CHAPTER IV

A SHATTERED DREAM:
THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SCENARIO

The second half of the present century is perhaps the gloomiest and the most unsettled period in the history of the United States. True, it has known worse periods in the past and passed through more horrible experiences; but none of them, not even the Civil War or the Depression, made the Americans doubt the efficacy and the intrinsic worth of their political system. The postwar scenario, however, with its countless atrocities and tragedies, with the devaluation of political leadership, and with the perpetuation of senseless war effort, resulted in a gradual erosion of the credibility of the American way of life. Many writers have given adequate expression to the widespread feeling of uncertainty and doubt, but none more elaborately than Kurt Vonnegut.

America has always had its social critics who alerted the public to excesses and irregularities in their political and economic processes. However, their criticism was generally moderate and they seldom desecrated the supreme leaders or the solemn institutions as was frequently done in the postwar era, because they still had an abiding faith in the innate goodness of their
leaders and in the inherent effectualness of their institutions. A leader had always been an epitome of faith and confidence who steered the country through internal and external threats. And the capitalistic socio-political system ensured a safe deliverance from recessions and the Depression itself. The greatest democracy in the world successfully withstood every threat at a time when several other democracies were being run over by Communism or militaristic autocracies. The rapid increase in production that boosted material wealth, the unchallenged military superiority that guaranteed national security, and the optimistic ardour of the people appeared to usher in the golden age. But, occasional voices pointed out that everything was not so snug and beneficial.

The American democratic system, which was well-grounded in liberal and Darwinian concepts of societal organization, gradually came in for sharp criticism. Some, like Charles De Benedetti, feel that what America lacked miserably was "genuine political and economic democracy that expressed the voice of ordinary people" (Peace Heroes 23). For Norman Thomas, American democracy, for all its professed grandeur, left much to be desired. The cruel neglect of the ordinary man and his rights was the accepted norm: "the threat to civil liberties was as endemic to American society as was exploitation and waste;
the principle of democracy was vulnerable to the power of the very special interests which it was designed to control" (qtd. in Chatfield 101). But such criticisms failed to gain ground in the booming economy and the reassuring nascent military prowess. The emergence of America as an unchallenged military and economic power engendered the illusion that the American political and economic system would ensure national as well as individual prosperity and welfare. Along with it grew the conviction that Americans are esteemed and emulated everywhere: "The highest possible form of treason," Vonnegut suggests in *Cat's Cradle*, "is to say that Americans aren't loved wherever they go, whatever they do" (65).

This complacency, however, was short-lived. Political and military events of the postwar period belied the American dream. Frequent wars, bloody riots by recalcitrant mobs, motiveless political assassinations, mounting poverty and unemployment, and increasing alienation of the ordinary people cast doubt on the intrinsic merit of the system. Something was seriously wanting in the "affluent society," as it was called since the forties. A strong disbelief in their political process arose, as is best expressed by Ken Kesey in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. There, in the lunatic asylum McMurphy and Harding are engaged in an argument to
decide the "bull goose looney." When McMurphy says, "I'm so crazy I admit to voting for Eisenhower," Harding replies, "I'm so crazy I voted for Eisenhower twice!" Harding finally accepts defeat when McMurphy suggests that he is so crazy he plans to vote for Eisenhower again (22).

No wonder that Ronald Barthelme's *Snow White* exhorts to give up voting and even advises men to remove and destroy all posters and slogans from public places. Of course, the fifties and sixties saw the American society giving women and racial minorities, at long last, economic, legal and social equality, but Vonnegut reminds us that such a gesture of elementary justice took more than two hundred years to materialize (FWD 85).

Even the formidable material plenty failed to bring contentment, as William Styron points out in his novel, *Set This House on Fire*. He says that Americans torture themselves with so much drinking "because Americans are so wealthy. That's why they drink. They have to drink because drinking drowns their guilt over having more money than anybody in the world. My God . . . let them have some pleasure" (330). For Saul Bellow, "the rich men he knew were winners in struggles of criminality, of permissible criminality . . . kinds of cheating or thieving or (at best) wastefulness which on the whole caused the gross national product to increase" (*Mr. Sammler's Planet* 75). Vonnegut uses biting satire to
lay bare the frightening discrepancy between the publicized welfare society and the real America. For instance, he tells us in *Jailbird*:

Mary Kathleen O’Looney wasn’t the only Shopping-bag-Lady in the United States of America. There were tens of thousands of them in major cities throughout the country. Ragged regiments of them had been produced accidentally, and to no imaginable purpose, by the great engine of the economy. Another part of the machine was spilling out unrepentant murderers ten years old, and dope fiends and child batterers and many other bad things. (140)

He discloses the tragic alienation and displacement of the poor people in telling words; for example, in *Hocus Pocus* he says: "... poor and powerless people, no matter how docile, were no longer of any use to canny investors. What they used to do was now being done by heroic and uncomplaining machinery" (67). The rich are hardly better off in Vonnegut. They, while amassing as much wealth as possible for their descendants, usually made "psychological cripples of their own children. Their heirs were more often than not zombies, easily fleeced by men and women as greedy as the person who had left them
much too much of everything a human animal could ever want or need" (Galapagos 78).

The gradual devaluation of life was an obnoxious byproduct of progress and affluence. Behind the facade of prosperity and conformity there was the unsavoury world of immorality and violence. Edmund Wilson noted in 1963 that "gangsters, delinquents, the baboons of the South" formed large elements of the American society (273). In 1975 Vonnegut drew the dismal life in New York in an article in the Harper's Magazine: "... the city was ... being driven into the permanent bankruptcy of today by crooks and incompetent political leaders and greedy financiers, men at the top of their fields" ("New York" 3).

Much of Vonnegut's work forges a radical critique of his society; he satirizes the shallowness of the leaders and the ineffectuality of the political and economic system. Most of his novels and many of his other utterances are potent satires on the American way of life. For him America has retrogressed as regards morality and justice, and the American dream which inspired generations has become an empty symbol which only bolsters inequality and injustice. He views his leaders as "movers and shakers who were screwing up our economy for their own immediate benefit, taking money earmarked for research and development and new machinery and so on, and putting it
into monumental retirement plans and year-end bonuses for themselves" (HP 220). Thus his country has become "a thoroughly looted, bankrupt nation" (HP 90). It was ruled, he suggests in Deadeye Dick, by "a small clique of power brokers who believed that most Americans were so boring and ungifted and small time that they could be slain by the tens of thousands without inspiring any long-term regrets on the part of anyone" (231-32). In an interview with Hank Numer in 1987 he says that the human race is doomed by bad leadership. It is especially true in the case of America because, "very narrow sorts of people rise to the top, as witness our president [Ronald Reagan] who does not read at all and has people around him who know no history and who know no technology" (qtd. in Allen, Conversations 254). When Reagan describes America’s chief competitor, Russia, as "the evil empire," Vonnegut feels that such ignorance and provincialism are conducive to perpetuation of belligerency (254-55).

