Chapter-I

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American fiction in the 1960s and 1970s was not only exciting and abundant, but underwent some fundamental transformation of theme and style. The years since the end of Second World War – a war that in many ways brought American writing and culture to a center place in the history of mid-twentieth century literature. Indeed, these were the years of extraordinary versatility, variety and multiplicity. The writing reflecting and refracting a nation itself multiethnic and multidox, extraordinarily identifying its cultural roots. It showed the complexities and cultural variations of an immigrant land – America.

Post war America became a land of unprecedented affluence and within a very short span of time the United States became the exemplary consumer economy generating a remarkable inner cohesion. Looking around the new America of the 1960s, of new affluence and new conformity, new cold war conservatism and caution, the new era of post-modern fiction saw the breakthrough of natural science, psychology, philosophy and myth into its fold.
The 20th-century novel portrays the protagonist as a contemporary sensitive man who is faced with the problems of modern society – alienation and purposeless existence. He makes efforts to overcome his negative state of existence. The post-war America saw the emergence of an extra-ordinary new variety and heterogeneity in American fiction. Thus, the post-modern novel is absorbed in its narrative technique, character portrayal, plot setting and more concerned with the treatment of social, psychological, metaphysical and mythical elements along with the scientific developments taking place in the century. It also delves into the fact that “reality” is simply our existence and “objectivity” is, of course, an illusion.

American literature has been enriched by a large number of science fiction writers of the twentieth-century like Burroughs, Barth, Heller, Ken Kessey and many others who gave a rich dimension to the art of science fiction. No other fiction writer of the twentieth-century has understood the mental ecology of human race as has been done by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. ---a versatile novelist, short story writer, script writer and essayist. He has some of the most outstanding novels to his
credit. His fiction of the sixties is the popular artifact which may be the finest example of American cultural change. His fiction limped along for years on the democratic basis of family fiction and pop magazine science fiction. The range of science fiction values him as a master of contemporary literature. He uses satire, irony and iconoclastic humour in his work to raise philosophical questions about the meaning of modern life. He is particularly noted for his subtle narrative style with characteristic features of puns, aphorisms, slapsticks, running gags and self-effacing humour.

Vonnegut has some important novels to his credit such as Player Piano(1952), The Sirens of Titan(1959), Mother Night (1962), Cat’s Cradle(1963), God Bless You, Mr. Rose Water (1965), Slaughterhouse-Five(1969), Breakfast of Champions(1973), Slapstick(1976), Jailbird(1979), Deadeye Dick(1982) and Galapagos (1985). In his novels he satirizes human folly in its contemporary manifestations and they rely on fantasy, black-humour, and the absurd as the tools of satire. He describes himself as a total pessimist asserting that mankind is inherently self-destructive and exists in a “higgledy-piggledy cultural smorgasbord” which ends only in death.
It is significant to note that Vonnegut always tempers his caustic comments with compassion for his characters, suggesting that humanity's ability to love may particularly compensate for destructive tendencies. Indeed, this extraordinary power of vision is a major achievement of Vonnegut in the arena of American fiction. Therefore, my purpose is to study the novels in detail and to explore the theme, technique and vision of Vonnegut.

The method used in this study is one of critical analysis and evaluation of the novels of Vonnegut. It is significant that critics like Peter J. Reed, Jerome Klinkowitz, Robert Scholes, Stanley Schatt, and Richard Todd have made perceptive studies of Vonnegut's novels from various angles ranging from themes, techniques and characters. In spite of these studies, there is still a scope to make an in-depth analysis of the themes and techniques of Vonnegut's novels to delve deep into the subtleties and nuances of Vonnegut's fictional mode.

I propose to bring out the significance of his characters, the narrative technique, and the use of humour, irony and satire. In the
process of this analysis, quotations from texts as well as the view points of other critics will be referred to justify my view points.

The principal purpose of this study is to analyse the themes of Vonnegut’s novels and the nature of his vision. More significantly, I shall analyse the characters in Vonnegut’s novels in the backdrop of 20th-century social milieu. My secondary aim is to explore the narrative technique of Vonnegut in the context of his novels.

This study proposes to refer to the major novels written by Kurt Vonnegut. References to his major novels are an integral part of the study. This forms the primary source of my reference. Apart from the short stories and novels written by Vonnegut, references to the different books and articles written on Kurt Vonnegut’s work will also be made. This forms the secondary source of my reference. These also include books and articles on 20th-century science fiction of the American literature.

