was something else again. It was yet another test—with comical possibilities, provided that every body submitted to it in good faith.

Love was never at issue. And, perhaps because I was so perpetually intoxicated and instructed by Laurel and Hardy during my childhood in the Great Depression. I find it natural to discuss life without ever mentioning love.

It does no seem important to me.

What does seem important? Bargaining in good fate with destiny (?)

It is significant that the story of the novel is narrated by Dr. Wilbur Daffodil—II Swain, the 100 year—old man who was the final President of the United States. It begins with him, sitting in a small clearing in the jungle which once was Manhattan, writing his autobiography. Wilbur tells the story of himself and his twin sister Eliza. They were born into a family which brought together much of
the wealth of America. Though mistaken at birth for 'mongoloid 
idiots', they are in fact actually "neanderthaloids", a new type of 
human being. Wilbur is an intellectual. Eliza can’t read or write, but 
she possesses an uncanny intuitive ability, which when combined with 
Wilbur’s knowledge highlight their creative genius. In other words 
they are specialized halves of a single brain. They are truncated when 
separated yet "born with the capacity and determination to be utterly 
happy all the time" when they are together.

It may further be stated that Vonnegut enlightens the "delightful 
esteroid" in which their parents have them "entombed" into a 
"paradise". Their archangel Michael is the psychologist Dr. Cordelia 
Swain Cordiner, who destroys the paradise of their "nation of two" 
and says: "this is the United States of America, where nobody has a 
right to rely on anybody else—where everybody learns to make his or 
her own way". Thus Wilbur and Eliza become aware that life is a 
tragedy as well as a comedy. After their separation, Eliza is locked 
away for many years against her will in an institution for the feeble 
mind. Wilbur is sent to Harvard Medical School, becomes a rural 
pediatrician in Vermont, then a Senator and finally the last President
of the United States. He is elected President on a platform of "Lonesome No More!" a spectacular utopian plan for universal happiness. To Vonnegut the underlying cause of loneliness is the American melting pot that destroys cultural and regional differences and that creates homogenized Americans that look alike, dress alike, and even think alike. All forms of loneliness and isolation are eliminated by arbitrarily assigning everyone thousands of relatives by computer thereby making them part of larger extended families.

The irony in this is that Wilbur is unable to have real intimacy, just as he is unable to share love. In the Preface Vonnegut has rightly pointed out to the failure of love as a redeeming and unifying force in the world. "I find it natural to discuss life without even mentioning love", he says, and "I can not distinguish between the love I have for people and the love I have for dogs" (2). Indeed, love "can often be poisonous" and Vonnegut wants it replaced by "common decency". When Wilbur and Eliza attempt a reconciliation of these strands the result is an incredible intense, traumatic, and pathetic orgy which lasts for "five whole nights and days" and which terrifies them both.
In Slapstick, the Chinese communist scientists observe that America and its allies produced their greatest weapon, the atomic bomb, by cooperating with each other. By following this example of cooperation, the Chinese miniaturize themselves and join together psychically to form the most powerful cosmic force in the universe. The result is the destabilization of the Earth's gravity and the destruction of the entire Western World by "Green Death", which is the result of microscopic Chinese microorganisms that caused death when inhaled or ingested. Vonnegut argues that, it is appropriately ironic that America's greatest scientific achievement, the atomic bomb ultimately leads to its destruction by microscopic Chinese who are as small as the atoms American scientists had unleashed.

It may be concluded that the strong eschatological thread runs through Vonnegut's fiction. It is closely linked to his continued preoccupation over the question of man's ability to control his own destiny. The autobiography which he writes in Slapstick is simply his acceptance of the impossibility ever discovering life's inherent meaning and his realization that the key to humanity's survival and happiness is its acceptance of life with the good natured earnestness
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and sincerity of Laurel and Hardy. In *Slapstick*, Vonnegut fashions a new medium of fantasy juxtaposed with very sincere, confessional journalism. In this new element, Vonnegut, like Swain, appears to be ‘quite at home and unafraid’.

Moreover, the best of Slapstick comedians may be said to have turned low humor into high art. Wilbur and Eliza Swain’s effort to please their parents by suddenly transforming themselves into intelligent teenagers is laudable, and their puzzled reaction to their parent’s guilt feeling for having treated them as idiots for fifteen years is perfectly human and very appropriate. What perfectly captures the slapstick quality of Laurel and Hardy at their best is the native decision by the brother and the sister to make every one once again happy by reverting to their idiotic behavior and by beginning to throw food while drooling. Their motivation is laudable. It is certainly an attempt to bargain in good faith with their destiny, but it is also ludicrous and hilarious.