People’s attention is continuously being diverted from political crimes and disturbing truths through show-business gimmicks and "objectively batty fantasias":

that it was good that civilians could buy assault rifles; that the contras in Nicaragua were a lot like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison; that Palestinians were to be called terrorists at
every opportunity; that the contents of wombs were Government property; that the American Civil Liberties Union was a subversive organization; that anything that sounded like the Sermon on the Mount was socialist or communist, and therefore anti American . . . that a billion-dollar airplane was well worth the price; and on and on. (FWD 78)

Vonnegut doesn’t exonerate the people from responsibility; they failed to take corrective political measures and, on top of that lent support to their leaders even when the leaders were flagrantly revengeful and corrupted all through. They have, for Vonnegut, become shallow spectators in a political drama they neither understood nor cared about, as was seen in the fierce battle between Nixon’s Social Darwinism and McGovern’s populist, humanitarian policies in 1972. In "Playboy Interview" Vonnegut says that McGovern lost the election because he failed as an actor: "Only one thing matters: can he jazz us up on camera? This is a national tragedy, of course—that we’ve changed from a society to an audience" (WFG 273). Later, when America applied all the weapons that were earmarked for an attack against the Soviet Union on Iraq, a speech by President George Bush on the Iraq attack "won him the highest rating in television history" (FWD 14).
Vonnegut's America of 1970s and 80s is dismal—with its war economy, hegemony of the neo-conservatives, worsening unemployment rates, and rapid increase in poverty. Although his futuristic view is often discounted by critics, he persists in his attempt to make it a plea for moderation and humanistic evaluation rather than a cry of doom; moreover, most of his predictions are well-grounded in facts. For instance, he has repeatedly shown that the American system of capitalism and free enterprise has resulted in cruel neglect of the weaker sections of the people and that poverty and unemployment are on the increase. In her 1991 study Katherine S. Neuman draws a similar picture: "After decades of postwar prosperity and seemingly unlimited opportunity, the American job machine seems to be running down, wages have stagnated, income inequality is growing, unemployment . . . remains troublesome . . . and the cost of living continues to rise" (112). America at the turn of the century is, for Vonnegut, "a bankrupt nation whose assets had been sold off to foreigners, a nation swamped by unchecked plagues and superstition and illiteracy and hypnotic T. V., with virtually no health services for the poor" (HP 90). So many people make money by dismantling essential industries, cleaning out savings banks, and facilitating transfer of major concerns to foreigners (264). Hiroshi Matsumoto, the Japanese warden of the Athena prison in
Hocus Pocus has this to say about the American ruling class: "They looted your public and corporate treasures, and turned your industries over to nincompoops. Then they had your Government borrow so heavily from us that we had no choice but to send over an Army of Occupation in business suits" (223). He goes on to describe the falsities of American economy and the mediocre political leadership of the 1980s:

Never before has the Ruling Class of a country found a way to stick other countries with all the responsibilities their wealth might imply, and still remain rich beyond the dreams of avarice! No wonder they thought the comatose Ronald Reagan was a great President! (223)

In Jailbird Vonnegut envisages a future where all major industries and firms are sold off to the Japanese or the Koreans. In Slapstic the Chinese have infiltrated into every sphere of American life, cleverly manoeuvring things to their advantage. This fear must have its origin in the xenophobia of the McCarthy period, exacerbated by the fact that in the 1980s America had fallen from a position of comfortable trade surplus to trade deficit kindling a feeling of insecurity and even inferiority against trade rivals, especially Japan (Block 93-94). Vonnegut’s
futuristic vision becomes the gloomiest in *Galapagos* where nations come to unhappy ends through suicidal mistakes committed by men at the top:

Too late, the surviving inhabitants of such a nation would crawl from ruins of their own creation and realize that, throughout their self-imposed agony, there had been absolutely nobody at the top who understood how things really worked, what it was all about, what was really going on. (140)

This is fairly understandable on the grounds of Vonnegut's disgust at the frivolous political leadership of the 80s.

National prosperity and military superiority notwithstanding, a disbelief in the political and economic practices surged in the minds of the people. Paul Goodman notes that the feeling of patriotism was discouraged by the "lack of bonafides about our liberties, the dishonorable politics in the universities, the irresponsible press, the disillusioning handling of the adventure in space, the inferior and place-seeking high officers of the State, the shameful neglect of our landscape and the disregard of community" (qtd. in Howard 69-70). This wearing down of credibility
diminished voter turn-out on the one hand,¹ and caused widespread profanation of institutions and beliefs on the other. A survey conducted by the Michigan Survey Research Center showed that the percentage of the electorate who trusted their government at least most of the time declined from seventy-five per cent in 1964 to a frighteningly low twenty-five per cent in 1980 (Abramson 12).

This distrust in their political leadership and their institutions and beliefs informs some of Vonnegut’s most successful novels. While God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and Jailbird are outright political novels, Hocus Pocus, Breakfast of Champions and Galapagos contain brilliant travesties of the American way of life. Vonnegut was never excessively patriotic or narrowly nationalistic. He reveals his attitude through Campbell who says that hating America would be as silly as loving it: “It’s impossible for me to get emotional about it, because real estate doesn’t interest me . . . I can’t think in terms of boundaries . . . I can’t think that they mark the end or the beginning of anything of real concern to a human soul” (MN 100). Vonnegut’s attitude was in sharp contrast

¹ The percentage of adults who voted for president has been on the decline since 1960 until it was a meagre fifty-three per cent in 1980. That of those who voted to the Congress also showed a marked decline to a paltry thirty-six per cent in 1978 (Abramson 5-7).
to the general American affinity towards strong nationalism which was ingrained in their nature right from the days of Emerson. Linked with it was his distrust of any ideology that tended to belittle the individual. What he saw was an affluent society controlled by ostentatious leaders who more often than not forgot the ordinary people. Even while he realized that "all the enlightened commitment in the world will not bring social justice, will not forestall our collective degeneration" (Cowart 180), he strived to make the American ideologies and laws more humane. The unhappy nexus between the disillusionment of the people and the venality of the shady politicians and industrialists shocked him to such an extent that some of his works have become radical critiques of the American political system. Even when he is dealing with existential questions or with an individual's psychic responses to destructiveness he does so within the context of American political and economic history, making his readers doubt the very certitude with which they used to take their ideologies and practices as exemplary (Uphaus 168-69; Cowart 180).

Vonnegut hasn't forgotten the time when it was impolite to discuss a person's sources of wealth just as it was impolite to discuss sexuality or excretion. "If we are to discuss truthfully what America is and what it can become," he noted in an address in 1973, "our discussion
must be in absolutely rotten state, or we won't be discussing it at all" (WFG 216). In rotten state it has always been, making him a literary maverick, repelling academic critics for a long time but alluring the disillusioned youngsters and thereby becoming their unproclaimed prophet.

He doubts the validity of most of the myths incorporated in the American dream. For instance, when the American Public Television shows "the beauty and charm and wittiness" of British imperialism and the British class system, they strike him as "hopelessly subversive." He says in Fates Worse Than Death: "British imperialism was armed robbery. The British class system (which seems so right to the Neo-Cons) was and still is unarmed robbery" (132). He no longer regards the Constitution of his country as sacrosanct, as he says in an interview:

I finally understand that I am not protected by the United States Constitution . . . The good will of those who govern us--and that's it--that's all that has ever protected us. We have entered a period now when our government doesn't really seem to like us much. I find this oppressive, and realize that the Constitution can't help much, can't help at all really, if our leaders come to dislike us--which they apparently do. (McLaughlin 72)
Further, in the preface to *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons* he says that Nixon is "a useful man in that he has shown us that our Constitution is a defective document" (xxiii). The American dream, sustained by the "hallowed myth of American rugged individualism" (Hipkiss 62), fails to impress Vonnegut. It has ignored, and in turn alienated large sections of the people so that, as Hipkiss suggests, "that unbridled capitalism should ever have been thought of as the way to realize the American dream for all Americans is in itself absurd" (62).

