Chapter-II

Significance of Vonnegut's Early Novels
Kurt Vonnegut showed his literary intelligence at a very young age. He enjoyed writing about real events and real people from his school days. In this chapter I wish to explore the backgrounds of social, political and psychological events that steadily moulded Vonnegut’s fictional art from an apprentice short story writer to a celebrity of twentieth-century American fiction. Furthermore, I also wish to highlight the significance of his early novels such as Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Mother Night and Slaughterhouse Five.

I

Vonnegut draws his themes and characters for his novels from his childhood experiences in a large extended family, his middle class background, his knowledge in science and technology, and his war experiences. His novels deal with the strange unimaginable war time atrocities, crafted from materials in the storehouse of middle class American culture. His own experiences within this class provide the
structure for his fiction. Vonnegut is doggedly middle class, and much of what he knows derives from what he learned as a child in Indianapolis, giving him a simple disposition towards plane truth which maintains despite more complex, even hysterical situations.

Both in theme and structure Vonnegut's fiction is a challenge to familiar notions of what the American novel should be, but it is articulated within the core of America's most commonly accepted terms. He is an offbeat hero among the intellectual elite expressing the most homely sentiments. He has said, "I trust my own writing most and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am" (Palm Sunday, 79). These comments of the writer reveal a central truth about the contents and techniques of his novels.

The novelist Ken Kesey once pointed out that he wanted to be a lighting rod, not a seismograph. Vonnegut's achievement is that he has been both. His most challenging work, Slaughterhouse Five, published during the Vietnam War years, is a work of bleak black humour and considerable resignation. It abandoned conventional
notions of time and space as readily as it discarded the easy assumptions of natural innocence and intrinsic American worth. Yet it retained middle class values and hopes, and out of that tension it helped to reinvent the novel. It also tries to reshape the country’s imagination as it passed from one stage of history to another.

Kurt Vonnegut’s family in Indianapolis was a large one. His father and grandfathers were successful architects and their buildings were important centres of commerce and culture of this Midwestern Capital. Aunts, uncles and cousins abounded, giving young Kurt the true sense of an extended family. It was a child’s ideal world – before the Great Depression, before the World War II – and it prompted no doubt in him the quest for identity and the threat of the future. Vonnegut’s first world was indeed the American dream of its time. But succeeding decades of the twentieth-century destroyed that ideal community and Vonnegut found himself at the centre of that dissolution, experiencing it over his most formative years. Moreover, large and stable American families have in his own days become exception rather than the rule. The typical family is nuclear and stripped down to essentials of economic mobility – a mobility that
disperses these units away from their ancestral homes and keeps them continually moving at a rate of once in every four years. All these constitute a great loss that pervades the entire tone of his work. As Vonnegut explains:

I think most of the unhappiness-the indescribable malaise -that people are feeling these days is really a longing for a large permanent family. The ideal commune would be one in which the people actually grown up together that's the sort of commune humans have lived in for most of their history on earth. So it is better if you have bloodiness. But if you can't you can at least have a lot of people. (Class71, 16)

Throughout the seventies, when he was in great demand as a college commencement speaker, Vonnegut brought the same message to his students:

Your class spokesperson mourned the collapse of the institution of marriage in this country. Marriage is collapsing because our families are too small. A man can not be a whole society to a woman, and a woman can not be a whole society to a man. We try, but it is scarcely surprising that so many of us go to pieces (Palm Sunday, 180-181).

The imaginative reconstruction of such primitive ideals such as the extended family and regional stability determine both theme and structure for Vonnegut’s work of the sixties and seventies. But the
essentials of this vision can be found in his earliest and more popular publication, *Welcome to the monkey house*. Vonnegut's short stories from these years often alternate between two types of narrators. He is either a 'contact man for an investment counseling firm' who will call on the potential clients -- the middle class Americans, or an honest trade's man in 'Aluminum combination storms windows and screens' and again a solid representative of the American middle class.

Another important element in Vonnegut's fiction is its demonstration that reality is not absolute but instead an arbitrary convention. As a child just turning nine years old, and continuing through his teens, Vonnegut saw the social and economic reality of his family changing quite radically, from financially secure respectability to a decade of unemployment of his father, loss of social standing, and hard times in general for the rest of his relatives in Indianapolis. The depleted fortune of his family and the country's economic collapse had changed the terms of his life and his education for the future. It is significant to note that the restructuring of Vonnegut's life, which the Great Depression provoked, may have been a disguised blessing. In
his fiction, at least, Vonnegut delineates these aspects in the social matrix of his early years.

