Kurt Vonnegut is an archetypal postwar novelist who concerns himself with the inexplicable, sordid and often nightmarish aspects of modern American life. Branded categorically as a pulp writer and then as a black humourist, he was left in obscurity for about twenty years. But from there he shot into fame and popularity to become "the most talked about American novelist since Ernest Hemingway" (Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions* 33); to millions of youngsters he was a cult figure, whose portrait of America with its tribulations and complexities matched the America of their own experience. He became a truly representative postwar novelist highlighting the sterility and hypocrisy of middle class life, and inveighing against the dehumanized socio-economic system in America. By the 1970s he had become the most widely read novelist in America, and Jerome Klinkowitz reports that by 1974 Vonnegut was a leading candidate for the Nobel Prize (*Literary Disruptions* 192). His unique vision and his signal role as a relentless critic of the American way of life have endeared him to his readers.

Vonnegut has acknowledged that he was greatly influenced by his American experience: his own German-
American background, the harrowing experience of the Depression, literary apprenticeship at school, his scientific education at college, the insanity and suicide of his mother, the traumatic experiences during the Second World War, and the shocking confrontation with technological reality during his work at General Electric in Schenectady.

He was born on November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis as a fourth-generation German-American. His parents were sceptical, liberal pacifists, and Vonnegut grew up without any inhibitions. His large, closely-knit family was very conducive to moral and intellectual growth, and later in his fiction, he was forever clamouring for such large families throughout America. During the Depression his architect-father went without a commission for eleven years, forcing young Vonnegut to attend an ordinary school, Shortridge High School. There he became the editor of their daily, *The Echo*, which provided him with valuable literary experience.

Kurt Vonnegut, Sr. encouraged his children to take up science at college: Bernard, the eldest, became a world famous atmospheric scientist, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. took up Biochemistry at Cornell University. What young Vonnegut learned at Cornell or later at Carnegie Institute of Technology stood him in good stead in writing his
science fiction. But of far greater consequence to his career was his work as the editor of the Cornell Sun. In "Playboy Interview" he reveals the advantage he had: "rather than writing for a teacher, which is what most people do . . . I started out writing for a large audience. And if I did a lousy job, I caught a lot of shit in twenty-four hours."¹ He could survive only by sharpening his wit, which he did; it was a training ground for the mature humourist that he eventually became.

From Carnegie Institute he was inducted into the Army. Although in his regular column in the Sun he had been a steadfast pacifist, his German background made it imperative for him to enlist. He could never forget how his family roots had been maimed by the American hatred for all things German, consequent on America's entry into the First World War: "Children in our family were no longer taught German. Neither were they encouraged to admire German music or literature or art or science" (SL 6). In Palm Sunday he analyses his parents' action: "They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism" (21). The resultant frustration is poignantly expressed in the prologue to Slapstick: "We didn't belong anywhere in particular

¹ Interview with David Standish. Playboy July 1973: 57+. rpt. in Wampeters (259).
anymore. We were interchangeable parts in the American machine" (7). Hence, to stay back from the war might induce people to cast aspersions on his loyalty.

What he encountered in Germany was to remain with him like an incubus, numbing and debilitating him forever. He was destined to witness 1,35,000 civilians die in a single day in Dresden, in a combined British-American air attack. Even his own miraculous escape could hardly cheer him. The utter meaninglessness and lunacy of war stared him in the face, and he could no longer trust his own government. This traumatic experience has coloured his imagination; it has made him suspect the motive behind every belligerent gesture from war-like nations, and it has turned him into a confirmed pacifist. He tried imaginative recreation to exorcize the demon from his mind but not to much avail.

His mother was opposed to his joining the army, and she could never accede to his decision. She had already wrecked her brain with amphetamines and alcohol. Her untreated insanity made her commit suicide on Mother’s Day in 1944, when Vonnegut was home on furlough.² In 1972 his

² Kathryn Hume notes that homecoming is no source of happiness in Vonnegut ("Kurt Vonnegut and the Myths and Symbols of Meaning"): Harold Ryan’s homecoming in Happy Birthday, Wanda June, Campbell’s return after the Second World War (Mother Night) or Walter’s release from jail (Jailbird) substantiate the argument.
own son Mark had a schizophrenic breakdown and Vonnegut was afraid that he himself was going insane. In an address to the American Physical Society he confessed that he had never been of sound mental health: "I have always thought of myself as a paranoid, as an over reactor, and a person who makes a questionable living with his mental diseases" (WFG 92). But he said he was in good company: "Fiction writers are not customarily persons in the best of mental health" (92). In Palm Sunday he calls his ancestor Clemens Vonnegut a cultivated eccentric" and says that he himself aspires to be one (30).

That his own mother was a suicide troubled him, and he admitted that he too thought of suicide (PS 304). By 1984 he was so worn out and depressed that he made an attempt to commit suicide. Later, in Fates Worse Than Death he describes it: "I had tried to kill myself. It wasn’t a cry for help. It wasn’t a nervous breakdown. I wanted ‘The Big Sleep’ . . . I wanted out of here" (181).

After the war he went to the University of Chicago and majored in anthropology, but his master’s thesis "Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales" was unanimously rejected by the Department. It is ironic that the same University conferred on him an honorary degree twenty-five years later in recognition of his
contributions to anthropology, particularly in *Cat's Cradle*. The laborious task of distinguishing between good and evil has been Vonnegut's major concern in most of his works (Schatt 16). His artificial extended family in *Slapstick* and in his essays was an extrapolation of the ideal folk society which was introduced to him by Prof. Robert Radfield; for him a folk society is "a relatively isolated community of like-minded friends and relatives . . . an ideal scheme within which people can take really good care of one another, can share freely, and can distribute honors to one and all" (PS 211). Vonnegut had no difficulty in identifying loneliness as the greatest evil in American society: in the 1968 Presidential election he had advised George McGovern to accept "Lonesome No More" as a slogan. Some form of artificial extended family presented itself to him as the only viable solution to the loneliness that was threatening individual and social well-being.