Science fiction is a significant achievement of 20th-century and hence an understanding of science fiction also forms the basis of my
dissertation. Vonnegut understands this new age of astounding scientific inventions, space flights and other developments in our century which he has frequently used in his novels.

I

This section highlights a brief account of science fiction, its short history, definition, features and functions that form an essential prerequisite to the study of Vonnegut's novels based on scientification. In the following pages I intend to touch upon these aspects.

The term “science fiction” is often equated with juvenile escapist fantasy. It evokes in many people images of Buck Roger's comic strips and Bug-eyed Monsters, Tarzan and Barsoom, raygun-flaunting superheroes rescuing scantily clad damsels in distress from creepy aliens, and megalomaniac scientists threatening a take-over of the world. To a few others, science fiction is a sermon on the marvels of science and technology, sugarcoated with a thin layer of fiction.
Science fiction is a reaction against realism or the single reality fiction of the nineteenth-century, when the Victorian notion that the universe could be comprehended in terms of easily understood formulas and that life was earnest and real was generally accepted. In the introduction to his anthology, *Modern Science Fiction*, Norman Spinrad writes:

"Today, after Einstein, Freud, Psychedelics, Quantum Mechanics, McLuhan, Cybernetics, the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, system analysis and few other little vision-expanders, we were back where we were before the Victorians defined reality as a rigid Tinker Joy construct.

It is relevant to point here that science fiction deals with the explosion of the evolving human mind in a total space-time universe that is itself revolving realities around us faster than we catch our breath.

II

In this section I shall focus on the brief history of the origin and gradual development of science fiction.

The formative history of science fiction begins with Hugo Gernsback who founded *Amazing Story Magazines* in 1926.
Gernsback had the notion of "Scientification" as a way of educating the masses in science. The fiction in 'amazing stories' emphasized the importance of technological developments on the modern frame of mind. The literary critics of the day had no term for this mind-blowing, consciousness-expanding literary effect. Hence, Spinrad rightly mentions that the early science fiction fans called it a "sense of wonder".

The appeal of science fiction has long been strengthened by the bizarre and mysterious qualities of the writers themselves. An important figure in this respect was John W. Campbell Jr. Unlike Gernsback, Campbell encouraged scientific credibility of his writers. Consequently, he became the single most influential editor in the development of science fiction as a literary form. He championed many outlandish causes, including antigravity devices, dowsing and astrological weather forecasts. He was responsible for advancing the cause of man's understanding and mastery of the Universe through inspired personal effect. Thus, Campbell was regarded as a "Scientific Visionary".
It is significant that A.E Van Vogt in his novel *Slan* came out with the human mutant as a successor to man. Robert A. Heinlein became famous for his “messianic hero” in the novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Asimov, with a Ph.D in Chemistry, was eminently suitable to Campbell’s conception of scientifically informed writer. He wrote a long series of stories and novels on robots. His novel *The Foundation Triology*, deals with the Spenglerian rise, decline, and rebirth of a gigantic empires.

It is significant to note that the influence of Campbell, the growing awareness of the new world brought on by technology and the general improvement in the quality of science fiction writing led to the birth of—a subculture. The fans congregated around the writers like Robert A. Heinlein and Kurt Vonnegut Jr., both of whose works embody the most appealing of all science fiction characteristics, the mating of magic and science.

Science fiction magazines were founded almost daily. Some, such as *Galaxy* and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, published excellent works. By the mid-1950s, more than forty
magazines were in the market. The result was that meaningful work was buried in the avalanche. It became increasingly difficult for readers and reviewers to sort the best work out. Some writers quit in disgust. Others, such as Theodore Sturgeon, Philip Jose Farmer and Philip K. Dick hung on at considerable personal economic cost.

Too much stylization led to another difficulty. The trouble with the genre material is that it became over used. Moreover, the props are few—rocket-ships, telepathy, robots, time-travel, other dimensions, huge machines, aliens, future wars. It soon became impossible to use the props seriously without inviting self-parody. Vonnegut certainly realized this when he discovered that they worked very well as subservient vehicles for his cosmic irony and existential wit.

The bursting of the science fiction bubble in the 1950s led to a revolution in the genre in the 1960s, which coincided with Vonnegut's success. The revolution involved a number of younger writers, a "new wave" consisting of Thomas M. Disch, James Sallis, and Spinrad. To these writers, the older single-reality fiction with its linear conception of time simply did not accord with their generational consciousness.
Defining science fiction is a herculean task as it has no agreed definition. In reality, almost everyone who writes about it comes out with new definition. I shall focus on these aspects in the following pages.