In 1941 Vonnegut enrolled at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. There he was attracted to Cornell daily Sun and began editing to the College humorous column Innocents Abroad. By the time Vonnegut was 21, however, a different reality intervened. He contracted Pneumonia and was forced to drop his classes. He enlisted in the US Army, which sent him overseas as an advance infantry scout. In 1944, he obtained leave to visit his parents on the mother day. But the night before his arrival his mother ended her life by consuming overdose of sleeping pills. Almost thirty years later, Vonnegut expressed his painful feelings about this suicide in Breakfast of Champions.

Thereafter, Vonnegut returned to his regiment for the battle of the Bulge where he was captured by the Wehrmacht on 22nd December 1944. As a prisoner of war Vonnegut was sent to the open city of Dresden, which was nevertheless destroyed in a fire-bombing by the Allies on 13th February 1945. Only a few of the city’s quarter
million inhabitants survived. One of the fortunate survivor was young Vonnegut who saw the scientific truth in the form of a carefully engineered fire storm—destruction of one of the artistic and architectural treasure houses of European culture. This holocaust coloured Vonnegut's entire career, and it took him 20 years to achieve the esthetic distance necessary to describe the event in Slaughterhouse Five (1968). Indeed, these painful experiences were the shaping forces which gave a stimulus to his craft in his subsequent novels.

Between 1947 and 1950 Vonnegut worked as a public relation official for the research laboratory of the General Electric Corporation in Schenectady, New York. At General Electric Vonnegut wrote press releases and mixed socially with young scientists. From this post-war corporate experience Vonnegut drew themes and structures for his early fiction. But at the same time Vonnegut was becoming restless, rebellious and deeply skeptical of the good life promised by such corporate ideals. He quit the job to become a free lance writer because he felt compelled to write a novel about people and machines in which machines frequently got the best of it.
II

Here I wish to discuss the significance of Vonnegut's early novels which continued to satirize the American society and its establishments. It also highlights the unending sequence of war horrors and the dehumanization of individual in a society dominated by science and technology.

The first of Kurt Vonnegut's novels, *Player Piano* (1952) depicts the shape of things in the future. Its settings are the city of Ilium, New York, some years after the second industrial revolution. This is a novel about a future America in which machines determine human destiny on the basis of computer, "Achievement and Aptitude Profiles". This satire of contemporary America through the projection of a frightening future is pervaded by a note of nostalgia. The protagonist and even the author himself seem to indulge in the notion that the present is grim and the future holds little promise. The past must somehow had been better.
Player Piano is the story of Paul Proteus, the young manager of the Ilium works who has served as Director of National Industrial, Commercial communications, Food stuffs and Resources (10). The lost dignity is illuminated through a series of subplots that are linked to the adventures of Paul Proteus. The Shah of Bratpur, for example, is an Eastern Spiritual leader who, accompanied by the state departments Dr. Ewing J. Halyard, watches an army parade given in his honour. One of the soldiers marching is private Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Hagstrohm. The Shah immediately notices the emptiness of American life, particularly for Halyard and Hagstrohm.

By setting this novel in Ilium, New York, Vonnegut deliberately contrasts the demeaning and unheroic role of man in a technocracy with the glory and grandeur of Homer’s Troy. The major computer for the country is EPICAC which suggests that the only epic to which man can look forward in his post—Christian technological age is one found on Computer paper. Vonnegut opens his novel by parodying Julius Caesar’s Commentary on the Gallic Wars:

“ILIUM, NEW YORK, IS DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS.”
In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south, across the Iroquois River, is the area known locally as Homestead, where almost all of the people live (1).

As the foregoing summary suggests there is no straight forward development of one plot in Player Piano. The story of Proteus metamorphosis from a company man to a rebel is the key to the understanding of the novel. Paul is not a fully convinced company man. There are limitations to his rebellion at the end, and, above all, Vonnegut is more interested in the actions of the whole society than of one man. It soon becomes apparent that Paul finds it necessary to visit periodically Thomas Edison's old laboratory in order to receive a "vote of confidence from the past...where the past admitted how humble and shoddy it had been, where one could look from the old to the new and see that mankind really had come a long way" (6). Vonnegut carefully describes the cat's natural antipathy for the machine. When the machine mangled the cat and spewed it high in the air, the animal "dropped to the asphalt--dead and smoking, but outside." (12). It is only by dying that the cat is able to escape the
scientific community’s electronically guarded compound. In a way Paul feels the same problem as the cat. Paul finally decides to leave because of his job “was not getting anybody anywhere, because it was getting every body nowhere” (247).