In 1946 he joined General Electric at Schenectady as a public relations man. But his first-hand contact with super technology was so disheartening that he soon lost his trust in science and technology. Though he wrote much about technology in his short stories and early novels he was thoroughly disillusioned and he resigned in 1950. By that time he was a recognized science fiction writer.
In order to make a living Vonnegut started selling short stories to popular magazines; he published over fifty stories in Saturday Evening Post, Collier’s, McCall’s, and the like. Those "slick" stories branded him as a "pulp" writer and so when Player Piano was published in 1952 it was hardly noticed: it sold only 3,500 copies. Jerome Klinkowitz correctly remarks in his Kurt Vonnegut:

Shunned as distastefully lowbrow in the experimental scene, found insufficiently commercial to suit the exploitative tastes of the most highpowered publishers, Vonnegut’s fiction limped along for years on the democratic basis of family fiction and pulp magazine circulation . . . . (16)

For a long time Player Piano was known only to lovers of science fiction. Vonnegut expressed his frustration in an article in 1965:

I learned from the reviewers that I was a science fiction writer.

I didn’t know that. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. ("Science Fiction" 2)
He goes on to express his desire to get out of the label:

I have been a sore-headed occupant of a file-drawer labeled "science fiction" ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a tall white fixture in a comfort station. (2)

In an interview he analyses the reason why critics tended to regard him as a science fiction writer and nothing more: "critics felt that a person could not be a serious artist and also had a technical education--which I had" (Cargas 1048). It has stigmatized him: "most American fine writers know nothing about technology. I'm a contemporary of Truman Capote, for instance; he very quickly gained a reputation as a literary person, and I very quickly gained a reputation as a hack" (1048).

After Player Piano he took seven years to write another novel, The Sirens of Titan. "This was not because of spiritual difficulties," says Vonnegut. "This was because of financial difficulties" (FWD 178-79). To support his family he sold stories which paid him handsomely. The Sirens of Titan was an ingenious blend of several themes which he was to develop later, but it only established him as a science fiction writer. It also showed him the potential of paperback market.
The novels that followed, *Mother Night* (1961) and *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), were also in paperback but they built his reputation in college campuses. He occupied the same position among students as that of J. D. Salinger a decade before. He was gradually getting the attention of reviewers and critics who emphasized his unique vision and peculiar style. Graham Greene regarded him as one of the most able living writers, and called *Cat’s Cradle* one of the best novels of the year. Writers like Terry Southern, Jules Feiffer, Conrad Aiken and Nelson Algren admitted that they were Vonnegut fans (Bryan 2). With the publication of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in 1965, he was getting more critical attention, and the new critical interest in his works prompted the re-issue of *Player Piano* and *Mother Night* in hard cover. He became the favourite of young writers and undergraduates; he was given a two-year term as lecturer in the University of Iowa Writers Workshop in 1965. Writing in *Harper’s* in 1966, Richard Schickel called for a new appraisal of Vonnegut’s work which, he was sure, would induce people to take him more seriously. In the following year Robert Scholes analysed Vonnegut as a great satirist in his *The Fabulatos*. This was the first serious critical attention to Vonnegut from a major critic of the time.

With a Guggenheim Fellowship he went back to Germany in 1967 to complete his novel about his war experience.
The novel—*Slaughterhouse-Five*—was published in 1969, and with it Vonnegut reached the pinnacle of his fame. In his post-modern rendering of the greatest massacre in human history—1,35,000 civilians killed in a single night in Dresden—Vonnegut gave expression to his own traumatic experience during the war. The novel was well-received by the academic world and soon it was prescribed as a textbook in many schools. Favourable reviews appeared in all important journals and Vonnegut became a writer of international repute. Klinkowitz says that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was in tune with the sweeping changes in American attitude in the sixties; it "so perfectly caught America’s transformative mood that its story and structure became best-selling metaphors for the new age" (*Literary Subversions* xix).

Vonnegut seemed to have said all that he had to say; he turned to the stage with *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* in 1971. But he soon realized that the theatre or the movie could not provide much latitude for his characteristically egocentric narrative style. In the preface to his Television script *Between Time and Timbuktu* he says: "I have become an enthusiast for the printed word again. I have to be that, I now understand, because I want to be a character in all of my works. I can do that in print. In a movie, somehow, the author always vanishes" (xv).
By the early 70s he had become a major figure in contemporary fiction; he found himself immensely popular not only among the undergraduates and youngsters who always eulogized him but among the academicians as well. In 1973 Breakfast of Champions had an advance sale of twenty thousand copies and a hardbound first edition one hundred thousand copies and, moreover, it was the major selection of four book clubs. Klinkowitz observes: "there was little doubt that a fiction widely scorned only six years before was now a dominant mode in serious contemporary literature" (Literary Disruptions 61). In 1970 alone Vonnegut's novels sold over one million copies (Scriber, "Bringing Chaos to Order" 285). In 1976 his Slapstick had a first printing of one and a half lakh for hardcover which was close to a record.