Science fiction is defined as a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision. John W. Campbell aptly states that fiction is only dreams written out, but science fiction consists of the hopes and dreams and fears of a technologically based society. It deals with all places in the universe, and all times in eternity. So the mainstream literature is, truly, a subset of science fiction. A good science fiction story is a story about human beings, with a human problem, and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its science content. It is significant that science fiction portrays the genre that embraces all imaginary fiction which grows out of scientific concepts. It may also be defined as the origin of species fiction since it is about us as we have been shaped by
our genesis, our biology, our environment and our behavior. James Gunn gave a descriptive definition of science fiction:

Science fiction is the branch of literature that deals with the effects of change on people in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to distant places. It often concerns with scientific or technological change, and it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or community; often civilization itself is in danger.

The plethora of definitions of science fiction led to the facetious assertion that anything labeled as science fiction is science fiction. It may be argued that these definitions emphasize the scientific content in science fiction. It is the fictional speculation emanating from a scientific fact or theory that matters in science fiction and not the fact or theory itself.

IV

In this section I intend to present some of the features and functions of science fiction.

The most striking feature of science fiction is its presentation of different kinds of setting or situation. The science fiction story usually takes place in the future, or in present which has been in some way
altered by a new factor into a different present, or in a past similarly altered. It may depict a different world, or our own world that has suffered a change through addition of a new circumstance or the removal of an existing one.

Some science fiction writers portray an alternate world that has taken a turn different from our own at some significant period of history. Others present parallel worlds or universe where the laws of nature applicable to our universe are reversed or radically altered. Still others introduce para-dimensions reaching beyond the three spatial dimensions (length, breadth and height/depth) and the three temporal ones (past, present, future). Several fictional devices have been adopted to realize the altered settings: space travel by means of rockets, spaceships, interstellar drives, antigravity devices, hyperspace warps and jump doors etc.; time travel by means of time-machines, fields of temporal distortions, paradimension jumps or simply mind-power. Gadgets and gimmicks galore to bring about various kinds of novel situations: the assumptions of the existence of alien worlds and alien beings; para-physical and para-psychological powers; the making of human beings artificially or through a man machine
symbiosis; and many more. By means of one or more of these devices, the science fiction writer creates a “novum” - a radical deviation from the empirical reality of his time and world. Both science fiction and fantasy employ the ‘novum’. While fantasy treats it as magical or supernatural, science fiction seeks to project it as human effort extending to sentient creatures of any world.

Science fiction performs some significant functions in addition to presenting wonder, action, and romance. One of these is its role as a literature of change. This has been aptly explained by Arthur C. Clarke. He explains:

The science fiction writer by mapping out possible futures as well as a good many impossible ones, encourages in his readers flexibility of mind, readiness to accept and even welcomes change, that is, adaptability. The dinosaurs disappeared because they could not adapt to the changing environment. We shall disappear if we can not adapt to an environment which now contains space ships and thermo nuclear weapons.

Science fiction writers have more vociferously focused attention on the dangers of over population, pollution, ecological imbalance, automation, mind manipulation, and several such problems of concern to mankind. For this they adopt the process of
extrapolation, i.e., taking up current developments or trends and projecting them forward in time. Scientific ideas when dramatized in fiction have a better chance of gripping the human than when they are analyzed theoretically.

In conclusion, it may be stated that science fiction is written by men and women who live in this world as a part of contemporary society. Hence Edmond Crispin rightly suggests:

Science fiction's real subject matter is the present, seen against the perspective of history... It is not really about the Martians, or Morlocks, or miraculously intelligent machines.... It is about us, here, now....

Serious writers cannot help making their works reflection of contemporary values, masked in some cases and overt in others.

Science fiction has specific advantage as a vehicle of satire. Satirists have always felt the need for 'other' places or times for purposes of comparison or contrast for freedom to criticize individual or institutions without fear of being censored or censured. When most other writers felt gagged from social criticism, science fiction writers continued to criticize society unpuzzled because of the freedom that this mode offered.
In this section I shall make a critical survey of the backgrounds that led to the development of the Twentieth Century Science fiction.

While myths, legends, fantastic adventures, imaginary voyages, satires and utopian projections served as the literary progenitors of science fiction, developments outside the world of literature were gradually leading towards the making of a “literature of change”. The socio-cultural milieu of the modern society dominated by science and technology provides the basic background for the development of modern science fiction.