It is significant that the central conflict in the novel is between the machine and the humans, between the forces which espoused automation and those which affirmed the dignity of man, the warmth and fallibility of his animal being. Proteus realizes that he is becoming more and more inhuman and finds that he must make a decision. He must either accept his age of science as a paradise or be content to live as automation or leave such a society. He slides into “the fantasy of the new, good life ahead of him. There was a place for a man and woman somewhere outside of society--to live heartily and blamelessly, naturally by hands and wits” (126). Two central symbols appearing early in the novel focus this conflict. The first is a cat which Proteus is pleased to discover because a recent plant failure was caused by a mouse gnawing an electric cable. When he goes to check the failure in Plant 58, he takes the cat with him. The cat becomes terrified of the robot cleaning machine and flees, but the mechanical
hunter ruthlessly tracks her down and swallows up the animal predator.

Now I wish to focus on the other important symbol that gives the book its title: The Player Piano. This instrument makes an appropriate symbol since it represents one of the oldest and seemingly most harmless attempts to duplicate and replace the movements of man by means of holes punched in paper. Proteus, Finnerty, and Shepherd have followed this same procedure at the old plant 58. They have measured the motions of Rudy Hertz, the best machine operator, and recorded on tape. The machines now run themselves—albeit not quite as well as the newer ones—and Rudy becomes the replaced “piano player”. When Paul stumbles upon the now old and somewhat senile Rudy in the Home stead tavern, the displaced operator insists on playing the player piano in honor of the engineer. Rudy regards the instrument with awe, saying, “you can almost see a ghost sitting there playing his heart out.” (38). The ghost that we see, and which Paul sees, of course is of Rudy himself. Vonnegut underlines the striking irony by immediately beginning the next chapter with: “Darling, you look as though you have seen a ghost”, said Anita (38). It may be
argued here that the player piano becomes the symbol of the machines that turn men into idle ghosts.

In answer to this dehumanization Paul declares that the “main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings... not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems” (273). One of the telling ironies in *Player Piano* is that Paul nobly declares his humanity at the very moment that a completely rational, unemotional, heartless government seems to dehumanize him. Yet, immediately afterwards, he joins an organization that is based completely upon emotion, the kind of irrationality revealed in the intentional destruction of sewage plants and food facilities by people who hate any and all machines and who fail to use their rational powers of discrimination.

One of the key scenes in *Player Piano* takes place at the meadows, an executive retreat where managers annually spend two weeks playing team sports, drinking, and renewing their faith in the system. Some critics have scoffed at Vonnegut’s description of the going on at the meadows as being sophomoric and ridiculous, but
Vonnegut has confessed that General Electric used to hold such a ceremony annually at Association Island. Not surprisingly, General Electric abandoned this tradition shortly after Player Piano was published.

It is significant that Vonnegut portrays two kinds of father figures in his fiction. The first kinds are very common domineering, career-minded fathers who are so preoccupied with their own affairs that they ignore their children. These are represented by George Proteus (Player Plano); Senator Rose Water (God Bless You, Mr. Rose water); and Felix Hoenikker (Cat’s Cradle). The other category of fathers are the less frequently appearing, loving, gentle, fantasy-father figure illustrated by Edgar Derby (Slaughter house-Five). Often in Vonnegut’s fictive universe, there is a yearning for a God resembling a gentle, fantasy father figure. But there is the realization that He is probably more like George Proteus or Felix Hoenikker—too busy with other projects to concern Him.

It is significant to highlight the central point in Player Piano. The protagonist, Paul Proteus observes that the common people who
took part in the revolution against machines are now seeking to reassemble the very machines that made them obsolete. This characterization is the germ of an idea that later becomes a major theme in Vonnegut's fiction---man has a tragic flaw that relentlessly moves him in the direction of self annihilation.

