CHAPTER V
IT IS MORBID AT HOME

Vonnegut's radical critique encompasses every facet of postwar American life; over and above the castigations that we have seen so far, his targets include frail family relationships, addictive use of nerve-decaying drugs, reckless plunder of natural resources and the consequential environmental hazards, conveniently ignored social maladies, and the inversion of values. Josephine Hendin calls his novels "anarchic, disintegrative fiction" (30), for in his jeremiads Vonnegut presents a sick society where the complexities of modern life have made men lose their bearings, besides tainting even their most intimate personal relationships. Even those novels that deal apparently with serious topics like war or the ills of a technological society revert to the "lunacies of contemporary life" (Giddins 500) because, like the true "canary in the coalmines" that he wanted to be, he tries to give salutary warning in every utterance. John R. May has remarked that like Pynchon Vonnegut offers "gently humorous satire of the madness of modern American society that hardly anyone could miss and certainly no one would be offended by" (199).
That his picture of postwar America is consistently bleak has often provoked critics to excoriate his cynicism (Sale 107-08), whimsical pessimism (Giddins 500), or his overt sentimentality (Weber 396-97); yet his novels affirm meaning and values (Cowart 170), and, with Robert Scholes, we notice that his novels, despite their apparent hopelessness, exhort us to be more humane ("Like Lot’s Wife" 1). David Cowart aptly remarks that Vonnegut, in his frequent repudiation of the "cultural malaise" of his society, has effected a delicate balance between "nihilist despair and humanist affirmation" (170). But that doesn’t soften Vonnegut’s attack a whit, as this passage from his recent Fates Worse Than Death demonstrates:

[T]he forces of Beelzebub were waging racist and classist political campaigns, and taking over and liquidating business and natural resources, and looting pension funds, insurance companies, and savings banks, and putting a greater percentage of our citizens in jails and prisons than even the Soviet Union or the Republic of South Africa. (192)

The parenthetical comment that follows crystallizes his disappointment: "Some beacon of liberty we were to the rest of the world!" (192). This denigration of the American way of life is imprinted in every one of his
works; he has woven political commentary into whatever he wrote (Lal 194). In *Slapstick* he makes Eliza call America a "hell-hole" (118). His Conservative Senator in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* finds much in common between the Rome of Augustus Caesar and the America of 1950s and 60s:

Rome was a paradise for gangsters, perverts, and the lazy working man, just as America is now. As in America now, forces of law and order were openly attacked by mobs, children were disobedient, had no respect for their parents or their country; and no decent woman was safe on any street, even at high noon! (34)

However, Vonnegut never hesitates to express his love and admiration for his country; he has categorically stated that he deems it an honour to have been born the way he was. If a considerable percentage of youngsters have lost faith in, and respect for, their country and its institutions, a major part of the blame falls squarely on those institutions which, through their actions and through the media, belied their hopes. He gives a telling picture of the American television in his address to a gathering of Unitarian Universalists in 1986: "According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average American child watches 18,000 TV murders before it graduates" (FWD 162); the child will have seen
Christianity fail with every imaginable lethal weapon. "And afterword," continues Vonnegut, "that boy or girl is supposed to feel grateful to the corporations, our Federal Government among them, which put on such shows" (162-63).

Americans have failed as a community, as constituents of a culture. "The darkest secret of this century, I am afraid," suggests Vonnegut in *Bluebeard*, "is that too many of its citizens imagine that they belong to a much higher civilization somewhere else" (179). Whether it is another country or the past, this attitude allows many people "to lie and cheat and steal from the rest of us, to sell us junk and addictive poisons and corrupting entertainments" (179). Robert Nadeau has aptly remarked that Vonnegut's Americans "lack the communal ethos necessary to sense that they fully belong to and participate in a culture" (129). This is, to a large extent, due to the miserable failure of their social institutions, as has been pointed out by Saul Bellow: "Almost nothing of a spiritual, ennobling character is brought into the internal life of a modern American by his social institutions" ("Where Do We Go From Here" 7). The thoroughly fragmented society of Indiana or Midland City that we meet frequently in Vonnegut is the upshot of this rootlessness. In his address to the American Psychiatric
Association in Philadelphia in 1990, he analyses this unwholesome American scenario:

Human beings have almost always been supported and comforted and disciplined and amused by stable lattices of many relatives and friends until the Great American experiment, which is an experiment not only with liberty but with rootlessness, mobility, and impossibly toughminded loneliness. (FWD 34-35)

There the "schlemiels, fools and waifs" (Cain 1069) drift on, "surrendering their will and their common sense to quacks and racketeers and charismatic lunatics" (FWD 158), realizing all the while that any social or political affiliation leads inevitably to total absurdity (Crichton 35). Loree Rackstraw identifies the basic pattern in Vonnegut as the "development of the existential theme of absurdity--of the indifference of nature and of humans to fellow humans" ("Vonnegut the Diviner" 75). Vonnegut relates this theme to the realities of modern American life where artificial values and a material culture have displaced ordinary human values.