In America there was a flood of science fiction in the early 1930s. It presented nothing except wonder, adventure, and the gadgetry. In the forties, the emphasis on hardware and adventure got toned down and the social aspects of science and technology started receiving attention. The Gernsbackian formula fiction was replaced by amalgam of Wells and Verne, bringing the genre some thematic relevance if not literary significance.
Space-flight was first becoming a reality with the Russian Sputnik and American Apollo programme in the late fifties and early sixties. Mark Hillegas and Jack Williamson brought academic recognition to the genre with the organization of full time course in science fiction in American Universities. There was a spurt in the publication of books and anthologies of science fiction.

With these developments there appeared the phenomenon of 'New-Wave' science fiction, characterized by experimentation in subject and style, iconoclastic attitudes, and highly subjective approaches. It was only in the fifties that there was an influx of new talents, notably among them being Samuel R. Delaney, Ursula K. Le Guinn, Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury, Phillip K. Dick, Frank Herbert and Walter M. Miller. To them science fiction is a metaphor and myth. It is significant that all of them had contributed to the recognition of science fiction in the academic circles.

In the sixties, a number of well known writers of the mainstream started employing themes and techniques of science
fiction, resulting in the assimilation of one with the other. The tradition of this genre has been enriched by the popular science fiction writers like William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut who gave a rich dimension to the art of science fiction.

The reason for discussing them together is that despite many important differences between their ways of thinking and writing, there works seem to fall within a broad spectrum of shared thought and technique. And if we find similarities between the thematic and structural pattern of their works, it only proves that they are operating on a common wavelength. This common wave length is the use of astounding scientific discoveries, space flights and other developments in their novels concerning the history of human thought and the advancement human civilization. It is this very common concern in Burroughs, Pynchon, Barth, Heller and Vonnegut that make them construct their novels on similar patterns.

The exploration of inner space through science fiction techniques is seen in William S. Burroughs' novels of "decadence"
which portray the consequences of contemporary addictions. Ihab Hassan declares that the frame work of Burroughs’ book is science fiction, the new map of our hell, the nightmare that our machines dream when they dream of history.

Like Phillip K Dick, Burroughs uses drug addiction and its effects on awareness as a central theme, and projects his novels into the worlds that drugs induce. Burroughs’s Naked Lunch takes the heroin-addicted narrator through several cities, and then into imagined settings of horror, violence degradations and perversions. Time ceases to be linear and becomes a montage in a world view based on biochemistry, anthropology and politics. Burroughs’s claims in this novel that places and people, like machinery, have interchangeable parts that can be cut up and rearranged any way. Constant metamorphoses of characters and disjointed action make the novel dizzying fantasy. But to Mary McCarthy, it is “the first space novel, the first serious piece of science fiction---the others are entertainment”.

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Burroughs’s next novel *Nova Express* tries to depict a struggle of the “interplanetary police” to defeat the designs of the “Nova Mob”, a criminal gang engaged in altering the physical and mental attributes of people by administration of drugs, orgone dispersion, and biologic mutation. Its ultimate aim is to make the sun go nova and thus destroy the solar system. Several elements of science fiction such as space mercenaries, time distortion, Weird symbiotic forms, super gadgets and lost worlds figure in this fascinating novel.

Burroughs subsequent novels, *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket That Exploded* continue the same theme in the same narrative style of cut-up-and-scattered pieces. Theodore Solotaroff called these works as “series of ‘blue’ science fiction novels” It is significant that while dealing with the theme of impersonations and fantasies, Burroughs acts out an inferno where everyone is turned on, each in his own way. The result is a species of gallows humour-obscene, ghastly, and timely of bodily abuse and spiritual death.

Another novelist of this genre and perhaps the most remarkable writer to explore the limits of modern fantasy has been Thomas
Pynchon. Pynchon uses traditional structures in his novels and undercuts them by foregrounding details rather than plot. The central theme of his novels create a tension between form and formlessness.

Pynchon’s first novel *V* (1963) portrays a terrifying picture of the decadence of western civilization. It scuttles back and forth in space and time in an attempt to trace the mysterious elusive lady, V. The narration being partly realistic and partly fantasy, it cannot be considered science fiction. Pynchon’s second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is short, witty and the plot is too elaborate and absurd to fit into a science fiction except in Pynchon’s use of the concept entropy.