III

In his next novel, The Sirens of Titan (1959) Vonnegut turns completely away from the world of machinery and creates a fantasy world that remains one of his most unique achievements.

In The Sirens of Titan, man's quest for meaning in his universe and for purpose in his existence undergoes a more direct exploration. Vonnegut goes one step further in The Sirens of Titan and considers the possibility that man is merely a machine whose destiny is controlled by other machines. In many ways this novel is Vonnegut's most complex one since it functions simultaneously as a parody of hard-case pop science fiction, a description of the mythic journey of a modern day hero, and perhaps most importantly, an exploration of the meaninglessness of the universe. The plot is far more complex than

56
the mere counter pointing of Paul Proteus and the Shah of Bratpur in Player Piano. The Sirens of Titan follows the science fiction form more consistently than any of Vonnegut’s other novels and goes farthest into the future. There is very little emphasis on prediction in this novel. 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.

The Siren of Titan begins with a reverse of Player Piano’s nostalgia – a persona, speaking from a more remote future; tell us that this is the story of a less happy era falling between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression. Then he goes on to say that men did not know that the meaning of life was within themselves. They searched all creations for meaning but found only meaninglessness.

The protagonist of this novel Malachi Constant, richest man in America arrives at the Rumfoord estate on the summons of Beatrice Rumfoord. Her husband, Winston and his dog, Kazak, have plunged into a chronosynclastic infundibulum while taking Rumfoord’s private
spaceship to mars. The infundibulum is a sort of gyre in time and space, within which all truths become known. In reality, Vonnegut manages to parody the traditional elements of ‘hard-core’ pop science fiction while utilizing the future-history frame used successfully in the science-fiction classics of Isaac Asimov’s, Foundation Trilogy and Frank Herbert’s Dune and Dune Messiah. Moreover, Vonnegut has often expressed love for H.G Well’s novel The War of the World’s. While H.G.Well’s Martians are completely inhuman and possess superior weaponry, Vonnegut’s Martians are the dregs of human society equipped with single shot rifles. Four other elements of traditional science fiction which are not found in The War of the Worlds are abundantly present in The Sirens of Titan along with the serious treatment of elements of mocking. These include— the use of robots with the suggestion that Salo, the robot, is more human than his human friend, Rumfoord; the kidnapping of Earthlings by extra terrestrials; the use of superior space-ships able to exceed the speed of light by some version of ‘space-warp’; and a trip beneath the surface of a planet where strange creatures are encountered.
Moreover, history is the major subject of *The Sirens of Titan* since Vonnegut’s focus is on whether or not human history is meaningful. He suggests that historians such as Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler have wasted their time trying to discover patterns and meaning into a human history that has been the result of Tralfamadorian’s efforts to send a message from one end of the universe to the other. Vonnegut points out that the Tralfamadorians manipulated the people of Earth in order to communicate with Salo on Titan. Histone in *The Sirens of Titan* is still playful with a touch of cynicism. Malachi Constant, Beatrice Rumford and Malachi’s companion Boaz are each able to accept the idea of being used by some unknown force. They are able to accept their lack of free will in determining their destinies because they find that what is important is not ‘why’ they live but how they live. Only the millionaire Winston Niles Rumfoord is unable to accept this harsh truth.

Vonnegut frequently describes Rumfoord as supernatural, as almost godlike. “When he staged a passion play, he used nothing but real people in real hells”. *(329)* Rumford manipulates the inhabitants of Earth and Mars in his god like way because he wished to change
the world for the better by means of the great and unforgettable suicide of Mars'.(174). On Titan, he resembles a halo-clad deity: “Rumfoord held his hands tight and his fingers were spread. Streaks of pink, violet, and pale green, Saint Elmo’s fire, streamed from his fingertips. Short streaks of pale gold fizzed in his hair, conspiring to give a tinsel halo” (270). Rumfoord feels the same degree of disgust and shame when he realizes that man is also seemingly without a purpose although he does have a Tralfamadorian purpose. All human history has been merely a vast bill board upon which the Tralfamadorians have placed messages for their messenger, Salo. Vonnegut’s aptly echoes Rumfoord’s feeling of disillusionment when he states in reference to himself that “an explosion on the sun had separated man and dog. A Universe schemed in mercy would have kept man and dog together.” (295). Rumfoord is doomed to travel forever in a merciless universe without even his dog for companionship.