What infuriates Vonnegut more than anything else is the smugness of his people--their propensity for overlooking pressing social problems; despite its vast resources and highly advanced technology America still
faces social maladies like unemployment and acute poverty of the lowest classes. In novel after novel he labours to unveil the unsavoury aspects of modern American life. For instance, in *Bluebeard*, Rabo Karabekian, the Abstract Expressionist painter, shocks us by his observation regarding illiteracy: "At least forty million Americans can’t read and write according to this morning’s *New York Times*" (201). Israel Edel in *Jailbird* has a Doctor’s degree in history and is a Phi Beta Kappa, but the best job he could get was that of a night clerk in a hotel, and that too, a dilapidated one (112-13). From *Player Piano* to *Hocus Pocus* we find a considerable number of people deprived of the means to live. Unable to find a job they roam the streets as beggars, hoodlums or shopping-bag ladies. The widespread frustration and the resultant moral turpitude get adequate expression in his novels. That the bleakness of his vision is not merely the offshoot of his cynicism is well authenticated by readily available socio-economic data. Look, for instance, at the list of urban trends prepared for the U. S. Conference of Mayors in 1986:

Population drain, increased poverty, an income gap between city and suburban residents, gaps among racial groups, long-term unemployment . . . homelessness, hunger, low education levels, high crime rates and very high taxes. (Zukin 245)
While describing the sordidness of American life in the last three decades, Vonnegut suggests, particularly in *Breakfast of Champions* and in the preface to *Slapstick* as also in interviews, that life in the Depression years was equally frustrating; but the most alarming thing about the present is the fact that, as Jerome Klinkowitz observes, no one seems to hope that the nation will be "happy and just and rational" again (*Literary Disruptions* 58-59). In the ensuing disillusionment all basic human values have lost their efficacy. Corruption and criminality have been so ingrained in their nature that for Marsha Mason, an actress who had acted in Vonnegut's play, the trouble with New York is that "Nobody here believes that there is such a thing as innocence" (PS xviii). *Breakfast of Champions* reveals how the material and consumer culture has substituted its junk for whatever human qualities the people had. Vonnegut brings out the irony of it all in *Bluebeard* where Rabo Karabekian realizes that the only person in America whom he can trust is a Chinese laundry man (48). Joseph Heller gives a similar picture of degradation in *Catch-22* where Yossarian learns that Orr, coming from the "wilderness outside New York city," is the only person who will not cheat him: "Orr, unlike Yossarian's mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, in-law, teacher, spiritual leader, legislator, neighbor..."
and newspaper, had never lied to him about anything crucial before" (46).

From the sixties Vonnegut's works showed a marked tendency towards exposition of the morbid state of the society. Rebelling against the stereotyped attitude of writers and thinkers, Eliot Rosewater shows a strong affinity towards science fiction writers because they are the ones who really care for humanity. He tells a convention of science fiction writers:

You're the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us. (GBR 27)

This might very well be Vonnegut's opinion. Accordingly, his works of the seventies and eighties became more and more concerned with the "inanities and mistakes of our everyday lives," and he grew more "whimsical, less hopeful, angrier" (Keough 113). As James Lundquist has remarked, Vonnegut's main concern turns out to be to "define the night terrors of an era so unreal, so unbelievable" (69). In his preface to Slapstick Vonnegut states that the novel is about "cities and spiritual cannibalism and incest and loneliness and lovelessness and death" (18-19), implying
that beneath the fantasies and futuristic imagination there lies the bed-rock of stark social realities.

Those protagonists who refuse to drift in the current and attempt, in maverick-fashion, to sustain their selves inviolate are soon maladjusted or succumb to psychosis. Paul Proteus or Ed Finnerty cannot belong to the system whereas Eliot Rosewater is glaringly neurotic. Billy Pilgrim tries to escape from reality through schizophrenic delusion (Mustazza, "Vonnegut's Tralfamadore" 300) whereas Bokonon takes refuge in "harmless untruths" to shun the ills of this world. These seem to be the only viable responses to the complexities of modern life. "The traditional desire to maintain the integrity of self," says Klinkowitz, "in the face of a too-chaotic world has always been a schizophrenia of sorts" ("Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the Crime of His Times" 43).