Vonnegut is highly critical of the political leadership of his time; most of the political leaders, both real and fictitious, who appear in his works are ignorant mediocre men pretending to be steering a great nation into prosperity and glory while they don't really have a clue as to what is happening. President Jonathan Lynn in *Player Piano* hasn't even finished high school and reads a speech someone else had written, reading "order out of chaos" as "order out of koze." Vonnegut dwarfs him by suggesting that "all the gorgeous dummy had to do was read whatever was handed to him on State occasions: to be suitably awed and reverent, as he said, for all the ordinary, stupid people who'd elected him to office . . ." (102-04). In *The Sirens of Titan* the President talks about the "prog-erse" made possible by the
great American economy, and to those who are still circumspect he blurts out: "Space can absorb the productivity of a trillion planets the size of earth. We could build and fire rockets forever, and never fill up space and never learn all there is to know about it" (59-60). Wilbur becomes the president in *Slapstick* on the strength of his motto "Lonesome No More," and when faced with an acute shortage of fuel he orders all the papers from the National Archives to be burned for fuel. Participating in a debate about Reagan's possible second term Vonnegut remarked:

If Ronald Reagan gets re-elected, which I think will happen, he will happen to be an actor who pretends to steer the United States of America . . . . He will go on spinning a great ship's wheel this way and that, although it is connected to nothing but the floor of the set . . . ." ("Imagine the Worst" 26)

What infuriates Vonnegut is not the mediocrity of the politicians alone but their callousness as well as the gullibility of the people who have become passive spectators for all practical purposes. Referring to the Safeguard Antimissile System planned by Nixon and Laird, the Secretary of Defence, he says that if such a system was ever used, all children born after that would die of
birth defects: "So I marveled again at the cheerfulness of our leaders, guys my age. They were calling for nothing less than the construction of a doomsday machine, but they went on smiling. Everything was OK" (WFG 104). He confesses that he would have smiled amiably if he met Nixon and Laird even though youngsters might disagree: "Kids don’t learn nice manners in high school anymore," he says. "If they met a person who was in favor of building a device which would cripple and finally kill all children everywhere, they wouldn’t smile. They would bristle with hatred, which is rude" (WFG 105). Even intelligent men succumb to popular gimmicks which draw voters more easily than concrete policies. It was especially so during the "disgraceful Bush Vs Dukakis campaign," says Vonnegut; the aim in American politics has become "to train intelligent, well-educated people to speak stupidly so that they can be more popular. Look at Michael Dukakis. Look at George Bush" (FWD 29-32).

Vonnegut’s distrust of the American political system is inflamed by his conviction that political leadership has become subservient to interests detrimental to the well-being of the ordinary people: "the real power in this country now resides entirely elsewhere, in the hands of anarchist money managers and militarists and so on" ("Imagine the Worst" 26). He feels that they turn a blind eye to the interests of the weak and the poor, and
deliberately keep them ignorant and lonely. He says in "Playboy Interview":

We’re being kept apart from our neighbours. Why? Because the rich people can go on taking our money away if we don’t hang together. They can go on taking our power away. They want us lonesome; they want us huddled in our houses with just our wives and kids, watching television, because they can manipulate us then. They can make us buy anything, they can make us vote any way they want . . . . (WFG 274)

Genuine political and economic reforms will deliver us from this muddle, but that needs intelligent and selfless political leadership, something Vonnegut has always hankered after. He expresses that dwindling hope in a letter he writes to Earthlings a century from now:

Now that we can discuss the mess we are in with some precision, I hope you have stopped choosing abysmally ignorant optimists for positions of leadership. They were useful only so long as nobody had a clue as to what was really going on—during the past seven million years or so. In my time, they have been catastrophic as heads of sophisticated institutions with real work to do. (FWD 112)
No political or economic ideology, however, seems to satisfy Vonnegut, the humanist, whose ultimate concern is man, engaged in a perpetual conflict with dehumanizing agencies or motives. Starting with a mild repudiation of "the well-intentioned impulses of enthusiastic welfare-state-ists of all stripes" (Keough 104), he reaches the realization that "every successful government is of necessity a Ponzi Scheme" (JB 51)² and ends up in passive resignation in Hocus Pocus: "I have no reforms to propose. I think any form of government, not just capitalism, is whatever the people who have all our money, drunk or sober, sane or insane, decide to do today" (227). Though he never identified himself with any ideology, his concern for the ordinary people made him a socialist and even inspired his "decent political radicalism" (Wood 9). In an article in The Nation in 1981 he remarks that he came from a not-so-radical family but that "A splendid education in the Indianapolis public schools, plus the Great Depression, plus three years as a private in the Army" radicalized him ("Stars and Bit Players" 580). In the prologue to Jailbird he discloses that he had

² Walter F. Starbuck feels that countries thrive on enormous loans which can never be repaid. Otherwise, America might never have escaped from the Depression in which many of its people could not earn even the most basic necessities, and reached the time when people could "waddle in wealth" (JB 51-52).
cherished socialist dreams and that it made him vote for
Norman Thomas and Mary Hapgood, wife of Powers Hapgood,
the Indianapolis socialist and labour organizer, in the
1944 presidential election. "I imagined that I was a
socialist," he continues. "I believed that socialism
would be good for the common man. As a private first
class in the infantry, I was surely a common man" (xii).

Vonnegut's socialist sympathies arose not so much
from any well-knit ideological premise as from the
recognition that the apotheosis of wealth and
individualism has resulted in a stratification of the
American society where social justice is on the wane.
"Life is hard enough," he suggests in God Bless You,
Mr. Rosewater, "without people having to worry themselves
sick about money, too. There is plenty for everybody in
this country, if we'll only share more" (104). In his
Bennington College address in 1970 Vonnegut gave his
socialist stance: "I suggest that you work for a socialist
form of government. Free Enterprise is much too hard on
the old and the sick and the shy and the poor and the
stupid, and on people nobody likes . . . . They lack that
certain something that Nelson Rockefeller, for instance,
so abundantly has" (WFG 168). He makes it more explicit
in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater where Eliot Rosewater
admits that continuous work for the indigent people of
Rosewater County has brought communist thoughts in his mind:

I think it's terrible the way people don't share things in this country. I think it's a heartless government that will let one baby be born owning a big piece of the country, the way I was born, and let another baby be born without owning anything. The least a government could do, it seems to me, is to divide things up fairly among the babies. (104)

Walter F. Starbuck, Vonnegut's most clearly delineated political character, had the vision of a socialist utopia where "common people everywhere would take control of the planet's wealth, disband their national armies, and forget their national boundaries," and in that ideal society the only misfit would be "one who took more wealth than he or she needed at any time" (JB 13-14). Now old and zany, he realizes that he has become a misfit: "I still believe that peace and plenty and happiness can be worked out some way. I am a fool" (14).

Vonnegut is drawn to a radical criticism of the American way of life by humanitarian ethics as also by his unflinching concern for man. In *Jailbird*, for instance, during Congressional hearing, Nixon asks Walter why he had been ungrateful to the American system, and Walter's answer is pithy though commonplace: "Why? The Sermon on
the Mount, Sir" (241). The collapse of socialist regimes in Russia and the East European countries doesn’t detract from the validity of Vonnegut’s socialist dream: "Just because the Soviet Union, which used to brag about being such a friend of the common people, has collapsed, that doesn’t mean the Sermon on the Mount must now be considered balderdash" (FWD 132).

Much of the blame for tarnishing the American dream falls on political leaders in Vonnegut; in a comic reversal of fortune some of them become mediocre figureheads while some are self-seeking, bigoted cheats. A cavalcade of prominent leaders array themselves in his novels and he shows them for what they really are: for the most part actors and pretenders, or passive onlookers in a social drama they neither grasped nor cared about. While most of them are depicted unambiguously, some are only cleverly implied.  

Vonnegut profanes the memory of the great fathers of the American way of life. For instance, in Breakfast of Champions he remarks that Thomas Jefferson, the great

3 Winston Niles Rumfoord of The Sirens of Titan is shown by critics to correspond to Franklin D. Roosevelt (Karl 247; Allen, Understanding 39), Senator Lister Rosewater of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is identified with Barry Goldwater (Lundquist 46), and Lionel Boyd Johnson of Cat’s Cradle is taken to represent Lyndon B. Johnson (Lundquist 37).
champion of liberty, owned slaves and, on top of that, even justified it. In Galapagos Roy Hepburn’s list of persons or things that died without a progeny includes smallpox and George Washington. His wife Mary Hepburn realizes that Count Dracula was "a far more significant person to most of her students than George Washington, for instance, who was merely the founder of the country" (132). Vonnegut is more pungent in his criticism of contemporary political leadership. His fictitious presidents in Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan and Slapstick as well as the real political leaders of Jailbird, Palm Sunday and Fates Worse Than Death are masters of histrionics in manipulative politics. Most of them ascend to the top on the basis of their ability to act and their skill in enticing the audience-turned voters. We get a similar picture in Jerzy Kosinski’s brilliant political satire, Being There. Chance, the gardener, a virtual nobody, ignorant and even illiterate, is made Chauncy Gardiner by the media and shot to national prominence, all within four days of his first public appearance. His ideas on gardening are interpreted as his formulas for the resurgence of the collapsing American economy.