Vonnegut emerged as the most prominent American novelist in the 1960’s. He introduced the theories of language and discourse to
demonstrate the invalidity of value reference and meaning of the twentieth-century American life. Vonnegut, however, struck a balance between nihilist despair and humanist affirmation. Recognizing the limits of stylistic self-indulgence, Vonnegut devoted his artistic energies to defining the cultural malaise. Always a moralist, even at his expressions of black humour, Vonnegut identifies the moral malaise with isolation, which he prefers to call by the homelier and starker name of loneliness.

In my brief analysis of Jailbird I intend to reflect on this aspect of loneliness. Vonnegut categorically identifies family, community and culture as the collective antidote of loneliness. Fantasy sequences depict heaven as a place of ultimate familial harmony. It is the mode of fantasy which reflects heaven as a place where one-vicious Nazis and innocent little girls live together happily.

It may be stated that in Jailbird Vonnegut sets out to record the history of the twentieth-century American life. It is the history of those, who in Vonnegut’s view, promote the values of a collective standard of social welfare and advocate the notion of treating all
citizens as family members. It is typical of Vonnegut, that he tempers his vision of familial utopia by setting it against an imagined collapse of American civilization. The novel culminates in revelations about many Kathleen O’Looney, a bag lady who happens to own a corporation—RAMJAC—a mythic proportion.

Moreover, the Prologue to Jailbird is also autobiographical. Vonnegut talks about his father as a failed architect and his mother prone to suicidal tendencies. The family relationships are set against the background of the Cuyahoga Massacre and the references to Sacco and Vanzetti. In this way, Vonnegut uses history to support the personal narrative which, in turn, reinforces the fiction. The narrator of Jailbird feels guilty of crimes which history and circumstance have forced him to inherit. His life has been a nightmare for longer than he can remember (98). RAMJAC, incredibly, is the opposite of every corporate cliché. It functions as the arm of Mary O’Looney’s charity. It is another extended family.

However, in this novel the extended family cannot survive in its original character after the passing of the matriarch. It proves subject
to economic, cultural and social laws that subvert enlightened efforts
to consolidate fraternal relations within the family of human beings.
Jailbird is also Vonnegut’s reflection on twentieth-century American political and economic history. A recurrent motif in this novel is “the Harvard Man” usually invoked at the expense of this entity. Harvard has always had a reputation for its liberalism. It furnishes a remarkable number of tarnished angels to the halls of corrupt power. The novel focuses on Watergate, the infamous scandal. The theme of the novel can be best expressed by the judge who summons Starbuck and gives him a dressing-down for his folly in giving the reactionary Right ammunition to use against “pity and brains”. Starbuck, says the judge, has “set humanitarianism back a full century”. To set back humanitarianism is to set back prospects for returning society to familial standards of decency. It is to postpone the millennial “folk society”.

Indeed, early in the novel Starbuck thinks of his wife Ruth, a concentration camp survivor who believed:

.... that all human beings were evil by nature, whether tormentors or victims, or idle standers-by. They could only create, meaningless tragedies, she said, since
they were not nearly intelligent enough to accomplish all the good they meant to do. We were a disease, she said, which had evolved on one tiny cinder in the universe, but could spread and spread" (23).

Late in the novel Starbuck reflects bitterly on the absurdity of human aspirations in the face of an indifferent universe. "We are here for no purpose, unless we can invent one. Of that I am sure. "No matter what he had done with his life, he thinks, "the human condition in an exploding universe would not have been altered on iota" (236).

In the conclusion of Jailbird, it may be stated that Vonnegut remains committed to the ideals enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount. Starbuck invokes the most hopeful of New Testament texts early on, along with a composite myth (the Cuyahoga massacre) of labor exploited, oppressed, and resistant. Thus he invokes Sacco and Vanzetti throughout, from the epigraph (xxxix) to the closing passages. Vonnegut defines anarchists here as "persons who believe with all their hearts that governments are enemies of their own people" (175) (PS, 122). Though Jailbird ends with the RAMJAC
family subverted, the novel's liberal passion delivers it from negativism. Indeed, this is a major achievement of Vonnegut.