It is significant to note that in The Siren’s of Titan there is no evidence of God’s mercy. The only merciful act in this novel is a Tralfamadorian machine’s hypnotism of Malachi which permits him to die contented, not disillusioned like Paul Proteus, Like Finnerty in
Player Piano, Rumfoord is self-deceived. Even as he leaves the solar system, he can ignore his treatment of Malachi, Beatrice, the thousands of people he killed during the war he started between Mars and the Earth, and his formation of a church that preaches his peculiar, personal doctrines. His last words are, “I have tried to do good for my native Earth while serving the irresistible wish of Tralfamadore”.

(298)

It may be stated that Vonnegut provides numerous pictures of broken machinery in Player Piano with the implication that mankind has replaced himself with machinery that reflects human fallibility. But in his second novel, Vonnegut focuses on patterns that defy human comprehension and suggests that humanity still suffers from Sir Francis Bacon’s Idols of the Tribe, the human need to observe order in a universe even when there is none. This tendency is apparent in the vast number of hallucinations in The Sirens of Titan. In the first chapter Malachi Constant climbs a forty-feet cylindrical fountain in order to “see whence he had come and whither he was bound” (17). Constant imagines that the fountain is running only to discover its doing so is merely another of hallucinations. In a similar way
Constant learns that Biblical Scholars also have hallucinations. Thus Vonnegut suggests that theologians have overlooked the real meaning and the real pattern of the Old Testament: it is a guide to financial and not to spiritual success.

The hallucination theme in The Sirens of Titan is reinforced by the fantasy-like quality of the novel. It is significant that The Sirens of Titan matches thematically with Alice in Wonderland. The parallels include the Alice in the wonderland door to the Rumfoord estate, the well-like infundibulum that Rumfoord falls through, and the grinning countenances and disappearances of both Carroll’s Cheschire cat and Vonnegut’s Rumfoord.

Moreover, Vonnegut makes his novel even more fantastic by frequent references to drugs, including the narcotics Malachi mixes with alcohol, the sedative Beatrice takes, and the Schliemann ‘goof balls’ that the Martian army takes to enable it to breathe in any environment. In The Making of a Counter Culture, Theodore Roszak aptly indicates that the counter culture can be defined as a group in society that opposes a technocratic society and embraces such causes
as the dialectical philosophy of Herbert Marcuse and Norman Brown, the validity of the Psychedelic experience and the need for a Shamanistic world views.

At one level, *The Sirens of Titan* is a revolutionary novel as ideological as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* while on the other hand the presence of class struggle and psychedelic drugs in *The Sirens of Titan* is quite apparent. There is also a marked counter culture rejection of technocracy’s reliance upon science and an acceptance of a Shamanistic view of the world. The scientistic in Vonnegut’s novel are bewildered by the chronosynclastic infundibulum and cannot design away to eliminate this problem. Their only success in the novel is the arsenal of thermonuclear weapons they assemble and detonate to annihilate the Martian army. In many ways, *The Sirens of Titan* describes a pre-scientific knowledge. In fact, the ritualistic appearances of Rumfoord recur periodically. The most detailed community ritual in *The Sirens of Titan* is Malachi’s return to Earth, the community’s recognition of what he represents and its subsequent rejection of him as a scapegoat. Rumfoord prepared the community for this ritual by writing his own Bible.
Consequently, Vonnegut reveals that Rumfoord is a false artist who manipulates the community for his own purposes. Thematically, this incident effectively re-emphasizes once again the inherent meaninglessness of the universe and the pathetic human need to see a divine purpose.

In conclusion, it may be stated that Vonnegut’s novels attack many of the situations of counter culture favourites. He rightly expresses that the major tenets of the counter culture are impossible to realize. Vonnegut argues that while the science and technology associated with the technocracy certainly do not provide all the answers to the ills of American society, neither does the rhetoric of revolution nor the escapes from the world provided by psychedelic drugs, or a return to a pseudo-American-Indian tribal structure save us.