Such sweeping criticisms were the outcome not only of the visible qualitative deterioration of the political leadership and the convergent ethical degeneracy but also
of the turbulent mood of the postwar period. Escalation of war, the paranoid temperament that underlay the McCarthy purge (Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*), the rise to prominence of the extreme right, open antagonism to popular demands for racial and economic justice, and frequent reports of open venality discomposed the people to an unprecedented degree. Starting with the Nixon administration the government seemed to move beyond the reach of the people, becoming increasingly unresponsive to criticism or even to public opinion. The President and his cronies came to believe in their divine rights, being reinvigorated by religious leaders (WFG 205). Vonnegut is especially severe on Richard M. Nixon who, as he says in the preface to *Wampeters*, is "the first President to hate the American people and all they stand for. He believes so vibrantly in his own purity, although he has committed crimes which are hideous" (xxiii). He comes back to it in *Slapstick*: "He promised to bring us together, but tore us apart instead" (166).

In his report on the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida, in 1972, Vonnegut effects a bitter commentary on the American political scene where winners are wont to despise losers because they are convinced of their divine rights. He reports that Nixon appeared to be the champion of truthfulness, but he reminds us that such emphasis on truthfulness is a clever
strategy to be believed when they lie: "President Nixon, for instance, was free to lie during his acceptance speech at the Convention, if he wanted to, because of his famous love for the truth" (WFG 205). His distrust has grown to hatred by the time he addresses the graduating class at Fredonia college in 1978: "Let me tell you what kept us as high as kites a lot of the time: hatred. All my life I've had people to hate--from Hitler to Nixon" (PS 181).

He doesn't soften his words in his evaluation of subsequent political leaders. About Ronald Reagan he says ". . . all I do is louse up paper, whereas Ronald Reagan . . . loused up the whole country" (FWD 130). He takes great exception to Reagan's Star Wars, "the chimera that technology can make the United States invincible . . . that a technological fix can be found for what are ultimately political and diplomatic problems" (Zins 177). He is more rancorous when he comes to the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, "a traveling show about dirty books and pictures put on the road during the administration of Ronald Reagan":

At least a couple of the panel members would later be revealed as having been in the muck of financial or sexual atrocities. There was a clan feeling, to be sure, but the family property in this case was the White House, and an amiable,
sleepy, absentminded old movie actor was its totem pole. (FWD 78)

He sees through the device quite smoothly and warns the people to be wary of such planned make-believe:

The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography was blatantly show business, a way for the White House to draw attention to its piety by means of headlines about sex, and to imply yet again that those in favor of freedom of speech were enthusiasts for sexual exploitation of children and rape and so on. (While other Reagan supporters were making private the funds for public housing and cleaning out the savings banks.) (FWD 78)

Things did not improve at the time of Bush either, as was shown during Bush's election campaign. Vonnegut painfully remarks that Bush was "promising to protect rich light people everywhere from poor dark people everywhere" (FWD 29). Vonnegut was of firm opinion that Bush was declaring wars indiscriminately on weak foreign countries in order to ward off suspicion about the dishonest practices of his supporters. Bush is upbraided also for "his failure to take notice of the most beautiful and noble and brilliant and poetical and sacred accomplishment by Americans to date"—*Voyager II*, the camera-bearing space probe that disclosed several secrets
about the Solar System. When it departed forever "sending us dimmer and dimmer pictures of what we were and where we were," Bush just ignored it and "spoke passionately instead of the necessity of an Amendment to the Constitution . . . outlawing irreverent treatment of a piece of cloth, the American flag." Vonnegut doesn't hesitate to say that "such an Amendment would be on a nutty par with the Roman Emperor Caligula's having his horse declared a Consul" (FWD 82). He is critical of Bush's selection of Dan Quayle as his Vice-President: "George Bush's making Dan Quayle the custodian of our nation's destiny, should Bush become seriously impaired, was proof to me that Bush didn't give a damn what became of the rest of us once he himself was gone. There's a bomber pilot for you" (FWD 94).

Political atrocities of the postwar period that made American politics the centre of world attention are brought to close scrutiny in Vonnegut. The McCarthy witch-hunt of the 50s and the Watergate scandal of the 70s are regarded by Vonnegut as outgrowths of cankerous tendencies very much in evidence in American politics, often submerged in the smugness cultivated in the people and overlooked by the media. The Cold War had made most of the writers and intellectuals dissociate themselves from radical causes and radical socio-political criticism (Hoffman, Daniel 5). Richard Hofstadter proves that anti-intellectualism that deterred any serious criticism of the
system in the 50s had been there since the beginning of American nationalism (Anti-intellectualism). It didn’t inhibit Vonnegut, however, from effecting bitter criticism of his society right from 1952, the year in which his first novel *Player Piano*, his valiant anti-establishment attempt, was published. The "paranoic atmosphere" of the novel had obvious bearing on the political atmosphere of the time as William Rodney Allen documents (*Understanding* 31).

McCarthyism was in fact a convenient weapon in the hands of politicians like Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the young Republican Richard M. Nixon to eliminate whoever seemed not to conform to their views and policies. It was so very easy to convince people that the greatest threat to the nation was from Communism and that it was only meet to ostracize anyone connected with it. As more and more liberal people were tried and humiliated, people learned how to keep quiet or not to think freely at all. The Congressional Committee for un-American activities subjected "two million federal employees to a purge of suspected communists or fellow travellers at a cost of twenty-five million dollars" (Archer 133). The attempt of Nixon and McCarthy to ferret out Communists and left-wingers was so assiduous that intellectuals lived in constant dread of being stigmatized. Archer estimates that 570 civil servants were fired and 2,478 were forced to resign during Truman’s period and another eight
thousand left under Eisenhower (134). Talking about the 50s Norman Mailer said in "The White Negro": "A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve" (338).

Vonnegut recaptures the dreadful ordeal in *Jailbird*, his "divine capitalistic comedy" (Rackstraw, "Vonnegut the Diviner" 74), as a symptom of the inherent decay in American political practice.

He flouts the American Cold War concept that most of the evil in the world has been caused by Communism or left-wing intellectuals (Allen, *Understanding* 128); he has no difficulty in identifying the hysteria generated by McCarthy and the extreme right as a ploy to drown any concerted demand for social or racial justice. What really surprises him is the credibility of the people—within a couple of years an intelligent and politically conscious people came to believe in whatever was officially recommended and to regard McCarthy and his loyalists as heroes.⁴ He comments in *Jailbird* that Nixon "would almost certainly never have become President, of course, if he had not become a national figure as the discoverer and hounder" of innumerable Communists (47).