The few characters who achieve an awareness of the human predicament can’t do it with impunity; they often do it at their own peril. What distinguishes them from insensitive Eichmans or senile policy-makers is their ability to differentiate between right and wrong. Howard Campbell, Jr. jocularly observes in the frenzy caused by the rabid fascist atmosphere of Nazi Germany: "I could no more lie without noticing it than I could unknowingly pass a kidney stone" (MN 126). But all his attempts to remain
true to his self notwithstanding, Campbell learns to his horror that while being the victim of enervating racial passions, he was becoming its mindless agent as well. He departs from life itself with the realization that his two retreats--art and love--have failed to sustain him, and with the sad knowledge that there is no society without "strong and young people eager to experiment with homicide" (123). Dwayne Hoover is in constant search for even one purpose for life in the purely material culture of America. By the time he finds out the sacred part of him--his awareness--as the only "unwavering band of light," he is carted off to a lunatic asylum (BC 225). Malachi Constant in The Sirens of Titan who yearns for a message worthy enough to be carried through the world finds out that he has been a mere pawn in a cosmic pattern. Eliot Rosewater, who strives to atone for social and economic inequality of which he too has been a perpetrator, is on the verge of being declared a lunatic and getting dispossessed. Some of them--like Billy Pilgrim, Jonah and Rudy Waltz--adjust themselves to life through a "complete reinvention of the world" (Klinkowitz and Lawler 55).

They never forget the sad fact that "we like to hurt folks, and we especially like to hurt them in good cause" and that "Revolution, war, crusades--these are all ways of justifying human cruelty" (Scholes, "Like Lot's
What Vonnegut can offer by way of solutions is only simple human values like love and kindness. While granting the sincerity behind the solutions we can't help doubting the feasibility of them. Vonnegut himself knows it—that in the face of overwhelming odds his values have no chance even of effecting a change of heart. That is why his vision very often turns apocalyptic, as in his sermon at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. He asks them to remember that Jim Jones gave his followers Kool-Aid laced with cyanide when faced with fates worse than death. A natural finale to their own government's mad race could be as sinister: "If our government sees that we are facing fates worse than death, it will shower our enemies with hydrogen bombs, and then we will be showered in turn. There will be plenty of Kool-Aid for everyone . . ." (FWD 140). But as an artist he has known all along that his ultimate purpose is "to make mankind aware of itself, in all its complexity, and to dream its dreams" (qtd. in Lundquist 14). This presupposes an "enthusiastic intimacy" with works of imagination which is the only way "Americans can rise above their ordinariness, can mature sufficiently to rescue themselves and to help rescue their planet" (WFG xxvii). Most of the people back out either because they have had enough frustrating experiences or because they have become too pessimistic to crave for betterment.
Vonnegut draws a vivid picture of this ultimate surrender in an interview with Robert Musil: "... life is, for most people, a very terrible ordeal. They would just as soon end it at any time ... They're too embarrassed, they're distressed, they're frightened" (232).

This despondency arises not so much from any specific calamitous experience as from the pervading sense of the absurdity of life. Right from his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut has played with the absurdity of life. Despite a strenuous search for some meaning and purpose in life, his protagonist fails to learn "towards what end his life has moved, since the purposefulness of terrestrial actions may be tied to extra-human cosmic ends" (Schulz 25). In *The American Absurd* Robert A. Hipkiss identifies the basic irony in Vonnegut to be "the irreconcilable opposition to fate by human beings who demand an absolute prescription for their lives in a relative universe, who want permanence and unity in a world of change and fragmentation" (70). This constitutes much of the inner meaning to the otherwise meaningless lives of Billy, Malachi Constant and Campbell. Lawrence Broer defines it as "the sometimes despairing, sometimes hopeful efforts of his fragmented protagonists to put their disintegrated selves together again" (*Sanity Plea* 45).
Not that they succeed convincingly; what they face is a universe organized according to a pattern which refuses to conform to our preconceived notions. Whether manipulated by the beings in a distant galaxy for their own ends (The Sirens of Titan), or ordained by an indifferent god who delegates the duty of finding out the purpose of life to man, his creation (Cat's Cradle), the cosmic pattern eludes us. The "cosmic joke" is on us, suggests Robert Scholes, "every time we attribute purpose or meaning that suits us to things which are either accidental, or possessed of purpose and meaning quite different from those we would supply" (Fabulation 148). Scholes is of opinion that Billy Pilgrim's "time-warped perspective" is Vonnegut's answer to the "cosmic absurdity of life, which is Vonnegut's life and our lives" ("Like Lot's Wife" 23). Such schizophrenic delusions enable Billy, Campbell, or Eliot Rosewater to tackle the forces of disintegration and live out their lives with at least a modicum of respectability.