With Slapstick Vonnegut started a new phase in his career which, according to William Rodney Allen, was a "surprising resurgence" of his career (Understanding 124). Leaving behind science fiction techniques and the preoccupation with epistemological questions, Vonnegut began to give pungent social and political criticism; he became less egocentric and more iconoclastic, less philosophical and more satirical so that his works came to be regarded as the most radical critique of postwar American society. He got ready for this new phase by cleaning and renewing himself in Breakfast of Champions,
setting free all his literary characters including Kilgore Trout, his surrogate author, who symbolized his own image as a prolific but unrecognized author (Berryman, Decade of Novels 46; Karl 500). He had overcome the personal depression through "faith in the inviolability of awareness, which, if properly cherished and cultivated, may yet redeem us and our planet from the technological horrors" (Olderman 155-56). Writing was indeed therapeutic for him, exorcizing the nightmarish war experience, curing him of his personal depression, and more importantly, helping him to get over the death wish which, on a wider scale, had manifested itself as "the violence endemic in American culture" (Allen, Understanding 109). No wonder that he could laugh--and make us laugh with him--even at the grimmest horrors. In an interview with William T. Noble he confesses: "I was getting morbidly depressed about such things as Attica, the Vietnam War and other events on earth" (qtd. in Allen, Conversations 63). He knew that "many of the people on either side of me don’t care what happens next. I am mistrustful of most people as custodians of life and so I’m pessimistic on that account" (Musil 233).

3 "Vonnegut loves life too much," says Robert Musil, "to let what happened to his mother happen to him" (233). So the purging and renewing that he talks of in Breakfast of Champions was essential to sustain himself.
However, Vonnegut finds a precious few who are willing to respond to the specific problems that make life precarious. In his address to the graduating class at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, he expressed his optimism in this regard: "There is a willingness to do whatever we need to do in order to have life on the planet go on for a long, long time" (PS 209-210). For him it is of immense potentiality: "that willingness has to be a religious enthusiasm, since it celebrates life, since it calls for meaningful sacrifices" (210). Vonnegut's fiction is an earnest attempt in that direction.

In his "Playboy Interview" Vonnegut disclosed his theory of an artist's function in society. As "specialized cells in the social organism," writers should serve as agents of change: "as a means of introducing new ideas into the society, and also as means of responding symbolically to life." This response can be as a warning alarm:

And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick.
However, he knows that very often it is a futile attempt to be the conscience of a community; the feeble response of the artist goes unheeded:

The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think that artists--all artists--should be treasured as alarm systems. (WFG 238)

And Vonnegut has been a conscientious alarm system throughout his work--alerting his people to the inhumanity of most of their political, economic or military policies. But due recognition was delayed, first through the categorical rejection of his works as mere science fiction, and then through the charge that he was an easy writer (Richardson). His uncompromising quest for clarity in his works, especially in the latter phase of his career, was misjudged as an attempt at simplistic presentation. Vonnegut flouts the view in *Palm Sunday*: "It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them" (320).

His works invited another criticism--that they contain obscenities. The Board of the Drake School in
North Dakota where *Slaughterhouse-Five* was a prescribed textbook, burned thirty-two copies of the book in 1973 on the charge that it was pornographic. Though it shocked him, Vonnegut and his publisher didn’t attempt to capitalize on it. In a letter to Charles McCarthy, chairman of the School Board, he expressed his annoyance:

> If you were to bother to read my books, to behave as educated persons would, you would learn that they are not sexy, and do not argue in favor of wildness of any kind. They beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are. It is true that some of the characters speak coarsely. That is because people speak coarsely in real life. Especially soldiers and hard-working men speak coarsely, and even our most sheltered children know that. ("Kurt Vonnegut on Censorship" 632)

He discloses their hypocrisy: "And we all know, too, that those words really don’t damage children much. They didn’t damage us when we were young. It was evil deeds and lying that hurt us" (632). He impresses on them the desirability of allowing the circulation of ideas: "you should also resolve to expose your children to all sorts of opinions and information, in order that they will be better equipped to make decisions and to survive" (632).
Later, in *Fates Worse Than Death* he comes back to the subject: "There are some obscenities in my books, since I make Americans, and particularly soldiers, speak as they really speak" (180).

Such facile criticisms were of especial significance to him because they tended to deter serious readers and the men in power from listening to him. In an interview with C. D. B. Bryan he says that his primary aim as a writer is to be read by men in power; as the politicians do not have either the time or the inclination to read much, he even keeps his books short. He has targeted his works on the youngsters on purpose:

> I have worried some about why write books when Presidents and Senators and generals do not read them, and the university experience taught me a very good lesson: you catch people before they become generals and Senators and Presidents, and you *poison their minds with humanity*. Encourage them to make a better world. (2)

But it took fourteen years for his work to get serious critical attention. Writing in the *Harper’s* in May 1966, Richard Schickel drew attention to the "unimitative and inimitable social satirist" and admitted that there was already a "Vonnegut cult" (103). In the same year, Robert Scholes, in a friendly article, analysed
the black humour elements in his fiction ("Mithridates, He Died Old"). Warren Coffey identified his "gentleness and his stylish sense of the ridiculous in these our times" as the factors that endeared Vonnegut to the young (348). J. Michael Crichton exhorted the readers to see through the science fiction framework and to explore the real Vonnegut who was writing about the most excruciatingly painful things that nobody else writes books about.

The charge that he is an easy writer (Richardson) or an anti-serious writer (Fiedler) is frequently refuted by critics. John Updike remarks that in Vonnegut the science fiction framework and the stylistic devices are all "a way of stacking pain"; such a performance "looks easy only in retrospect" (47). Calling his work "deceptively simple," Robert Scholes warns us: "The apparent simplicity and ordinariness of his writing mask its efficient power" (Fabulation 159). John Irving too refers to the apparent simplicity: "he can fool you by how 'easy' he is to read--if you don't think carefully" (45). Admitting that Vonnegut asks really painful questions with "childish directness," Kathryn Hume cautions that "Vonnegut's naïveté and over-simplifications are real, but so are the issues he insists on raising" ("The Heraclitan Cosmos" 223). Lynn Buck remarks that if Vonnegut is often writing about fashionable issues of 1960s and 70s,
"it is fashion that has caught up with Vonnegut, the unheralded prophet" (182). Other critics have also refuted the charge (Brier 44; Harris 60).