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⁴ Norman Murchi, the rapacious and dishonest lawyer in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* papers his room with pictures of McCarthy and Roy Cohn, who had been chief counsel of the Senate Permanent Investigating Committee headed by McCarthy (33).
The McCarthy syndrome is dexterously recreated in Jailbird. Only a few persons are directly affected by it in the novel; nonetheless, the paranoid mood of the time is deftly suggested. Dr. Ben Shapiro, lieutenant colonel in the Army Medical Corps has had Communist sympathies at Harvard and when he is transferred to Wiesbaden and promoted to full colonel, McCarthy finds the promotion sinister and wants to know, "who promoted Shapiro to Wiesbaden?" (28). It ruins him. In the second instance Vonnegut shows how the McCarthy hearings often ended in total ruin of both the accused and the accusers. Walter F. Starbuck was heading a task force of scientists and military men in 1949 to propose tactics for ground forces with small nuclear weapons. Having got wind of his Communist background, the Congressional Committee, particularly Nixon, wanted to know if he was to be trusted with such an important and sensitive job. Protracted hearings, civil suits and finally a criminal trial took over two years, and the proceedings and statements were widely broadcast. As it became evident that he could not escape without informing on some men who had Communist connections he gave, in reply to a question by Nixon, a list of men who had had Communist sympathies during the Depression but who later proved their patriotism during the Second World War. The list included the name of
Leland Clewes, a fast-rising bright star in the State Department. Clewes was in fact never connected with Communism but all his denials and his boss, the Secretary of State's strong defence in his favour didn't save him from being convicted. Vonnegut ironically suggests that there were men who could convincingly testify that Clewes continued to be a Communist throughout the war, and that he passed secret information to Soviet agents. Two horrible years later Clewes is convicted on six counts of perjury and sent to Federal Minimum Security Adult Correctional Facility at Finletter. Walter doesn't fare better; as the whole proceedings were broadcast over the entire nation, he fails to find a job once he is fired from the Defence Department (43-47). He carries the burden till the end of the novel. He is now despised by everybody; his own son even found it prudent to change his name to Stankiewicz to escape the stigma attached to his father's last name. Later, during the Watergate trial Walter refuses to divulge the names of the conspirators he knew and goes to prison instead: "It was sickening to send another poor fool to prison. There was nothing quite like sworn testimony to make life look trivial and mean ever after" (53).

Vonnegut brings out the irresponsibility of political leaders in his review of the Kent State University tragedy in Jailbird. On May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guard shot and
killed four anti-war protestors at Kent University. Ohio Governor James Rhodes, who despised campus demonstrators, had threatened to eradicate them (Blum 368). Its being an unprovoked outrage against a peaceful demonstration didn’t seem to induce Nixon and his men to denounce the incident. Vonnegut’s Nixon in *Jailbird* convenes an emergency meeting of about forty important people to discuss the steps to be taken about the shooting. Walter, the President’s special advisor on youth affairs, had sat up all the previous night drafting his suggestions as to what the President should say about the tragedy. He wanted the guardsmen to be pardoned, reprimanded and then discharged from service for the good of the country. Then the President should examine the activities of the National Guard units in the country to see if they are to be trusted with live ammunition while controlling unarmed crowds. He should declare national mourning with flags flown at half mast everywhere. Walter came to the meeting in which Nixon and Vice President Agnew, Virgil Greathouse, Secretary of Health and Welfare, Emil Larkin, Nixon’s advisor, Henry Kissinger, Richard M. Helms, Head of the C. I. A., Haldeman, and Ehrlichman were present. He was never asked to speak nor could he interest anyone in the papers in his hand (31-33). What Vonnegut suggests is well borne out by Nixon’s own statement regarding the tragedy, as we find in John Morton Blum’s *Years of Discord*. For Nixon such
incidents "should remind us all . . . that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy" (368). This insensate disregard for human safety and the political irresponsibility are frequently decried by Vonnegut, not merely as emblematic of the Nixon era but as a repellent feature of American right-wing politics.

He blends superb political satire with sheer fantasy in his only truly political novel, *Jailbird*, to highlight some of the major political outrages of the century. Historical characters and fictitious characters mingle in a strange drama where the focus is always on the political system that has been in force in America since the inception of the nation. To the disillusioned generations after the Second World War he has been an iconoclast and a sensitive alarm in whose hands the political fiascoes are brought to sharp relief, of which Watergate Scandal, the darkest chapter in American political history, gets paramount importance in *Jailbird*.

The Watergate incident was so shocking and incredible that it made people doubt the value of the much-defended American political system itself. Within the short period of a few years it shook the entire fabric of American political system. Here was a President, Richard Nixon, whose obscene remarks and foul oaths were broadcast all over the country; that too, at a time when he and his
trusted supporters were desperately trying to prevent the Judiciary from functioning properly. John J. Sirica, chief judge of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, who tried the Watergate case, sadly observed:

... Nixon and his people were arrogant enough to believe that they should substitute their own judgements for those of the electorate ... . Their lust for power, their arrogance, their raw disregard of the law, of fairness, and of the very constitutional processes that they had sworn to enforce and protect, led them to break the law in order to keep themselves in office. (299)

Vonnegut's oft-repeated denigration of Nixon as their worst president and his open admission of hatred for Nixon (WFG xxiii; SL 166; PS 181; 204) strike us as well-justified when we go through the details of the Watergate case. "It was one of the most disillusioning experiences of my life," observed Sirica, "to have to listen now to what had gone on at the highest levels of the government of the United States" (205). He even alerted the people to be wary of the likes of Nixon: "I hope no political party will ever stoop so low as to embrace the likes of Richard Nixon again" (239).
In *Jailbird* Walter F. Starbuck came to the White House because he had informed on his left-wing friends during the McCarthy purge. Nixon found him out and placed him in the White House as the President's special advisor on youth affairs at thirty-six thousand dollars a year. He was alone in his office in the subbasement directly underneath "the office where burglaries and other crimes on behalf of President Nixon were planned" (12). He never had any role in the White House and was never listened to or noticed, yet he was a witness to all the hideous plans contrived there. The atmosphere at the White House is best indicated by his comment about Emil Larkin, Nixon's "hatchet man": "In my time at the White House I feared him as much as my ancestors must have feared Ivan the Terrible" (35). That the White House men were engaged in shady schemes was proved beyond any doubt by the diligence with which they carried out sound tests to verify if Walter could overhear any sound from the rooms above. Later, when the FBI and men from the Office of the Public Prosecutor began searching the White House for records and illegal campaign money, some highranking people brought to Walter's room a huge steamer trunk containing illegal campaign contribution amounting to one million dollars in unmarked and circulated twenty-dollar bills. When the police found it and arrested him he refused to name the people who brought it there. He had not yet forgotten the
calamitous McCarthy purge during which he had informed on some erstwhile Communists slumping them into irrevocable tragedies.

Vonnegut admits that Walter was the oldest and the least celebrated of the Watergate conspirators; he was not powerful enough or rich enough to be regarded as a celebrity. During his two years in the Federal Minimum Security Adult Correctional Facility at Finletter he is shown no consideration. Walter recognizes that most of the inmates at the Facility are Phi Beta Kappas, doctors, disbarred lawyers or former Nixon men. Emil Larkin who was Nixon's advisor and a threat to the White House crew is now addicted to religion and he "prayed all day long to what he believed to be Jesus Christ" (34). Religion has become an opiate to him making him insensitive to "any slights at his expense" or any feeling of guilt (35). Virgil Greathouse, former Secretary of health, education, and welfare, recognizes Walter though he never seemed to notice him at the White House and threatens him not to reveal any secret. Nothing touches Walter any longer.

While the Watergate manoeuvre was the offshoot of the attempt by some politicians to remain in power at any cost, it had serious consequences for American politics. The most disheartening effect was that "as a result of the Watergate Scandal, as well as evidence of other official
misconduct or incompetence, skepticism about, even
disillusionment with, American institutions and leaders
emerged as an important feature of national life"("Watergate"). Vonnegut who had already become
circumspect regarding political actions and policies
became convinced that he could no longer trust his
government or the political leaders. As corruption became
rampant at higher levels his criticism turned more
aggressive as we can find in his later works. What pained
him more than anything else was the defiance and arrogance
of responsible political leaders who mere operating on a
plane inaccessible to popular wishes and impervious to
criticism. Coupled with it was their illusion that they
were innately good and unquestionably superior, not to be
compared with the rum masses.