Pynchon clearly steps into science fictional motif and technique in his third and most famous novel, *Gravity Rainbow* (1973). It contains many of the themes of his earlier work, including paranoia, conspiracy and entropy. The hero of the novel is presented as having been twinned with a rocket in his childhood. He is sexually conditioned by electronics and as a result, he has the uncanny power to pinpoint the targets of German V-2 rockets during the Second
World War simply by showing sexual excitation at those locations. Psychoanalytic critics of science fiction have often considered that rockets and spaceships stand for phallus. But in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the phallus that 'stands' for rockets.

He also uses science fictional idea in the novel by suggesting that a man can take on the fantasies and dreams of others and thus free them for more serious work. His vision of the world is shown as run by chemical companies, and the history of the world a conspiracy of rocket-markers. He beautifully merges the past, the present, and the future into one to describe contemporary predicaments in an absurdist manner.

John Barth makes use of science fictional devices to present an allegory. In his mock-messianic novel, *Giles, Goat Boy*, Barth views the university as the world itself and the campuses are the present day power blocks. All crucial decisions are made by self programming machines WESCAC (West Campus Automatic Computer) and it's Eastern Counter Part, EASCAC. The computers can EAT (destroy by Electro encephalic Amplification and Transmission) the entire
Universe if they wish. Only a Grand Tutor can descend to the bowels of the computer and change its AIM (Automatic Implementation Machine). A part-Christ part-Pan figure, the Goat-Boy named Giles, takes upon him the task of saving mankind from the tyranny of the computer. To Barth, science fiction is just one of several handy pegs to hang his satire and allegory on.

Joseph Heller was one of the versatile writers of the 60s. His Novel, Catch-22 (1961) is a great commercial and popular war classic. The picture of the world that emerges from Heller’s Catch-22 is characterized by “absolute entrapment....permanent apocalypse and built in catastrophe”. It is a world in which the human situation is coextensive with total war. This world is impersonal. It is made of abstract systems, institutions and structures that make men behave irrationally, take death casually and fight war without considering the consequences.

Catch-22 stands for all the absurd regulations of society that force men to fight war. It says, “You have always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to (p. 68). Catch-22 has usurped man’s
control over his own life and has left him to the mercy of an institution which manufactures fatal and incredible death traps.

Heller concludes his novel with the view that the absurdity of the modern world is responsible for the war. It is not an irremediable or inescapable fact of the human condition. His protagonist Yossarian escapes absurdity even though he is unable to oviate it. His escape has important consequences in relation to the eradication of war. Heller is hopeful of a world free from war. For him the world is a Utopia, no matter how far out of reach—is a meaningful ideal for which man may strive.

VI

If anyone could be said to have zoomed into modern American science fiction, the honour must go to Kurt Vonnegut Jr. He is unquestionably a prolific writer of the 1960’s who has brought about the merger of science fiction and the mainstream of literature.

The mention of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. evokes in science fiction circles mixed feelings of delight and dismay—delight because he has written some of the most enjoyable science fiction available, and
dismay because he has de-identified himself from the genre. Vonnegut's writings are more in the nature of spoofs of science fiction. Vonnegut's stories have appeared in specialist science fiction magazines. His early novels were originally published as science fiction paper backs. Player Piano was issued in a science book club edition. Cats Cradle, The Sirens of Titan and Slaughterhouse-Five were all Hugo nominees. Thus, science fiction is so apparent in his writing that it is the label he has been stuck with ever since Player Piano.

For over a decade and half, reviewers and critics treated him as a mere science fiction writer. Vonnegut is not comfortable with the classification which he complained in his article in New York Times Book Review, "I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file drawer labelled 'Science fiction' ever since the publication of Player Piano in 1952, and I would like out, because so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a comfort station".

Vonnegut was sore headed about the label not because he himself considered the genre infradig but because many serious critics
mistake it to be so. The desire to renounce the label was not on ideological grounds but for pragmatic considerations such as to obtain greater academic and literary recognition, wider readership and higher remuneration. To a question, "Are you a science fiction writer?" put by Scholes in 1966, Vonnegut replied: "Well I wrote a thing in The New York Times last year about this, objecting finally because I thought it was costing me a lot of money in reputation..." And yet, by almost any definition of science fiction, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., is a science fictionist. He may be as unhappy about it as he likes, but the conclusion is inescapable. In the strictest sense he may not be a science fiction writer. But he most certainly uses the motifs of that form as metaphors of his own humorous vision. According to Leslie Fiedler he uses the science fiction motive not as a kind of restriction but a way of releasing his own sentimental ironic views of a meaningless universe redeemed by love.