Critical attention was delayed because his vision was far ahead of the times (Todd 105; Bellamy 81). Loree Rackstraw comments that elitist critics were "either embarrassingly unable or unwilling to understand" ("Vonnegut the Diviner" 76). Those who came to him were, as Ernest W. Ranly has said, "hooked on Vonnegut" (207). While one would admire Barth, Pynchon or Barthelme, one enjoyed Vonnegut (Balakian 155). "While the others said that the novel might be dying," says Klinkowitz, "Vonnegut lived the life of fiction, keeping both himself and his novels alive and intact" (Practice of Fiction 103). Though apparently anti-intellectual (Nicol 28), and morally didactic (Fredericks 56), Vonnegut’s tone of kindness and regret, and his firm determination not to exclude himself from the diseased community that he attacked disclose his sincerity as a writer. This has made Raymond M. Olderman call him more of a social scientist than a novelist (192), and induced Robert Merrill to analyse his work to study his role as an agent for social change ("John Gardner’s Grendel and the Interpretation of Modern Fables" 178-79).
His reputation as a science fiction writer repelled elitist critics as well as serious readers for quite some time. But gradually critics were able to see through the science fiction framework and identify the real issues that lay underneath. His science fiction techniques were soon recognized as "a ploy to give him distance and objectivity" (Ranly 208), or as a means that reinforced his role as an instructor (Karl 344). Analysing his work, Malcolm Bradbury remarked on "fantasy's importance in trying to make sense of the senseless" and saw fictions as Vonnegut's responses to history and horror (168). Leslie Fiedler also viewed his science fiction as a convenient means of interpreting a meaningless universe. It is doubtless that science fiction allowed him the latitude to "say things too difficult to say any other way" (Pauly 67) and gave him adequate objectivity in his "fiction of atrocity" (Greiner). That the science fiction framework was only a structural device for Vonnegut is self-evident even in his most allegedly science fiction works, and he gave up most of its legacy when he perfected a more lucid style and a powerful first person narrative in the second phase of his career.

Another factor that put off critics was his obtrusive sentimentality. Leslie Fiedler, for instance, is of opinion that his satire is mild because he tempers it with irony. Robert Scholes calls him a "vulgar sentimentalist"
(Fabulation 150). Tony Tanner notices his tendency towards sentimentality, but views it as an outgrowth of his "compassionate humane spirit" (192-93). In his *Contemporary American Literature* Ihab Hassan too regards his "gruff sentimentality" as tending to "weaken his hold on complex realities" (45). But it has to be seen as emanating from his sense of being a conscientious agent for social change, and from his feeling of rage and guilt in being a part of the very dehumanizing society that he was always inveighing against. Robert A. Hipkiss's analysis of this sentimentality as a "sensitive author's emotional reaction to his intellectual apprehension of a world inescapably absurd" (43) enables us to view the Vonnegut canon in a new perspective. Behind his fantasies and his sentimentality there lurks a world of horror and desolation. Along with John Irving we realize that "when the sunny dreams and the harmless untruths evaporate--and they always do--a ruined planet is what we look upon; his books make us wish we were better" (44).

Another factor that dispelled critical interest was his refusal to give answers to the countless questions he kept on asking. Clark Mayo remarks that although Vonnegut's novels abound in questions we find hardly any answer (15), and Leonard Mustazza comments that "Vonnegut's endings always leave the reader uncomfortable" (*Forever Pursuing Genesis* 58). J. Michael Crichton goes
to the extent of calling him an offensive writer, "because he will not choose sides, ascribing blame and penalty, identifying good guys and bad" (35). Vonnegut’s refusal to resolve the issues or to take sides has made some misjudge his message. Josephine Hendin, for instance, concludes that dumbness--passivity, acceptance, denial, or resignation--is his solution to the ills of the time; Vonnegut asks us "to go dead to the fact that the past is the destruction you have known, the present the violence you see, and the future the holocaust to come" (38). Nothing can be more fallacious than this in our judgement of Vonnegut’s fiction: the illusions or fantasies that help a Billy Pilgrim or Howard Campbell to forget reality are virtually denounced by Vonnegut as something we have to be wary of (Chabot 45). Doris Lessing has justly remarked that the true strength of Vonnegut lies in his refusal to succumb to the general feeling of helplessness and placid conformity (35). Robert A. Hipkiss suggests that a deterministic view makes it impossible to blame anybody; as there are no villains, no one is to be held accountable (69).

Vonnegut survived his initial obscurity with his consistently sincere work to become the most popular and the most talked-about American novelist in the 1970s.
Critics have variously explored the peculiar attraction of his work. "Who other than Kurt Vonnegut," wonders Alan Brownjohn, "can have the reader laughing aloud on one page and flinching with horror on the next?" (84). Charles Berryman suggests that the strength of Vonnegut's fiction is due to his deft use of the "power of history" in fiction ("After the Fall" 97). Loree Rackstraw is convinced that "if there is a literary moralist writing today, it's Vonnegut" ("Vonnegut the Diviner" 76). James Lundquist feels that his technique has placed Vonnegut "in the center of postwar avant gardism" (101). Vonnegut's emphasis on authentic human experience fascinates Jerry H. Bryant (303-04). Doris Lessing suggests that "because he is comic and sad at once, because his painful seriousness is never solemn, Vonnegut is unique among us" (35). For William Rodney Allen, the "almost claustrophobic exploration of the mind of a guilt-ridden protagonist" has made his later novels unforgettable (Understanding 149).