The vainglorious political leaders are best
symbolized by the irresponsible leaders who caused the
Attica tragedy. Vonnegut firmly believes that it could
have been averted, had the authorities been a little more
prudent and humane. He makes the incident the focal point
of Hocus Pocus, his latest novel, though imaginatively

5 The New York State Special Commission on Attica
calls it "the bloodiest oneday encounter between Americans
since the Civil War" with the exception of Indian
massacres in the nineteenth century. The Commission has
shown that the assault was not carefully planned to
minimize the loss of life (xi-xv).
restructured and shown as occurring in 1999. Attica Correctional Facility becomes New York State Maximum Security Adult Correctional Institution at Athena but the details of the incident are more or less the same. His personal opinion on the tragedy was given in a speech he gave after accepting the Eugene V. Debs award.

At Attica convicts took over much of the prison and were successful in holding fifty prison employees as hostages. As the situation became tense—extremely dangerous to the hostages and to the convicts as well—the convicts, the hostages and their terrified families begged Nelson Rockefeller, Governor of New York, to come to Attica. They wanted him "to exert the magic and grace inherent in his office as governor so as to make it possible, somehow, for no one to die. He was asked to risk his dignity, and perhaps even his body, in order that some lives be saved" ("Stars and Bit Players" 581). He declined to come and sent National Guard units instead. They made a surprise attack and recovered the prison, killing thirty-nine, of whom ten were hostages. Vonnegut is furious in his strictures on the irresponsible behaviour of Rockefeller; he believes that Rockefeller didn’t go to Attica because he was the only leading character in a story where nobody else was famous: "Nelson Rockefeller believed that if anything demeaning happened to him, the star of the Attica story, the story
would become confusing and boring to the audience. It would stop being a wonderful story" ("Stars and Bit Players" 581). He reminds us that "we are not supporting characters in the cast of Hamlet, ready for any sort of humiliation or death, if only the Prince of Denmark can learn a thing or two" (580). But the Rockefellers take the people for expendable pieces in a political game where the populace continually lose out to personal glory and vanity of leaders.

Vonnegut’s concern for the unprivileged finds powerful expression in his treatment of labour leaders who, as he says in an interview with Charles Reilly, are the only genuine idealists in America (217). He has always had active interest in labour history as he reveals in the prologue to Jailbird (xix). Sacco and Vanzetti were always on his mind and labour activists like Eugene V. Debs and Powers Hapgood appear in his works as true champions of selfless service to the poor. But he recognizes that the general American attitude towards any socialist ideology is one of downright contempt and suspicion, that labour activists are anathema to the society, and that any recession in production or in the overall economic growth is often attributed to unproductive labour. H. Lowe Crossby, the bicycle manufacturer in Cat’s Cradle, sums up the attitude:
"The eggheads sit around trying to figure out new ways for everyone to be happy. Nobody can get fired, no matter what; and if somebody does accidentally make a bicycle, the union accuses us of cruel and inhuman practices . . ." (59). He moves his business to a poor Caribbean island because "The people down there are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense!" (59).

Vonnegut, however, hasn’t forgotten that labour unions have undergone structural as well as ideological deterioration. In *Jailbird* he says: "The union was run by communists then. It is run by gangsters now" (163). The public relations firms that whitewash Caribbean and Latin American dictatorships and every CIA scheme patronize the "gangster-dominated unions" too (36). In sharp contrast to the degenerate labour leaders of the present society Vonnegut presents socialist labour activists such as Eugene V. Debs and Powers Hapgood who heroically spearheaded American labour activities in the first three decades of the century.

Eugene V. Debs’s inspiring memory is evoked in *Hocus Pocus* as a socialist, pacifist, and a labour organizer of utmost sincerity and dedication. The novel is in fact dedicated to his memory and the hero Eugene Debs Hartke is named after the immortal labour hero. It begins with the
epitaph of Debs: "While there is a lower class I am in it. While there is a criminal element I am of it. While there is a soul in prison I am not free" (9). But the events in the novel show irrevocable divergence from the Socialist utopia dreamed by Debs. Kenneth Whistler in *Jailbird* is modelled on Powers Hapgood, the Indianapolis Socialist and labour organizer who, despite his affluent background and Harvard education, worked in the coal mines and was proud of it (x). Whistler, his palms callous and with coal dust in the lines on his face, electrifies the young Harvard men but all his efforts and charisma don’t preclude the hero from betraying his best friends in the frenzy of the McCarthy hearings.

That Vonnegut is fascinated by labour’s misery is evidenced by his inclusion in *Jailbird* of the Cuyahoga Massacre which, he admits, is only an "invention, a mosaic composed of bits taken from tales of many such riots in not such olden times" (xxi). The Cuyahoga incident is imagined to have taken place on Christmas morning in 1894 when, in a confrontation between striking workers and armed guards, fourteen were killed and twenty-three were seriously injured. It made Alexander McCone, son of the

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6 Debs said it in court when facing a possible sixty-year prison sentence for espionage for his open stand against America’s participation in the First World War (Wittner 76).
founder and owner of the Cuyahoga Bridge and Iron Company, stammer ever after and accidentally shaped Walter’s life. Vonnegut surely establishes his solidarity with the suffering underdogs, in his depiction of the Cuyahoga incident as also of the Sacco and Vanzetti case in the 1920s, "one of the most spectacular, most acrimoniously argued miscarriages of justice in American history" (JB xxi).

The execution of Sacco and Vanzetti so moved the young Vonnegut that he thought it would continue to be remembered for a long time. But, much to his chagrin, he learned that people forget easily, that many people came to believe that justice was served in executing them. His own father confessed that he had no doubt about their guilt (JB xxii). However, Vonnegut makes the incident central to Jailbird, as haunting Walter to the end, and inspiring the young radicals. It is so central to the novel that Lawrence Broer argues: "Save for Dresden, nowhere in Vonnegut’s fiction does a single act of sociopolitical madness so burden the hero’s conscience or prove more unbalancing than the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti" (Sanity Plea 121).

Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian immigrants who moved to Mexico to escape from the First World War. They came back to America as confirmed
anarchists and "made no secret whatsoever about how unjust and self-deceiving and ignorant and greedy they thought so many of the leaders were" (JB 177). They were arrested for radical activities and later accused of murders. Vanzetti was also accused of an attempted robbery in which his role was never proved, but Webster Thayer, the judge of the Massachusetts Superior Court, didn’t need proof or evidence: "This man, although he may not have actually committed the crime attributed to him, is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of our existing institutions" (JB 177-78). In his last statement in the court, Vanzetti pointed to the prejudiced judiciary:

We have proved that there could not have been another judge on the face of the earth more prejudiced and more cruel than you have been against us . . . We know, and you know in your heart, that you have been against us, from the very beginning. Before you see us you already know that we were radicals, that we were underdogs, that we were the enemy of the institutions. (Kittrie 325)

In July 1921 they were found guilty of murder by verdict of jury and on 9 April 1927 Judge Thayer imposed death sentences on them. Vonnegut recounts that as protests against the death sentence arose all round the world, the
government formed a committee of three of "the wisest, most respected, most fair-minded and impartial men within the boundaries of the state to say to the world whether or not justice was about to be done" (JB 179). One was a retired probate judge, one the president of Harvard, and the third the president of an Institute of Technology (178-79). They got thousands of telegrams, most of them opposed to the execution. Romain Rolland, Bernard Shaw, Einstein, Galsworthy, Sinclair Lewis and H. G. Wells were among the telegraphers (180). "The triumvirate" at last declared that the execution would only be just, and Vonnegut wonders: "Might wisdom be as impossible in this particular universe as a perpetual-motion machine?" (180). Sacco and Vanzetti were electrocuted on 23 August 1927.