But, in between comes the utter helplessness of man, best exemplified by Campbell standing frozen, not because of his sense of guilt, or rage at injustice or even death. His curiosity which alone moved him through the "dead and pointless years" has flickered out and he stands immobilized: "What froze me was the fact that I had absolutely no reason to move in any direction" (MN 174-75).
If he is to move again, some one has to point out the reason for moving (175).

Though the absurdity of life comes at the centre of some of the novels, Vonnegut never forgets to emphasize the importance of humanitarian values, as has been pointed out by James Lundquist (5). Quite predictably, all his novels are strewn with satirical comments on his America, and moral values get frequent emphasis. His humanistic credo comes out in all his works, but nowhere else is it so explicitly stated as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* where Kilgore Trout advocates a humanitarian perspective in a technologically advanced society:

In time, almost all men and women will become worthless as producers of goods, food, services, and more machines, as sources of practical ideas in the areas of economics, engineering, and probably medicine, too. So—if we can’t find reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are human beings, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out. (210)

Vonnegut wages a relentless war against anything that impedes recognition of this humanistic persuasion, whether it is an inhuman power group or the individual’s convenient, imaginative escape from reality which Lawrence
Broer calls "schizophrenic amnesia" (Sanity Plea 53). He has treated the former in its various forms--technocrats, warlords and neo-conservative politicians--and holds it responsible for most of the problems of his society; but he proves that the latter is equally culpable. It can be a deliberate plan to forget a life that is too unendurable, as in Billy or Campbell; or an intentional neutrality, "wanting love from nowhere, as certain as I was that almost anything desirable was likely to be booby-trapped," as we hear from Rudy Waltz in Deadeye Dick (133).

Raymond M. Olderman's analysis of the Vonnegut people as wastelanders is quite pertinent. In a country that has substituted mercantile and materialistic values for humanitarian moral values, people are, presumably, "sexually inadequate, divided by guilt, alienated, aimless, bored and rootless" (11). What he says about the novel of the sixties is particularly true in the case of Vonnegut's America: "Life constantly leads to a reduction of all human dignity; the wastelander becomes idealless and hopeless as he falls prey to false prophets" (17). In Vonnegut man's position becomes all the more precarious because he is very often an "agent victim" (Tanner 183-85). Malachi Constant in The Sirens of Titan speaks for them all when he confesses that "he was not only a victim of outrageous fortune, but one of outrageous fortune's cruelest agents as well" (162). Paul Proteus, Campbell,
Billy, Walter and Rudy Waltz are all victims of an unjust and dehumanizing system but they have contributed, in no mean measure, to its persistence.

Paul symbolically immolates himself to uphold the dignity and value of man, but he has been an involuntary agent of the very processes of mechanization and automation that have belittled man and tended to make him obsolete. Despite all his efforts to bring the Nazi business to ridicule, Campbell realizes that it was his anti-Semitic broadcasts that had motivated several men till the very end. Though Billy recognizes the futility and lunacy of war, he too was instrumental in perpetrating it, first through his participation in it and then through his schizophrenic tactics to shun reality. Walter is undoubtedly a victim of the paranoid, anti-intellectual conservatism of the fifties, but his failure to live upto his ideals and his betrayal of his friends for self-preservation are shown to have caused incalculable ruin. And Rudy Waltz, abetted by his gun-crazy father, destroys life in a wanton mood, and thereafter embraces an inert neutrality, but not before irrevocably damaging the lives of all in the family. One commendable trait in all of them is the humility to acknowledge their dubious roles.