His peculiar ability to make the readers laugh even at the grimmest horrors puzzled and then fascinated some while it even antagonized others. Accounting for the unusual Vonnegutean humour, Robert W. Uphaus remarks: "Vonnegut’s humor . . . strikes me as being only part of and not an antidote to, the all-encompassing problem of
human imagination pitted against the forces of historical extinction. Vonnegut’s humor represents a perceptual slant that makes destruction a bit more tolerable . . . ." (170). Benjamin De Mott recognizes the humane optimist in him despite his dystopian, apocalyptic vision. Vance Bourjaily is all praise for Vonnegut because he doesn’t exempt even himself from the target of his attack. While expressing admiration for the way in which Vonnegut had portrayed contemporary America and for the subtle juxtaposition of fact and fiction, Tony Tanner criticizes Vonnegut’s easy, detached portrayal of even the nightmarish events of the war (200-01). However, Malcolm Bradbury attributes the success of Vonnegut’s novels to their tone—"Both naive and sophisticated, resigned and bitter-sweet" (167). For William Keough it is an angry victim’s humour, of one who refuses to bow down before any dehumanizing system or process (122), and for R. B. Gill it is a truly liberating laughter.

Critics found a fertile ground in Vonnegut’s satire. Ihab Hassan called him "part satirist, part visionary" (45). For Thomas L. Wymer, Vonnegut is an "unusually able satirist who . . . does lead us to normative judgements about the evils he attacks" ("Swiftian Satire" 239). J. Michael Crichton regards the "wildly funny framework" in Vonnegut as anaesthetic: "We are able to cheer him on--at least for a while. But eventually we stop
cheering, and stop laughing" (35). What distinguishes him from the other satirists is his refusal to give ethical absolutes against which we can form our judgements about the evils or excesses he attacks (Kennard; Wymer, "Swiftian Satire"). This has made it appear that he recommends "resigned passivity" (Bradbury 167), but the humanist in him and his ardent humanitarian zeal have made it impossible for him to be indifferent. His satire sweeps over several unwholesome aspects of modern life and it often hurts even amidst the comic negligence which he occasionally exhibits. Critics have often compared him with Jonathan Swift, Mark Twain and George Orwell (Bryan 2; Hicks 25; Scholes, Fabulation 150; Wymer, "Swiftian Satire" 239; O'Connell 722). Vonnegut reigns supreme among contemporary American satirists; no other postwar novelist has either his range or his consistency.

He was acknowledged as the most representative American novelist of the postwar era. Robert Scholes aptly remarks: "The pathos of human beings enmeshed in the relentless triviality of contemporary American culture has never been more adequately expressed" (Fabulation 205). But he knows that as Vonnegut doesn’t easily conform to accepted literary practices of his time due recognition hasn’t accrued to his fiction: "Serious critics have shown some reluctance to acknowledge that Vonnegut is among the best writers of his generation. He is, I suspect, both
too funny and too intelligible for many . . ." (205). While most of his contemporaries were experimenting with the form and content of fiction, Vonnegut was continuously dealing with the absurdity of life and the modern predicament. Raymond M. Olderman has this to say about Vonnegut's major concerns in fiction: "No novelist in the sixties is more aware of the necessity of exorcising our dreams of death" (189). Malcolm Bradbury views Vonnegut's work as a sincere effort to analyse contemporary American life: "What lies behind Vonnegut's world is a lost middle American innocence, fractured by waste, decay, technology" (167). His "experimental methods and anxious historical preoccupations" are only his means to delineate his major themes (167). His readers soon learned that he was "articulating the blackest suspicions of a skeptical, cynical generation without running on into orgies of hate or ironical partisanship of evil" (De Mott 38).

Though his appeal was international, he was addressing, and writing about his own country, especially an America that was going through the turbulent postwar era. In a recent review James Wood concludes: "The more Vonnegut writes, the more American he seems--a kind of de-solemnized Emerson, at once arguer, doubter, sermonizer and gossip" (9). Klinkowitz traces the immense popularity of Vonnegut to his protests against various unpleasant aspects of life Americans were taught to overlook in the
Cold War years: nuclear threat, eroding ecology, and deteriorating cities ("Why They Read Vonnegut" 27). And his works had immediate effect: Slaughterhouse-Five had a major role in the rediscovery of Dresden which had largely been forgotten (Rowley 736); his anti-war writings, among other factors, "helped get the United States out of Vietnam" (Allen, Conversations ix). Allen goes on to say: "Perhaps not since Uncle Tom's Cabin had a work of fiction so deeply affected the public's perception of an ongoing American war" (ix).

All their effects and professed aims notwithstanding, Vonnegut's works never give a realistic portrayal of events; instead they maintain a precarious balance between facts and fictions. Klinkowtiz hits the truth when he says: "Reminding the reader that fictions are provisional realities and not bedrock truth is the essence of Vonnegut's work, his one enduring theme and the metafictional center to each of his novels" (Literary Subversions xx-xxi). Others have also stressed the interchangeability of fact and fiction in his works (Kennard 124; Olderman 25-26). In Breakfast of Champions Vonnegut himself argues that a realistic portrayal is not only fallacious but dangerous as well. He doesn't want "to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be
passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end" (209). He is shocked by "the idiot decisions made by my countrymen," but he knows that "they were doing their best to live like people invented in story books" (209-10). The people are treated as though they are disposable cogs because "that was the way authors customarily treated bit-part players in their made-up tales" (210). Thus he has formulated his own style where "Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order . . ." (210). And he has adopted a fabulative approach throughout his fiction, even while dealing with historical events.

