Kurt Vonnegut Jr. is one of the versatile novelists of the 20th-century. He is deeply influenced by the middle class social milieu, the horrors of World War-II, the impact of the Great Depression and the Industrial Revolution of the early 20th-century. Vonnegut started writing literary supplements for different magazines which later culminated in novel writing. In all his novels we find both the fantastic variety and the underlying coherence of the World of Vonnegut’s imagination.

This dissertation argues for a close reading of seven significant Vonnegut’s novels: Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Mother Night, Slaughterhouse-Five, Slapstick, Jailbird and Galapagos. This study brings out an in-depth analysis of Vonnegut’s themes and techniques focusing on his vision of the American society.

All his novels use the logic of schizophrenia, absurdity, illusion and satire. In addition to this, he uses the elements of irony and humour to resolve the philosophical questions about life that deeply disturbs him. From the stand point of both theme and craft Kurt Vonnegut Jr. is reckoned as a serious artist. His novels progress from satire to absurdity, from early protest themes in Player Piano to the almost total resignation of Slaughterhouse-Five. Accompanying the gradual intensification of his vision of absurdity there has been an increased use of innovative techniques that reinforce his vision. Though his angle of vision becomes
increasingly absurdist, it remains steadfastly comic. Never does he 
give way to despair or total pessimism. He tempers his fiction with 
compassion for his characters.

Like all great contemporary novelists, Vonnegut foresees the 
fate of human beings in our age of machine and its horror. He is 
aware of the meaninglessness of life and yet loves life with all its 
absurdities. In my thesis I have attempted to study the abundance 
and variety of fantastic themes and superb techniques in the seven 
novels in this dissertation.

Despite the concern of present day critics with these loaded 
issues such as dehumanization by science and technology, 
absurdity, illusion, and satire and mythic schizophrenia, these 
novels both explicitly and implicitly express Vonnegut’s vision in 
the perspective of the 20th century social milieu especially the 
predicament of the Americans. Each chapter in this study first 
constructs and then explicates the texts in the light of these themes 
and techniques.

The present study focuses on the critical analysis and 
evaluation of the novels. I propose to explore the theme and 
technique of Vonnegut and thus perceive his distinctive 
contribution to the contemporary 20th Century fiction. In addition 
to this, I wish to bring out the significance of the central characters, 
the narrative technique, and the use of humour, irony and satire in 
his novels.
No single theme, technique or theoretical model applies to all the novels. However, the observations of critics like Robert Scholes, Charles B. Harris, Max Schultz, Jerome Klinkowitz, David H. Goldsmith, Stanly Schatt etc are useful to my analysis. However, there is further scope for redefining the nature of Vonnegut’s art and technique.

The rationale for selection of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. among so many American novelists stands out from the recognition of his versatility of fictional art and technique. It is also significant that Vonnegut’s fictional modes are the reflections of this fantastic world and his protagonists are real life heroes who are victims of the social dogmas and caught in the dilemma to choose between happiness and freedom.

I have divided my thesis into seven chapters. Themes, techniques and characters of these novels have been treated in separate chapters. The chapters are divided into sections which permit construction of theoretical framework emerging out of the examination of texts. The dissertation follows the documentation style of the latest edition (Fifth edition – 1999) of MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.

Chapter one offers a broad overview of the critical study of 20th Century science fiction of American literature. It discusses the definition, short history and significance of science fiction. It also deals with the background of 20th century science fiction with particular reference to William Burroughs, John Barth and Joseph Heller.
Chapter two discusses the significance of Vonnegut’s early novels.

Chapter three discusses the major themes in Kurt Vonnegut’s early novels. Among his major themes this dissertation takes up for study two prominent themes—Edenic myth and psychic schizophrenia apparently interwoven in his early novels.

Chapter Four focuses attention on the expansion of his major themes in his later novels.

Chapter Five analyses the significance of his characters, their beliefs in conventions, traditions and their link with their post adolescent encounter with life.

Chapter Six analyses the fictional techniques in his novels and places him as an extraordinary master of contemporary science fiction.

In the final chapter I have summed up the ideas of earlier chapters with special comments on Vonnegut’s fictional craftsmanship and the culmination of his vision. The best answer offered to the readers in his novels is how to smile through their tears at the absurdities of life.

In the end a bibliography has been given which includes the primary sources such as the novels and short stories of Kurt Vonnegut and the secondary sources consist of the works of other critics that are referred to in this thesis.