Vonnegut employs science fiction motifs such as time-travel, visits by creatures from other planets, flying saucers, glimpses into a nightmare future to make the reader more aware of the absurdity of man's place in the universe. He uses these motifs as a means of
transmitting his vision that demands the intergalactic scope. Given Vonnegut’s attitudes towards his characters, if there were no such as science fiction, he would be forced to invent it.

It is significant to note that science fiction metaphor offers Vonnegut his greatest freedom in demonstrating his negative vision. It also offers the reader the greatest anesthetic against his vision. Science fiction thus serves as a mitigating element in Vonnegut’s fiction as well as a means of carrying off many of the jokes that run through and structure his novels.

Vonnegut writes in a world beyond alienation, a world different from that of James and Joyee, and even Faulkner and Hemingway. Any writer who hopes to penetrate its surface must approach it with a technique. Vonnegut is a writer who uses the techniques of science fiction form to delineate human experience—a human experience broadened to include within its scope the technology which forms a goodly part of that experience.
No longer can there be such a vast dichotomy between literature of idea and literature of experience. Karen and Charles Wood analyse the works of Vonnegut as fusion of the literature of idea and that of experience. Referring to the question, “What in hell are people for?” which recurs frequently in Vonnegut’s work, they rightly point out:

....the answers have been changed by Vonnegut: but it is the direction that change is taking which indicates how fully Vonnegut understands the question. Within this ultimate destiny motif lie most of the important questions that can be asked about life, about men, about the absurd universe we live in. It is to Kurt Vonnegut’s credit that he is integrating two modes of literature in order to ask anew questions, which form the life blood of literary art. If any one can pull science fiction into the mainstream of literature, Vonnegut can. If this can not be done, then he will have shown us that it is necessary that twentieth century man at least draw from that branch of literature that has came to exist because of the scientific essence of the twentieth century (qtd.in The Vonnegut effect, 156).

It is significant to note that our world is now one in which science has so permeated our lives, machines have so impinged upon our existence, and the mysteries of the universe have so forced themselves upon us, that a literature which deals only with man’s relationship to man is inadequate as an expression of human
experience. No man who experiences the modern world fully can escape it.

The fact that science fiction has always been the orphan child of the literary world, the writer, who wishes to be a genuine speaker of truth, can surely not be a science fictionist. But, because Vonnegut has been filed and labelled as a science fictionist, he has seldom been fully understood.

Vonnegut’s major theme from one work to the next remains the major issue of a world that lies beyond alienation. It operates in terms of separation with a barrier set up between and among mankind. It precludes not only communication in the truest sense, but also renders absurd and meaningless communication on the superficial level. These are themes which are found again and again in Vonnegut’s work.

Vonnegut has instinctively turned to the techniques and methods of science fiction to render his vision. Indeed, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has become the spokesman of his age. As Asimov
rightly said, he is writing about “all the great mind cracking hopeless problems” of today. While Mark Schorer wrote of “Technique as Discovery”, Vonnegut, and all science fiction writers, use ‘Discovery as Technique’. Their method of approach to literature is to discover the universe and let the discovery provide their technique.

It is argued that Vonnegut’s literary artistry may be seen as the fusion of human experience and idea into a single entity. Vonnegut himself has pointed out that this entity operates flawlessly as machines, as wars, as cities, as big, simple ideas, as tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes. Thus, to term at least a portion of Vonnegut’s work as “Science fiction” is not to degrade it, but to set it apart as a body of work which has managed an ultimate perception of an idea trying to get itself on to the printed page for centuries.

It is significant to note that Vonnegut’s first novel, Player Piano (1952), is one of the best science fiction novels ever written. It rests uneasily in the science fiction genre because it is such a good novel---a novel that puts the emphasis on characters---upon human experience
and actions. The fact that the characters in Player Piano happen to be living in a grotesque future world, Vonnegut is merely attempting to stick "real" fiction into a science fiction framework. Thus Vonnegut has turned the conventional science fiction inside out in Player Piano.

Vonnegut's inversion is simply to have realized that people are the most important things in both real and the fictional universe. He begins, not with the idea, but with Paul Proteus, possibly the most solidly realized character in all science fictions. The secondary characters of the novel, such as Lasher, Ed Finnerty, Kroner, and Anita are less acutely delineated. Some of these are drawn with such a fine, deft touch that all but leap off the page. Science provides the conflict, but Vonnegut resolves his novel with people being basically the same.