The peculiar style that Vonnegut developed was necessitated by his themes; he was describing a fragmented, chaotic world, and bearing witness to an age which didn’t permit a rational analysis. First the Depression which threw the people into near deprivation shook his belief in the American system and established for him the vulnerability of individual lives at times of national crisis. What he saw around him was a community desperately trying to find some means to cope with the uncertainty and drabness of life. That life is poignantly described at several places in Vonnegut. For instance, in Slaughterhouse-Five Billy’s mother buys a crucifix from a
gift shop. "Like so many Americans," says he, "she was
trying to construct a life that made sense from things she
found in gift shops" (39). Vonnegut learned a valuable
lesson from the Depression--that innocent humour is the
only way to fight the senselessness and futility of such a
life. He had seen how people tended to forget the misery
and disillusionment of the period through the frequent
radio comedies. He had no hesitation in acknowledging his
indebtedness to the great radio and film comedians who
helped the people to forget the tribulations of the time.

Then came the Second World War. Though America's
loss of life and property was negligible, the war will
forever remain in America's memory not only because it was
more long-drawn out and more destructive than any previous
instance but also because it revealed the utter futility
of war as a means of settling disputes. The war became a
nightmare that the people wanted to forget. No wonder
that Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five and Mother Night and
Joseph Heller's Catch-22 continue to haunt the readers
even though these are far from conventional war novels.
The soldiers we find there are either innocent children or
numbed, programmed robots. When we come to the Korean and
the Vietnam War, we no longer find experienced, patriotic
men fighting for their country but kids driven to the arid
warfields with a highly inflated patriotic enthusiasm.
There is no doubt the helpless youngsters who perished in alien warfields or were sent back deranged from "combat fatigue" as well as the insensitive leaders who sent them to their fate have coloured the imagination and the entire outlook of the people.

There followed a period of hectic economic reconstruction which gradually made America the most powerful nation in the world. But it also brought on inflation and widening economic inequality. Increased automation accelerated production, but deprived millions of their livelihood. Protests were submerged in the complacency engendered by the Cold War temperament of the fifties. The massive discontent ultimately exploded through innumerable protest movements like the Black movement, movement for social justice and women's rights movement.

The political and social uncertainty had a respite early in the sixties with the swearing in of John F. Kennedy. His assassination in 1963, with all the mysterious circumstances surrounding it, was a severe blow to the socio-political dynamism of the period. More shocking events were to follow: the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965, of Martin Luther King in 1967 and of Robert Kennedy in 1968. Political assassination was not anything new to the country but never in the past had it
reached such proportions. Nor had political murders in the past been accompanied by such mystery. Then the Watergate Scandal in the seventies rocked the nation and extinguished whatever trust the people still had in their political system.

If the postwar era was the worst period in American history, it was also the most scintillating period in its literary history. Klinkowitz has observed that intellectual activity asserted itself during this period because, for the first time, America was in a thoroughly bad way (Literary Subversions xxv). It was the American novel which saw the most surging activity; Bellow, Mailer, Barth, Pynchon, Nabokov, Vonnegut, Heller, Barthelme, Burroughs, Brautigan, Kosinski, Gass and others elevated the novel to the present prominence. Malcolm Bradbury remarks that in its preoccupation with experimentation and social responsiveness "the American novel has been of everincreasing centrality and importance" (186).

As the postwar years wore on, old values and old convictions seemed to wither away; and the novelists could no longer rely on a realistic presentation of the social or psychological actualities. Neither the traditional form nor the conventional treatment was adequate, and, accordingly, writers began to adopt a fabulative approach to history, conveying a sense of the "disjointedness and
disconnectedness of our existence" (Bryant 283). As the "cultural and intellectual climate of the country had changed dramatically" (Hoffman, Daniel 7), many of the postwar novels employed a style and a language that was in conformity with popular culture. The new permissiveness brought on by the counter-culture of the sixties and seventies enabled the writers not only to treat every aspect of life but to discuss openly matters which had hitherto been taboo. This was particularly obvious in the works of Vonnegut, Pynchon, Burroughs and Barthelme. There "the unspeakable, the vile and imaginative things which lie beneath the surface of our mundane, anesthetizing forms" are open for discussion (Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions 80).

Postwar American fiction reveals the "dislocated, crack-brained world" of contemporary America (Helterman and Layman 33). The state of the society as revealed in Pynchon, Vonnegut, Burroughs, Barthelme or Heller is so dismaying that these 'mini-Jeremias' are often regarded as "celebrants of unreason, chaos and inexorable decay" (Bell 26). True, their vision often turned apocalyptic, but it is because the world around them no longer makes any sense, nor do they find any salvage in existing institutions or ideologies. The picture of postwar America that emerges from their works is bleak indeed; it shows a people frantically on the move, but not towards
any recognizable goal, nor with any definite purpose or sense of direction unless it is a kind of death wish. Economic disparities, social as well as racial stratification, irrevocable ethical degeneration, and violent disruptions in political and cultural processes have disfigured their America. A few examples will suffice. Barthelme has pointed out in *Snow White* that disillusionment has diffused through the entire people: "The poorest of them are slaves as surely as if they were chained to gigantic wooden oars. The richest of them have the faces of cold effete homosexuals. And those in the middle are wonderfully confused" (141). William Styron delineates the degradation of an average American, who worships only "the almighty dollar," in *Set This House on Fire*:

> The wisdom of all the ages, all the precious teachings of his ancestors, they were lost upon him. He spat on his negro brother and wore out his eyes looking at TV and fornicated with his best friend’s wife at the country club . . . At the age of seventy he was an empty husk, saddled with a lot of ill-gotten lucre and a pile of guilt . . . . (19)
Pynchon's Benny Profane in *V* yo-yoes out of sheer futility of life whereas Brautigan's Jesse in *A Confederate General From Big Sur* or Cameron in *The Hawkline Monster* do things fit for an absurd life in an absurd world. In *Catch-22* Joseph Heller doubts the validity of even the basic precepts of the country where Milo tells Yossarian that "he was jeopardizing his traditional rights of freedom and independence by daring to exercise them" (396). For Vonnegut postwar America is a "polluted, junked, raped" country (Bradbury 169). Perhaps it is in *Hocus Pocus* that his most bitter comments on America occur. Through Dr. Helen Dole, an intelligent black scholar whose application for a teaching job is turned down because she is black, Vonnegut lashes out at the falsity of the tall claims of the optimistic few:

She ranted on about its sky high rates of murder and suicide and drug addiction and infant mortality, its low rate of literacy, the fact that it had a higher percentage of its citizens in prison than any other country except for Haiti and South Africa . . . and put less money into research and primary education than Japan or Korea or any country in East or West Europe . . . . (268)
Although most of the postwar novelists have given expression to the bleakness and self-contradictions inherent in contemporary American experience, Vonnegut's is by far the most consistent and the most comprehensive criticism of his society. His feeling that America is in "an advanced state of physical and spiritual and intellectual dilapidation" makes him a conscientious critic of his country (HP 267). While his contemporaries were more concerned with the structure of the novel and experimented with the form of fiction "to create its own provisional, liberated worlds of creative consciousness" (Bradbury 159), Vonnegut was also weaving social and political commentary in whatever he wrote, in addition to reshaping the form of the novel to sustain the complex vision of his time. He has touched on every aspect of life in postwar American society, that too with extraordinary insight and compassion.

The picture of postwar America with its corporate mentality, war economy and deteriorating morality is drawn indelibly in his novels, yet critics failed to identify him with any ideology. His attack against the American way of life and the free enterprise system was relentless but never did he support Marxian ideology. As Richard Schickel observed, he regarded all ideologies as frauds men perpetrate on themselves (103-04). His solutions were deceptively simple and his support was always for the
ordinary people for whom he possessed and exhibited an
ardent love which was reciprocated by them by making him a
cult figure. He is neither nostalgic about the "good old
days" of American past nor optimistic about the future of
the American dream; looking back he finds only the inhuman
treatment towards the black and other racial minorities.
He even objects to expressing uncritical love and
veneration for the great classical writers and thinkers
because most of them had stood for the superiority of the
white male. They had regarded females, all minorities,
and the poor as hardworking and loyal servants of white
males. "Such wisdom is a foundation on which only white
males can build," says Vonnegut (FWD 114).

In his works his major concern is that of a
sociologist, and if some of his works are obviously
dystopian or apocalyptic it is because of his "solid
bitterness at the souring of so many American hopes"
(Kazin 89). He is bound to regard his work as a sacred
mission, for "Nobody gives a damn anymore about what's
really going on; what's going to happen next, or how we
ever got into such a mess in the first place" (JB 238).
Rather than accept the world as arbitrary, he chose to
show how easily it could be made better so that it would
"treasure people for something other than what they can
produce" (Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions 39-40). Bound
with it is the readiness to fight any system or ideology
that tends to belittle or dehumanize man. James R. Tunnell regards Vonnegut and Ken Kesey as the two writers who make the most explicit attack on apathy and whose primary concern is for individual dignity. Theirs is a new redemption, says Tunnell, as they address themselves to "those who, amid the conformity and barrenness of our time, are searching for some vestige of personal integrity and some measure of human kindness" (1080-82). This preoccupation has induced Vonnegut to oppose every dehumanizing thing as also every deterministic theory. Lawrence R. Broer has given a thorough analysis of Vonnegut's stance:

We must guard ourselves, he asserts, not only against the organizational machines of political, economic, and military power structures (which attempt to subvert free will and individual autonomy) but also against any totalitarian entity or theory that undermines the individual's sense of control over and responsibility for his own destiny and that of the planet . . . .

(Sanity Plea 101)

Such an engrossment presupposes a comprehensive and clinical analysis of the society around him, but precludes any attempt at levity of which he is often wrongly accused.
He has adopted the satirical or comic vein because that suited his purpose better than any other style. The horror, the inscrutability and the nerve-racking anxiety of the time necessitated the calm detachment of his humour. It is in fact the humour that enables us to contemplate the horror and absurdity that he presents. "It does not disguise the awful things perceived," says Robert Scholes, "it merely strengthens and comforts us to the point where such perception is bearable" (Fabulation 204). Vonnegut himself has acknowledged in an interview that "humor is an almost physiological response to fears" (Cargas 1048). Except Auschwitz he can’t think of any subject which is not fit for his humorous treatment; "Total catastrophes are terribly amusing" (1048). For him "laughter is a response to frustration, just as tears are, and it solves nothing, just as tears solve nothing"; but he has come to the conclusion that "the biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments and the biggest fears" (qtd. in Allen, Conversations 89-90). Along with Scholes we realize that "comedy can look into depths which tragedy does not acknowledge" (Fabulation 204).