This self-awareness is not enough; they have to be aware of the dehumanizing and corrupting forces in the
society. It should be supplemented with a genuine concern for man and for life which will necessitate a repudiation of the "uncaring self-centeredness of their pride," as Olderman defines the sin of the wastelanders in Vonnegut (215). What Vonnegut finds, however, is a community of people who are forever retreating into their selves or to pleasant fantasies, and absolutely refusing to respond warmly and openly to their fellow men. The total breakdown of any meaningful communication is aptly voiced by Walter in *Jailbird*: "'Hellow and good-bye.' What else is there to say? Our language is much larger than it needs to be" (233). In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut alerts us to our revolting indifference. Driving through Ilium's black ghetto Billy was forced to stop his car at a traffic signal. The black man who tapped on his car window seemed desirous of talking to him. Then, "The light had changed. Billy did the simplest thing. He drove on" (57). Vonnegut seems to suggest that the two sins--of hubris and of indifference--will be our undoing. These sins arise from, and, in their turn fortify, "the illusions that war, money, machines, science, and causes are more important than people" (Olderman 215). Vonnegut is almost didactic where he begs us to be more compassionate and far-sighted if life is to continue on this planet.
Like the humanist that he was, Vonnegut upholds the dignity of human life; anything that attempts to devalue human effort or human worth is shown for what it really is. He is especially pained to notice the widespread callous disregard for human dignity—whether at the hands of a dominant meritocracy, the war machine or an inconsiderate political leadership. The American socio-economic system that successfully perpetuates social and racial inequality gets severe punishment. He can be very jocular in his invective, as in this passage from Jailbird: "a mob of out of work youths, armed with bats, were beating up and braining men who they thought were homosexuals; one of the poor men who were thrown into the East River turned out to be the finance minister of Sri Lanka" (154). When he inveighs against the arrogance and inhumanity of the privileged class he can be very astringent. For instance, in Slapstick, when his President Wilbur gives new artificial family names to people, some of the traditionally downtrodden people begin to flock near the Whitehouse, claiming to be relatives of the President or his wife, Sophie. She doesn’t try to conceal her astonishment and disgust at the spectacle: she refers to them as "strangers who are now crawling out from damp rocks like earwigs? Like centipedes? Like slugs? Like worms?" But Wilbur defends them: "They have never had a friend or a relative. They have had to believe all
their lives that they were perhaps sent to the wrong
Universe, since no one has ever bid them welcome or given
them anything to do" (175-76).

In his denunciation of the blatant racial
discrimination, Vonnegut is even more severe; he views it
as an unpardonable outrage against communities--be they
negroes or Indians--who have as legitimate a right to the
benefits of prosperity and democracy as any white American
enjoys. He battles against all conventions that deny
equal rights to any groups of people, bringing out the
incompatibility of the high principles of liberty and the
practice of racial segregation. His graduation address to
the class of 1990 at the University of Rhode Island is a
long tirade against the smugness that let the upper class
off with such an abominable crime. "What a beacon of
liberty we were to the rest of the world," asks Vonnegut,
"when it was perfectly acceptable here to own other human
beings and treat them as we treated cattle" (FWD 84).
It shocks him that the people found nothing unjust or
unnatural in it. He goes on:

Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, and not many
people found that odd. It was as though he had
an infected growth on the end of his nose the
size of a walnut, and everybody thought that was
perfectly OK . . . . A history professor
explained to me afterward that Jefferson could not free his slaves until he and they were very old, because they were mortgaged and he was broke.

Imagine that! It used to be legal in this beacon of liberty to hock human beings, may be even a baby. What a shame that when you find yourself short of cash nowadays you can’t take the cleaning lady down to the pawnshop anymore along with your saxophone. (84)

He notes that there was pronounced racial segregation everywhere in America although people very often took it for granted. Talking about their Army during the Second World War he says: "The American Army was still segregated in those days. Every unit was all black or all white, except for the officers, who were usually white in any case" (JB 19). The roles that the Blacks played depended not on their merit because they were commonly thought to be wanting in initiative and determination: "So they were employed mostly as common laborers or truck drivers behind the Duke Waynes and Frank Sinatras, who did the fearless stuff" (HP 270).

For all their public declarations of equality, Americans always thought along racial lines when they came to particular issues, says Vonnegut. For instance, right
into the nineties American prisons were segregated according to race: there were separate prisons for whites, blacks and Hispanic prisoners (HP 270). Nobody seemed to regard it as anything extraordinary because it had been like that all through. Walter Starbuck in *Jailbird* symbolizes the typically unconcerned American who didn’t find anything odd in a segregated society. "I knew nothing about black people," he says. "There had been no black people on the household . . . no black people in my schools. Not even when I was a communist had I had a black person for a friend" (19).