In Player Piano Vonnegut has extended the current trends of society as he saw them in 1952, to their logical end and the result is a description of the nightmare world that he envisioned. Vonnegut remarks of this novel, "I was working in Schenectady for General Electric, completely surrounded by machines and ideas of machines,
so I wrote a novel about people and machines, and machines frequently got the best of it.

Indeed, the idea paramount in Player Piano is simply what Vonnegut has stated it to be—that machines frequently get the best of it. He hit in his very first novel upon the realization that our contemporary society is so technology dominated that man simply has to notice technology. For him the communication of the idea of Player Piano, and of nearly all his works, has been to admit that science exists and has become vastly important to our lives. It may be argued that the communication of such an idea would not be easy to accomplish without the technique of science fiction.

Thus it is significant to note that Player Piano features a utopia of the future in which machines do nearly all the works, and the dignity of human labour has been so devalued that the 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 the desire to show off have made it 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.

The ending of the novel suggests, of course, the central metaphor of the book. Not only has American know-how resulted in a society that is itself a huge player piano, but history is much like the music on a piano roll—it can only repeat itself. Just as Paul finds himself back where he started so will all revolutionists and schemers. What is so ironic about the frustration is that Paul had failed to realize that the very workers he wants to set free by smashing the machines are programmed machines themselves. The essential nature of man may well be Protean, and like so many of Vonnegut's characters, Paul is anxious to change himself and as well as to change others. He does undergo an inner change, but this has no ultimate impact on external matters and finally he ends of sadly and comically deluded, despite his enlightening experience.

The Sirens of Titan (1959) follows science fiction form more consistently than any of Vonnegut's novels. It goes farthest into the
future and 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 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 success with which the science fiction technique is employed to those ends.

It may be argued that The Sirens of Titan depends more on the sufferings and delusions of Malachi Constant and Winton Niles Rumfoord than it does on the trappings of space-travel, time-warps, strange life terms, robots and anti-utopia. Moreover, Vonnegut makes more use of these science fiction standbys in The Sirens of Titan than in any other novels. The result is a cascade of absurd invention, its hither-thither technique a sophisticated pinch from the Wide Screen Baroque School. Indeed, the elaboration of plot makes it read like an exceptionally funny Dick novel. Dick is a science fiction writer (The Martians Time-Slip and The Penultimate Truth) who uses the form much like Vonnegut does.
It is significant to note that The Sirens of Titan begins with a reverse of Player Piano’s nostalgia: a persona speaking from a more remote future, tells us that this is the story of a less happy era falling between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression. During a space trip, Winston Rumfoord and his dog, Kazak, have plunged into a chrono-synclastic infundilum while taking Rumfoord’s private spaceships to Mars. The infundibulum is a sort of gyre in time and space. A series of bizarre events follow—abduction, seduction, mind-control, alien encounter, invasion, the founding of New Church and the discovery that mankind was all along being manipulated for a trivial purpose by an alien robotic race. A whole array of science fictional devices get fused in this funny story which seriously examines the fact that men did not know that the meaning of life was within themselves, they searched all creation for meaning but found that it was meaningless.

Vonnegut’s third novel, Mother Night (1962) is free of all trappings of science fiction. His next novel Cat’s Cradle (1963) gets back to the genre, narrating a global catastrophe caused by “Ice-nine”—a substance that converts all water it comes in contact with
into "ice-nine" which in turn can do the same and so on. "Ice-nine" is Vonnegut's cold symbol for 'hot' atomic radiation, with the same type of chain reactions and the same destructive power. The plot of the novel is partly political and partly religious, and both politics and religion get comically distorted in Vonnegut's hands.

His next novel, God Bless You, Mr. Rose Water (1965) is not a science fiction, but its protagonist has a great interest in science fiction, especially for the writings of Kilgore Trout. The same Kilgore Trout whom Rosewater considers a neglected genius figures largely in a later novel, Breakfast of Champions, (1973). It is another non-science fiction work of Vonnegut which makes constant reference to science fiction. The climax of this novel comes about when Dwayne Hoover turns violent after reading a story by Kilgore Trout, obsessed with the belief that all apparently living beings - human and other except himself, are robots programmed to keep the world going for some future sentient being who might wish to inhabit it.

Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut's most powerful novel, portrays Vonnegut's scathing attack on man's love of war, a
translation of the reality of fire-bombing into fiction. It is in this novel that Vonnegut makes the best of both worlds – that of science fiction and the world of ‘realistic’ fiction using two major time-streams in the novel one in the past tracing Bills experiences from becoming lost in Luxembourg in 1944 to his being in Dresden in 1945, and the other from 1968 to later in the same year.

This novel presents two characters who can see beneath the surface the tragic realities of human history but make no attempt to bring about change. These are the author himself, who is a frequent commentator and the Protagonist, Bill Pilgrim. With Billy coming ‘unstuck’ being freed from the Prison of time as a result of the horrors of the war, the past and the future merge with the present in a curious fictionalization of the opening lines of T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps in time future.
> And time future contained in time past
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
Vonnegut aptly states that Billy Pilgrim is transported to Tralfamadore and kept there in a luxurious zoo where he is mated with a kidnapped movie star, Montana Wildhack. The two live there almost blissfully and have a child and then Billy returns to the Earth by means of a time Wrap. Since all times coexist, Bill’s absence escapes notice, because by traveling through a time wrap his stay of several years on Tralfamadore only means that he has gone from Earth for a microsecond. “All time is eternally present” and hence all action is irredeemable and inevitable from the Tralfamadorians point of view, there being no such thing as free will. Back on the Earth, Billy preaches to large audience about flying saucers, alien cultures, time, determinism, and the insignificance of death. He predicts unfailingly of his own time of death, and is assassinated at the time predicted. It may be stated that like the seemingly unnecessary Dresden bombing which forms the background of the novel, everything is meaningless—wars, carnage, assassination, ambition, ideals, even existence. Nothing can be done or undone by anyone’s will. Everything is already there, patterned in non-linear simultaneous time.
Galapagos (1985) is Vonnegut’s last novel and the best after Slaughterhouse Five. It is his most controlled, inventive and remarkably a well-crafted work that offers a wry account of human species from a million years in the future. In fact, Vonnegut has stood a hoary science fiction cliché on his head to structure this simultaneously funny and harrowing novel. It echoes Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse Five in its developments of powerful role of chance. Vonnegut persists in Galapagos in reiterating the ponderous themes he first raised in The Sirens of Titan: the universe is an accident from which has evolved the serendipity called life; chronological time is an idea that lures people into believing in linear causality and intelligent purpose; absolute truths are illusion and those truths often become self-destructive paradoxes. Vonnegut’s message in Galapagos is that the human race has muddled its way to such splendid and horrific achievements because of the accidental evolution of a brain that does not seem to comprehend the danger of its own arrogance.

Galapagos begins brilliantly with the narrator, Leon Trout who is telling this story from a vantage point in the future—one million years from now. This gives him the same sort of historical perspective
than Billy Pilgrim had from planet Tralfamadore in Slaughterhouse Five. It enables him and Vonnegut to jump back and forth in time to comment on a lot of twentieth-century atrocities and make sci-fi like speculations about the future. The result is a novel that has the satisfaction a well-crafted comic strip, though it often settles for easy jokes instead of real humour. It tries to amuse us rather than move our emotions. It does have plenty of whimsical charms.

By means of science fictional devices Vonnegut looks at human affairs from outside, and transforms individual situations into universal conditions. He uses science fiction as a means of escape for his protagonist, an escape that leads to a greater understanding of his own world. It is an escape into a greater reality than an escape from reality.

It is significant to state that when Vonnegut moves half mystically and half laughingly in and out of science fiction, he always comes up with a definition of himself and others that will stand in the terrifying light of twentieth-century knowledge. When he is writing simply as a science fiction writer, he does not move very far towards
that definition. But when he combines the special effects of science fiction with extended comic irony in his novels, he transforms one of the important forms of pop culture into his own distinctive form of astral joke book.

In summary, it may be stated that much of Vonnegut’s writings employ the formula of science fiction, makes use of stock characters, replays old plots, states universal themes, and is written in a style that depends heavily on folk saying and street language. It may be argued that the particular power of Vonnegut’s work especially in the four books which develop his distinctive voice, all published in 1960’s— is that he deals with extraordinary nature of contemporary fact in the deceptively simple way. Vonnegut is a master of getting inside a cliché and tilting it enough off centers to reveal both the horror and the misery that lies beneath the surface of most placidly dull and ordinary human response.