His last novel, *Galapagos* is hailed as one of the finest works in which Vonnegut expresses the futility of human life and distrust of scientific ideologies. Scientific observation is taken over by a familiar blend of social commentary and science fiction. The evolution of humanity is predicted for the next million years. In this apocalyptic satire of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Vonnegut argues that humankind is doomed to evolutionary failure. Because of the freakishly-large human brain, an evolutionary mistake causes an immense variety of afflictions, threatening the future of the human race as well as other species and the planet itself. The novel centers on a group of tourists marooned on the Galapagos Islands by a nuclear war and a world wide economic collapse. Descendants of the tourists eventually attain a more peaceful existence by developing fins, beaks, and smaller, less dangerous brains. *Galapagos* is both a harrowing litany of big-brain abuses against life and good order and a semi paean to the joys of devolution.
Significantly, the setting, the characters and the narrative strategy are all closely related to the theme of evolution. Indeed, the interdependence of all elements to the central vision of the novel is what makes *Galapagos* more coherent and satisfying than its immediate predecessors. It may be argued that *Galapagos* takes the reader back into the familiar territory. The subject is the end of the world. The objects of lamentation are man’s cruelty to man, contemporary society, modern technology, and the horrors of war—World War II and Vietnam. Though there are no sing-song refrains like “hip pity-hop”, “hi ho” or “so it goes”, the narrative voice still has the quality of a verbal shrug-flip, careless and willfully casual. The voyage from the mainland of South America to the most remote of the Galapagos Islands is the symbolic turning point in evolution from the present to the start of a bizarre future.

Moreover, the narrator of *Galapagos* is none other than the headless ghost of Kilgore Trout’s son Leon Trotsky Trout. He waits a million years before joining his father by entering “the blue tunnel to the afterlife”. Vonnegut has boldly experimented with the narrative strategy in this novel. Kilgore Trout is a familiar alter-ego, a very
prolific and unappreciated author of science fiction. The idea of Tralfamadore comes from a Kilgore Trout book that Billy Pilgrim read in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The hero of the novel, Leon Trotsky Trout does not have a normal life. His mother was a red-headed, left-handed woman who walked out on the family when Leon was a child. Leon feels abandoned by his parents and later betrayed by his government. He walks away from the mistake of Vietnam like his mother attempting to leave behind a bad marriage.

Vonnegut aptly states that given the oddity of his genetic inheritance and the horrors of his experience, Trout can be expected to narrate a story about evolution from his own unusual perspective. The details of the narrator’s sad life and early death are scattered in *Galapagos*. Ironic symmetries occur throughout the novel, along with an intricately woven time-space development that ranges back and forth and up and down from 1935, when the Galapagos Islands were first discovered. It is a million years into the future—to eternity itself where Kilgore Trout addresses from the ‘blue tunnel leading to the afterlife’. Events range widely in time and space. They are knitted together by the web of ironic and accidental interdependencies. The
exposure to war gives the narrator a haunted memory of violence in much the same way that Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*. The shooting of the old woman is followed by the massacre of the whole village. The future narrator is supplied with a vision of destruction that is both common in Vonnegut’s fiction and crucial to the theme of evolution in *Galapagos*.

Indeed, Vonnegut’s bold experimentation with the headless ghost haunts the Bahia de Darwin and its survivors throughout the novel. Vonnegut’s style combines the first person and omniscient narrative. The most important scene for understanding the significance of the narrator may be late in the novel when he has a conversation with his dead father. Kilgore Trout chides his son for lingering on earth as a headless spirit. He encourages him to move at once into the afterlife. The cynical advice from Kilgore Trout gives his son a chance to explain why he wants to remain on earth a little longer: “I had chosen to be a ghost because the job carried with it, as a fringe benefit, license to read minds, to learn the truth of people’s pasts, to see through walls, to be at many places all at once, to learn in depth how
this or that situation had come to be structured as it was, and to have access to all human knowledge"(253).

It may be pointed out that Vonnegut’s success with Galapagos owes much to this winsome and paradoxical mixture of curiosity, wry cynicism and tragic hopefulness. The narrator of Galapagos tells the story of evolution from a human point of view that is wise beyond its years, high spirited, and doomed.

In sum, it may be argued that the wealth of Vonnegut’s techniques—science fiction, humour, satire and absurdity stand firmly in the American tradition, even though it is contemporary social satire particularly fitted to the tenor of the times. Again Vonnegut’s pessimism is redeemed by humour: the joke of man’s pride in how well he designed a machine to replace him, the grim humour of a frozen POW trying to don a coat ten sizes too small, the absurdity of a doomed Martian invasion. Thus Vonnegut has put the traditional American novel in matrix of the contemporary scenario. Some critics point out that the contemporary techniques are slick and superficial and the substance a thin caricature of the tradition. But a perceptive
study of Vonnegut’s fiction shows that his techniques revitalize old forms and make possible a return of tradition lost or observed earlier in the country.