IV

In his next novel, *Mother Night* (1962), Vonnegut abandons the fantasy mode to consider the advantages and limitations of a schizophrenic’s decision to create a separate “nation of two” and to ignore the problems of the real world.
It may be stated that *Mother night* represents a marked change for Vonnegut in terms of both the subject matter and the narrative technique. Instead of writing another social-science fiction novel, he decided to write about World War II. The novel is written in the form of the confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr. with an editor's note explaining the textual problems. The point of view is very similar to that found in Vladimir Nobokov's, *Lolitha*. Since both Humbert and Campbell are imprisoned monsters by society standards who resolutely declare that they have been sinned against much more than they have sinned; and both are extremely unreliable monsters. Howard W. Campbell, Jr., is an American dramatist living in Germany and married to a beautiful German actress. He is recruited by the United States as a secret agent, and he spends the war years making propaganda broadcasts that contain hidden messages for the Allies in the forms of coughs, pauses, and burps. After the war he is sought in the United States as a Nazi war criminal. He is also idolized by a strange collection of aging fascists. Campbell surrenders himself to Israel to stand trial with Adolph Eichman, but he concludes by
declaring that he will kill himself instead of waiting for trial because he is guilty of crimes against himself.

It is significant to note that World War II is doubly traumatic for Vonnegut. He is not only captured in the Battle of the Bulge and forced to listen to the fire bombing of Dresden and subsequently view the horror, but he is also disturbed about fighting against many of his relatives and his parent’s friends. Vonnegut indicates in his ‘Editor’s Note’ that Campbell is a playwright and to warn the reader that “no one is better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage” (ix). Campbell, who will not even admit that he is ill, declares at one point that “it was my world rather than I that was diseased” (194). It is significant that one of the games Howard plays with his wife in their “nation of two” is an adult version of “This Little-Piggy”. He defends doing so on the grounds that “Every body’s supposed to play games for mental health” (33). While games of obfuscation that Campbell plays fail to present him from ultimately having to face him responsibilities for his actions as a Nazi propagandist, Vonnegut feels that Howards plays
and his childishness are symptomatic of one of the major reasons wars occur.

Many of the facets of Campbell’s complex personality are illustrated in the opening chapter of *Mother Night* when he describes the various Israeli guards who minister to his needs. One of the guards is Arpad Kovacs, a Jew in Nazi Hungary who managed to survive by obtaining false papers and by joining the Hungarian security service. While Kovacs illustrates Campbell’s Schizophrenia, the middle aged Andor Guttman exhibits many of same guilt feeling that afflict Vonnegut’s protagonist. Guttman worked as a corpse carrier at Auschwitz and thus, like Campbell, managed to survive the war; but, when he is questioned about this experience, he replies, “shameful....I never want to talk about it again”(7). Campbell managed to bury many of his guilty feelings by anesthetizing himself to the point that only his wife Helga can stir his emotions. Similarly, the Israeli guard Bernard Mengel managed to survive the war by dulling all his senses.

As a man of imagination, Campbell is the first of a series of Vonnegut characters who ponder upon the role of the artist in the
modern world. During the time when Hitler was beginning to activate the Nazi war machine, Campbell seemed perfectly contended to write medieval romance. Since Campbell is not the only narrator of *Mother Night* but also a playwright, an artist who uses his imagination to construct a more pleasant world, it is very difficult to determine what is real in his universe. Howard W. Campbell, Jr., tries his utmost to rationalize away his feelings of guilt caused by his actions as a Nazi and by his realization that the sinister forces of *Mother Night* are a very real part of man’s nature. As in the case with all of Vonnegut’s protagonists Campbell lives in a pluralistic universe in which it is impossible to determine just what is real. Howard pragmatically eases his pain by assuming the role of spectator and by observing with two identities, representing evil and goodness, perform in a morality play. At first glance, Campbell’s action appears to fail Jame’s test since they bring more pain than comfort. He declares, as the novel concludes, that he will “hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself.”(202)

It may be argued what, then, is real in *Mother Night*? In order to discover what is real, it is necessary, to reconcile a number of
different views of reality, even though some of these may be contradictory. While Campbell’s reality is not verified by his experience, Vonnegut does not suggest what is actually real in this novel. Instead he clouds reality in an ambivalent mist. The very form of *Mother Night* suggests that reality is unknowable since the novel’s narrative structure leads the reader through the complex maze of Campbell’s mind and deposits him, on the final page, in a corner facing a blank wall.