The discrepancy between the professed high principles of the nation and the lop-sided judicial practice is, for Vonnegut, emblematic of the falsity of American ethos. No other passage in Vonnegut is perhaps more indicative of this disparity than the one in Jailbird where he quotes Judge Thayer’s triumphant remark to a friend after passing the sentence: "Did you see what I did to those anarchist bastards the other day?" (181). What depresses Vonnegut is the inability of the people to discern the flagrant violation of accepted legal standards. Walter comments on the indefensible inertia of the people: "When I was young,
I believed that the story of their martyrdom would cause an irresistible mania for justice to the common people to spread throughout the world. Does anybody know or care who they were anymore?" (7). Later he elevates the story to the level of any great sacrifice: "When I was a young man, I expected the story of Sacco and Vanzetti to be retold as often and as movingly, to be as irresistible, as the story of Jesus Christ some day" (171). The parallel is striking: "As on Golgotha, three lower-class men were executed at the same time by a state. This time, though, not just one of the three was innocent. This time two of the three were innocent" (172).  

Prejudiced—and thereby flawed—judicial decision was in evidence in the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg on 19 June 1953. At the height of the McCarthy witch-hunt, the Rosenbergs were accused of passing vital information regarding nuclear technology to the Soviet Union. Vonnegut, quite predictably, takes exception to the fact that neither the absence of any valid proof nor the appeals from all over the world, including the Vatican, could prevent the courts from executing the death

7 Celestino Madeiros, a notorious criminal who had already been convicted for another murder, was moved by the tears of Sacco’s wife and little kids and confessed his part in Sacco and Vanzetti crime, thereby gladly inviting their fate.
sentence. Prejudice and even open hostility towards the accused were not abated in the sixties either. For instance, in the Conspiracy Trial about the Chicago 1968 riots, Chicago Judge Julius Hoffman didn’t bother to conceal his hostility towards the defendants and had Bobby Seale of the Black Panther Party bound to his chair and gagged during hearings (Albert and Albert 45).

In the depiction of "labour massacres and judicial murder in America" Vonnegut is unambiguously indignant at capitalism (Homberger 86). Yet, the few characters who are moved by a genuine Socialist perspective and the very few who have a well-knit ideology in their minds often lack the moral courage to live up to their calling. This is precisely the reason why Vonnegut was often regarded as a humourist rather than a serious author. But, though apparently humorous or satirical, he effects a systematic repudiation of the American political and economic system.

Unquestioned acceptance of wealth as a divine boon, the deification of money and the ills that go with these delusions get very severe reproof in Vonnegut. His America is so wedded to the capitalist way of life and to the idea of free enterprise that money and power are interchangeable and have become, to all intents and purposes, the sole criterion for dignity. Wealth, often unearned wealth, amassed for its own sake and bequeathed
faultlessly, has been substituted for every value that used to symbolize honour and dignity. Walter recollects in *Jailbird*: "I then believed that a rich man should have some understanding of the place from which his riches came. That was very juvenile of me. Great wealth should be accepted unquestionably, or not at all" (xxiii). Wilbur in *Slapstick* shows a microcosm of the affluent society:

> Our parents were two silly and pretty and very young people . . . . They were fabulously well-to-do, and descended from Americans who had all but wrecked the planet with a form of Idiot's Delight--obsessively turning money into power, and then power back into money again, and then money back into power again. (28)

Economic disparity is shown to augment social inequality. For instance, Lister Rosewater of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, portrayed as one of the "ugly capitalistic Republicans," is forever willing to "order the militia to fire into crowds whenever a poor man seemed on the point of suggesting that he and Rosewater were equal in the eyes of the law" (13). And that law either overlooks or condones even criminality if it is backed by money or power, as an Assistant Secretary of the Army says in *Jailbird*: "The most important thing they teach at Harvard
is that a man can obey every law and still be the worst criminal of the time" (75).

Politics is sinful in Vonnegut because "it leads to ideas on how to discard useless people" (Olderman 217). In Hocus Pocus Vonnegut traces the absence of social responsibility to the radical change that has occurred in the form of wealth which has taken the form of "negotiable representations of money on paper," so that "there were few reminders coming from anywhere that they might be responsible for anyone outside their own circle of friends and relatives" (225). In the total reversal of values, the first duty of the government is to "protect them from the lower classes" (226). The few who start with an egalitarian attitude, as epitomized by Stewart Buntline with his inherited fourteen million dollars in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, are convincingly talked out of it (135-36). Moreover, those social welfare programmes the government reluctantly adopt end up as mere charades aimed at diverting the people's attention from obvious excesses on the part of the fortunate few.

Still most of the Americans firmly believed that they have created a paradise on earth with their free enterprise system. A 1979 survey revealed that eighty-two per cent of the respondents supported free enterprise system and seventy-seven per cent thought the American
economic system just and wise (McClosky and Zaller 133). This was due partly to the all-round progress made by America and partly to the effective propaganda that free enterprise gave equal opportunities to all and that anybody could become rich. Vonnegut challenges the mendacity of the latter argument through Howard W. Campbell, Jr. in *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

> Americans, like human beings everywhere, believe many things that are obviously untrue. Their most destructive untruth is that it is very easy for any American to make money. They will not acknowledge how in fact hard money is to come by, and, therefore, those who have no money blame and blame and blame themselves. This inward blame has been a treasure for the rich and powerful, who have had to do less for their poor, publicly and privately, than any other ruling class since, say, Napoleonic times. (117)

Vonnegut intensifies the attack in the "Playboy Interview":

> There are people, particularly dumb people, who are in terrible trouble and never get out of it, because they are not intelligent enough. And it strikes me as gruesome and comical that in our culture we have an expectation that a man can
always solve his problems . . . . This is so untrue that it makes me want to cry--or laugh. (WFG 258)

The unquestioned adoption of capitalism and free enterprise as the sole socio-political doctrine, what Calvin F. Exoo calls "cultural hegemony," is, for Vonnegut, the product of deliberate indoctrination--that poverty is an inevitable test of endurance and calibre, that failure is to be attributed to lack of resolve, and that success can be had for the asking. The plutocrats never forgo any opportunity to proclaim that theirs is a natural empire and that private property is sacred. The oath taken every day by the inmates of the Buntlines orphanage in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater proves it:

I do solemnly swear that I will respect the sacred private property of others, and that I will be content with whatever station in life God Almighty may assign me to do. I will be grateful to those who employ me, and will never complain about wages and hours, but will ask myself instead, 'What more can I do for my employer, my republic, and my God?' (154-55)

As capitalist individualism became the unchallenged way of life, attempts were afoot to make it acceptable to all. The very strong belief in capitalism necessitated,
and in turn revitalized, a cultural hegemony in America which has made "the land of inequality, the land of opportunity; the sin of luxury, the triumph of democracy; cupidity and rapacity, the American way" (Exoo 27). Vonnegut challenges this cruel deception which has forever pushed the weak and the poor into oblivion. Social Darwinism is singled out for particular attack and categorical repudiation.

The idea of Social Darwinism buttressed the conservative doctrines by making competition essential and by convincing people that continuous "struggle for existence" and the process of "natural selection" would lead to improvement. Besides, it taught people that any solid improvement must be "slow and unhurried" (Hofstadter, Social Darwinism 6-7). Vonnegut objects to it because it was a convenient ploy in the hands of the powers that be to perpetuate social and economic inequality. Robert C. Bannister in his brilliant study of the influence of Social Darwinism in American social thought has pointed out that it came handy in ignoring poverty and exploitation, and that it was applied throughout the history of America for racist and militarist purposes also (3). Vonnegut with his passionate interest in human life could never accept it as a beneficial socio-economic doctrine. Once when the *Weekly Guardian* asked him what is the trait he most
dislikes in others, he did not hesitate to point at Social Darwinism (FWD 15).