This blending of humour and horror, however, caused Vonnegut to be labelled a black humourist along with Heller, Terry Southern, Stanley Elkin, Bruce Jay Friedman and others. But critics like Scholes and Olderman viewed it not as a demerit but as a convenient technique of
tremendous potential. Those who argued that his black humour vitiated his effectiveness as a satirist did not realize that a modern writer could not legitimately assume the superior stance of a moralist and hence would not even attempt to give ethical absolutes which traditional satirists used to give. And the dark humour has enabled Vonnegut to make us laugh, although bitterly, even in those areas which are apparently unyielding to laughter. Scholes is of the opinion that his intellectual comedy makes us "exercise our consciences and help us keep our humanity in shape, ready to respond to the humanity of others" (Fabulation 162). Moreover, "an excess of the horrible is faced and defeated by the only friend reason can rely on in such cases: laughter" (146). But the label did repel some readers and critics for a time. However many people easily saw the efficacy of the method; Bernard V. O'Hare, his old war buddy who shared his traumatic Dresden experience, speaks for them all: "There is certainly nothing wrong with a man like that. And if such thinking constitutes black humor, it's too bad there is not an epidemic of it" (qtd. in FWD 216).

His novels are still admired and cherished on two counts: for his tireless innovations and for his biting social and political criticism. His role as a relentless critic of the American way of life has superseded every other achievement, and will rank him as one of the
greatest satirists. What he has given is a systematic repudiation of the American way of life. "I am embarrassed," he said in 1979, "We are all embarrassed. We Americans have guided our destinies so clumsily, with all the world watching, that we must protect ourselves against our own government and our own industries." He is motivated by the conviction that not to say or do anything would be "a brand-new method of committing suicide--family style . . . and by the millions" (PS 71). But he knows that in their smug complacency, people, especially those in power, will neither admit that there is any major blemish in the system nor tolerate any radical criticism. In *Jailbird* one of his characters remarks that Americans "couldn't stand it that even one American, even a black one, would think for even a minute that maybe America wasn't the best country in the world" (85). This kind of inordinate chauvinism was not uncommon. In *Rabbit Redux* John Updike makes Harry Angstrom admit that when he first heard the term American dream "he pictured God lying sleeping, the guilt-colored map of the U. S. coming out of his head like a cloud" (106).

Vonnegut regards the American dream as an illusory dream that has become a hoax to divert people's attention from the distressing realities of their lives. It was founded not on the high principles of liberty and equality as people were made to believe, but on naked violation of
natural rights and justice. Talking about imperialism in the modern world, he reminds us that imperialistic designs were manifest in the American experiment from the beginning:

It can't be said too often that when Christopher Columbus discovered this hemisphere there were already millions upon millions of human beings here, and heavily armed Europeans took it away from them. When executed on a smaller scale, such an enterprise is the felony we call armed robbery. (FWD 130)

Even while eulogizing America as the beacon of liberty and true democratic principles, the people didn't pay heed to the contradictions that were all too apparent. Vonnegut's intention is to disclose the hollowness of many of their claims. For instance, in *Breakfast of Champions* he remarks that Thomas Jefferson was "a slave owner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty" (34). He has convincingly proved how "a handful of rapacious citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America" (GBR 21). Thus the affluent society that boasts of having made the dreams of the founding fathers come true has vitiated the very principles on which the nation was built. Cruelly relegated to the background and to
subsequent oblivion were the millions who were poor, unemployed or discriminated against. It has become increasingly so in the postwar era.

Vonnegut takes that society in its various ramifications and analyses each aspect to show how it has defiled the dream. The emerging picture is that of a bleak society that has erred in every direction, often through inherent weaknesses of the very system of neo-conservatism and free enterprise, aggravated by the conformity and complacency of the general public. His keen insight and humane understanding have made his analysis comprehensive but scathing whereas his dismay and horror make him, occasionally, a prophet of doom. But no one will miss his message—to be gentle and kind and humane.

Chapter II of this dissertation deals with the evils of mechanization and automation. Although America has been the most technologically advanced nation for quite some time, the advantages of science and technology have not been passed on to the lowest levels. In spite of all the tangible results, the cybernetic reality has displaced and alienated large sections of society; several people have been dispossessed forever while those who could adapt themselves to the system are soon repelled by the purposelessness of individual initiative and by the
dehumanization brought on by the machine culture. Vonnegut’s support is for the individual in his futile fight against machines.

Chapter III has its focus on Vonnegut’s attitude towards war and the American propensity for belligerence and violence. America has continuously been pushing its youngsters into wars which are neither justified nor conclusive. His own traumatic confrontation with the horror and lunacy of war has coloured his imagination, and induced him to take a valiant stand against every kind of senseless aggression and use of force. He is pained to note that his own country has become a permanent war economy. He takes us through the Second World War, and all subsequent wars that America has fought, and discloses the futility of war effort in modern days. His instinctual distrust of the top leadership makes him doubt the tall claims made by military and political leaders regarding their military superiority. Vonnegut has perfected a fabulative style that enables him to tell his war tales.

Vonnegut’s criticism of the political and economic life of postwar America is examined in the Fourth Chapter. Without identifying himself with any ideology, he reveals the inhumanity and injustice inherent in the American political process. His disbelief in the system and in the
leadership is shown with the accuracy and insight of a sociologist. Political atrocities like the Sacco-Vanzetti Case, the Watergate Scandal, and the Attica prison incident are taken to symbolize the degradation that has set in. His solution is characteristically simple--a return to simple human values.

In Chapter V postwar America emerges as a diseased, fragmented society whose sustaining myths have become hollow and whose values have dissipated. Broken images of brittle family relationships, psychological dereliction and excesses of sexuality are strewn throughout his work. In the mad pursuit of progress and comforts, inner harmony and the very values that give meaning and purpose to life are forsaken. The obsession with eschatological thoughts is quite natural given the unscrupulous application of harmful substances and technologies.

In Chapter VI Vonnegut's message is briefly discussed. What he has experienced and what he has seen around him make an optimistic stand impossible. Yet he doesn't convey a thoroughly dismal view; though his solutions are deceptively simple they are sure to lead America and its people to a less morbid state. This has been the sustaining message that he eventually conveys.