Much of the macabre humor in *Mother Night* results from Kurt Vonnegut’s treatment of right wing extensive that range from neo Nazis to Bernard B O’Hare, the American legionnaire who imagines he is like Saint George and is on a holy quest to destroy the pure evil that Howard Campbell represents. Campbell and many of the minor characters in *Mother Night* are able to serve evil too openly and good secretly because they have what Campbell himself calls “the classic totalitarian mind” which he likens to a cuckoo clock in hell:

...Hence the cuckoo dock in Hell keeping perfect time for eight minutes and twenty three seconds, jumping ahead fourteen minutes, keeping perfect time for six seconds, jumping ahead two seconds, keeping perfect time for two hours and one second, then jumping ahead a year.
The missing teeth, of course, are simple, obvious truths, truths available and comprehensible even to ten-year olds, in most cases.

The willing filing off of gear teeth, the willful doing without certain obvious pieces of information (169).

This totalitarian logic is not limited to Doctor Jone’s companions. Bernard B. O’Hare, the man who first captured Campbell in Germany, sees himself as St. George to whom Campbell is the Dragon to be slain. What Vonnegut finds so repulsive about the totalitarian mind is its tendency “to imagine that God almighty hates...too where’s evil? It’s that large part of every man that wants to hate without, limit that wants to hate with God on its side”. (190)

In reality, throughout Mother Night Campbell’s statements about his love for Helga are pathetically self-deceiving. His “nation of two” is really such a selfish, ego-centered love that it is quite appropriate that the diary of his private life with Helga becomes a best-selling pornographic book. At the conclusion of the novel Campbell is no longer capable of love. Resi Noth describes him as “so used up that he can not love anymore. There is nothing left of him but curiosity and a pair of eyes.” (173). The physical act of hanging
himself is really anticlimactic since Campbell has already cut himself adrift from the roles that gave his life meaning. He is a patriot curiously without a country, a man who lived for love who is no longer capable of loving and a dramatist who can no longer write.

In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut confronts quite directly man's condition in an absurd world, using terms closely related to the war time experience. Page after page of the novel shows Vonnegut as a man who shows affection, indignation and compassion. An intense awareness of the absurd is there and meaninglessness is faced unflinchingly. Vonnegut does not submit to the darkness of nothingness as Mephistopheles does in the quotation from which the book draws its title. He recognizes that we are each a part of that original darkness, but affirms that "supercilious light" in its struggles against *Mother Night*.

It is significant to state that Vonnegut tries to maintain a thematic linkage with the use of different narrative techniques in his novels. *Player Piano* examines the undesirable inversion of man and machine. *Cat's Cradle* is a deliberate confusion of facts and fantasy and
offer a far more credible world to be destroyed than that which conventional science fiction might depict. The Sirens of Titan uses stock science fiction devices for the most ambitious eschatology, while God Bless You, Mr. Rose Water presents a science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, as the spokesman of the novel’s philosophy. Mother Night features the hero who is quintessentially Vonnegut’s, agent-victim who escapes only through death. Thus, Vonnegut projects the evil consequences of the modern world in Player Piano, Sirens of Titan, and Cat’s Cradle. Schizophrenic quality of science fiction is used to good effect in Mother Night and Slaughterhouse Five.

It is significant to note that Vonnegut is a writer whose personality behind the authorial voice is a pleasant one. From what he advocates and what he affirms, as well as what he disapproves of, one senses a compassionate, gentle, troubled man. There is a touching ambivalence in what he says in his novels. On the one hand is the constant implication that men could do better, and on the other a kind of resignation, a feeling that things can not really be expected to go better. “So it goes” Yet in spite of haunting pessimism, there is recurrent affirmation that life can be improved, can be lent meaning,
especially through love. Love proves the most satisfying source of personal fulfillment his protagonists achieve. Vonnegut aptly suggests that the understanding and the meaning in life lies in knowledge of ourselves rather than in seeking answers outside. Science, technology, militarism, nationalism, politics and religion all fail in their attempts to explain and control the universe, to provide the understanding and structure necessary to meaningful existence. In reality, Vonnegut's novels are considered as a portrayal of the society and art forms of our times.

In conclusion it may be stated that Vonnegut’s early novels reflect the aspirations, confusions, anger, and disenchantment of the 1960s. They show a range of attitudes---mundane concerns of daily life, belief in simple and moral values, and distrust of technology and especially technocrats---which suggest that his vision had middle class origin. He appeals to youth because his themes resist the smooth and rational adjustment to the horrible American decency.