He hasn't forgotten that the deep-rooted individualism will continue to ameliorate any persistent radical programmes besides sustaining the general belief in the validity of the American dream. That is why his political novels fail to evolve any solution worth the name. The attempts by his protagonists in Jailbird or God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater to bring about a socialistic or humanitarian transformation in the society fail and are destined to fail. But beneath it he has laid bare the intrinsic drawbacks of American capitalism. What he finds is a power elite whether they are technocrats or plutocrats or maniacal warlords. This is in conformity with the "triangle of power" comprising of the corporate, the governmental and the military that C. Wright Mills exposed way back in 1959. It is a country suited to technology--a "corporate country"--through a three-pronged manipulation: "political influence, concoction of technical data, propagandist appeals" (Rodgers vii). Forgotten in this were the millions upon millions who were left to toil in misery and acute poverty. Vonnegut's Homestead in Player Piano, Pisquontuit in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, and the future societies of Galapagos and Hocus Pocus are not mere fictitious localities of indigent communities, but have striking resemblance to the "other
America" of Michael Harrington where about fifty million "live in the economic underworld of American life," unrecognized by the society as a whole because they are "socially invisible" (10). Harrington is enraged that "In a nation with a technology that could provide every citizen with a decent life, it is an outrage and a scandal that there should be such social misery" (24). It is this conviction that makes Vonnegut acerbic in his criticism of the American society.

But the pseudo-conservatives have little empathy with the discarded people, as proved by Senator Lister Rosewater in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater--Vonnegut's Barry Goldwater figure--who can't understand why his son Eliot should spend his time and money on the worthless people in Indiana in whom he can't find even one good quality or thing. Eliot's wife Sylvia knows deep within her that what Eliot is doing is really meritorious and tells the Senator that it is a secret: "The secret is that they're human" (67). Nobody understood her: "She looked from face to face for some flicker of understanding. There was none" (67).

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater dissects American economy and reveals the juxtaposition of national affluence and individual squalor. No wonder that it is,
for Jerome Klinkowitz, his bitterest novel (Literary Disruptions 38). It shows the "dehumanizing power of money upon men" (Leff 30) in the culturally moribund American society. Eliot Rosewater recounts how a handful of greedy people came to control everything that was worth controlling in America:

Thus was the savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate and unnecessary and humorless American class system created. Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage . . . . Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun. (21)

Eliot questions the very notion of wealth as divinely ordained or as a legitimate possession, to be managed according to one's fads. Very often it is more or less the result of sheer accident, acquired by virtue of one's birth in a particular family, or locality, or class. Once he says to his father:

We were born on the banks of it [the Money River] and so were most of the mediocre people we grew up with . . . . We can slurp from that mighty river to our heart's content. And we even take
slurping lessons, so we can slurp more efficiently . . . From lawyers! From tax consultants! From customers' men! We're born close enough to the river to drown ourselves and the next ten generations in wealth . . . (104)

Yet, if one forsakes it, it has its latent danger in a society where "Your fortune is the most important single determinant of what you think of yourself and of what others think of you" (140).

Those who wallow in wealth get a severe drubbing: they either languish in sloth like Stewart Buntline, or crack up like Dwayne Hoover in Breakfast of Champions, or heap dishonour upon themselves like Malachi Constant in The Sirens of Titan. Stewart Buntline sleeps all day and watches unmoved as his wife and daughter go astray. For all his wealth and prestige Dwayne is virtually alone, having estranged his only son and lost his wife, and ultimately goes berserk. As Kathryn Hume pointedly remarks, "Dwayne is a dismaying picture of the middle American who finds that his material success has become meaningless" ("Vonnegut's Self-Projections" 181). Malachi Constant with his three billion dollars craves to derive at least a modicum of pleasure: "Everything Constant did, he did in style--aggressively, loudly, childishly, wastefully--making himself and mankind look bad" (29).
Constant is perhaps Vonnegut's symbol of the dehumanization caused by wealth:

[H]e used the fantastic fruits of his fantastic good luck to finance an unending demonstration that man is a pig. He wallowed in sycophants. He wallowed in worthless women. He wallowed in lascivious entertainments and alcohol and drug. He wallowed in every known form of voluptuous turpitude. (251)

The American society that is unveiled in God Bless You. Mr. Rosewater is a "sick, sterile wasteland" where everyone, irrespective of social or financial status, suffers from some physical or psychological ailment (Reed, "Economic Neurosis" 120). Amanita Buntline, wife of the millionaire Stewart Buntline, is an odious hypocrite and a confirmed lesbian. Their daughter, Lila Buntline, makes huge profits at thirteen by selling pornography. Caroline Rosewater drowns herself in alcohol in her attempt to forget her poverty. Amanita and Caroline pretend to love music and enjoy Beethoven on the phonograph at seventy-eight revolutions per minute instead of thirty three, and when the servant girl Selena Deal points out the mistake, she is sent out to clean up the lavatory outside. Selena remarks that what shocks her most about these people "isn't how ignorant they are, or how much they drink.
It's the way they have of thinking that everything nice in the world is a gift to the poor people from them or their ancestors" (158). She has thanked Amanita "for the ocean, the moon, the stars in the sky, and the United States Constitution" (158).

The poor people feel purposelessness and despise themselves either because they have no work or because their work is too meaningless (Reed, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. 166). Perhaps the only exception is Harry Pena and his two sons who are "true romantics catching fish and enjoying their work" (150), but the comment by Bunny Weeks, the homosexual restaurant manager, haunts us: "That's all over, men working with their hands and backs. They are not needed" (157).

By portraying the social mores of these people Vonnegut makes us look at an inherently flawed society where nothing short of a miracle will effect any noticeable change. But God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is his most affirmative novel because here, as Klinkowitz suggests, the programme proposed is "for all Vonnegut's novels the most immediately practical" (Literary Disruptions 38). Eliot Rosewater, president of the Rosewater Foundation worth eighty-seven million dollars--Vonnegut's Christ figure according to Jean E. Kennard (120)--takes up a life of selfless service and
benefaction: "I’m going to love these discarded Americans, even though they’re useless and unattractive. That is going to be my work of art" (47). In the unending tussle between "the destructive materialistic ‘wisdom’" of people like the Senator and the shyster Norman Mushari, and "the gentle, lifesaving ‘folly’" of Eliot (Mustazza, *Forever Pursuing Genesis* 96), we see the potentiality of uncritical love. We gradually realize that it needs fortitude as well as altruistic motivation. Eliot’s wife Sylvia is too delicate for the onerous task and suffers a nervous collapse. Her doctor Ed Brown diagnoses her disease and names it "samaritrophia," that is "hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself" (54). He is not happy about having cured her: "I was not proud, for I had calmed up a deep woman by making her shallow" (55). He concludes bitterly that "a normal person, functioning well on the upper levels of a prosperous, industrialized society, can hardly hear his conscience at all" (55).

Eliot too cracks up, or is made to appear so by the watch-dogs of the establishment. But Tony Tanner reminds us that "Any verdict of insanity passed on Eliot Rosewater may well appear to rebound on the society that makes it" because "it is better to be ‘crazy’ in some way than to drift on in the almost catatonic moral stupor and calm of the majority" (193).
Having shown that money is a "psychological germ-carrier" (Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* 152), Vonnegut gently suggests that uncritical love and simple acts of kindness will make the world conducive to more meaningful life. This was his ultimate advice in *The Sirens of Titan* also. Towards the end of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* Vonnegut's surrogate author Kilgore Trout sums up the significance of Eliot's action:

> It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be parts of human nature. Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see. (213)

What Eliot did is far from insane because "It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horrors will eventually be made world-wide by the sophistication of machines . . . . How to love people who have no use?" (210). As the complexities of American socio-political life begin to confuse and depress even the sturdy optimists, and as the American dream grows fainter and fainter, this seems to be Vonnegut's only viable solution.