The most satiric comments on the racist undertone in the American character comes in *Breakfast of Champions*. In the apparently endless parade of the inanities and self-contradictions inherent in the materialistic culture of America, Vonnegut questions the validity of the most sacred myths of the nation. It was their quenchless avarice, in perfect harmony with their disregard for an alien culture, that robbed the Indians of their rightful home. The blacks were always regarded as useful and uncomplaining machines; hence a huge earth-moving machine’s efficiency is measured in terms of the quantity of black labour that it could replace. The puerile description of a negro is a highly suggestive indication of the popular attitude towards the black community.
In his 1990 address at the University of Rhode Island, Vonnegut admits that the most significant change in America since he was a child is decreasing racism. But he doesn’t give its credit to the policy-makers: it was brought about by the oppressed minorities themselves (FWD 83). That it took so long, and that it has not been complete in any sense, irritates him still. He finds unmistakable signs of racism in the sporadic street-riots as well as in recent wars against distant, weak countries. His description of the wars as planned outrage against "communities of nobodies" or "monkeys without tail" leaves no one in doubt as to the true reason behind American cruelty towards other nations and communities.

The ardour with which Vonnegut handles socio-political maladies is very much in evidence when he comes to personal lives in the postwar society. Psychological disorder is one aspect of life that gets frequent mention in all his works. There is clear indication of schizophrenia in Billy and Campbell, catalepsis in Billy and Eliot, sheer psychosis in Eliot, acknowledged neurosis in Debs’s wife and mother-in-law, and cultivated megalomania in Dwayne Hoover. Several others are also severely psychotic, like Walter. The obsession with lunacy might have been the legacy of his own mother whose "untreated, unacknowledged insanity" (FWD 28) made her
commit suicide on Mother's Day in 1944. Later in his life his wife Jane Marie Cox went slightly crazy and their son Mark Vonnegut spent some time in a lunatic asylum for schizophrenia. He could never forget this lunatic history as we find in his casual remark in *Breakfast of Champions*: "Celia Hoover was crazy as a bedbug. My mother was, too" (181).

He often regards psychological aberration either as a perfectly natural means of adjustment with a shattering experience or as the only rational response to an apparently insane life. Campbell in *Mother Night* confesses that it was his schizophrenia which enabled him to function as an anti-Semitic propagandist and an American agent at the same time. Billy survives the ordeal of Dresden and manages to go on living with the memory of the massacre because of his schizophrenic imagination that permits him to live in the best moments of his life, forgetting all the moments that were unpleasant or eerie. In this sense even schizophrenia is a "simple and widespread boon to modern mankind" (MN 136), but it is traced often to readily identifiable extraneous factors. Unimaginative or cruel parents—what Lawrence Broer calls "parental morbidity" (*Sanity Plea* 136)—doom them for life, making them wince with feelings of shame or futility, creating emotional wrecks out of them. An absent or morbid parent figure—as in the case of Rudy
Waltz or Walter—or an inconsiderate or vain father—of the Hoenikker children or Eliot—is very often found to lurk behind the depleted psyche of Vonnegut's deranged characters. It causes the utter ruin of Rudy, Bunny, the homosexual son of Dewayne Hoover, and Leo, son of Kilgore Trout. For Paul Proteus and Eliot Rosewater, it is a strong element of Oedipus complex that makes them hate their fathers. Conversely, those characters who happen to neglect their filial duties—Eliot is an obvious example—fare no better.

The chaotic life they lead debilitates them and keeps them on the brink of insanity. A traumatic experience or an overwhelming sense of guilt and of utter helplessness is enough to tilt the precarious balance and shove them to the insane ward. The schizoid characters of Vonnegut are perhaps not so much the products of their own particular actions or personal deficiencies as of an insane society. Lawrence Broer observes that "the war-scared, death-haunted heroes of Vonnegut are so dehumanized by anonymous bureaucracies, computers, and authoritarian institutions, and so immobilized by guilt and fear," as to become "disembodied with disintegrating minds" (Sanity Plea 3). Vonnegut believes that the mad frenzy of the materialistic culture has produced "zombies and frustrated psychopaths" (JB 208) who are a legacy of the golden age of prosperity and security. Modern life is complex as it is, and when
the chasm between an individual's social role and his inner self widens, he, more often than not, crumbles under the strain of keeping his identity.

In this context Vonnegut doubts if insanity isn't the best response to life; the outcome is apparently insane characters like Eliot Rosewater whom Broer calls his "sanest lunatic" (*Sanity Plea* 67). What immediately pops up in our mind is R. D. Laing's comment that insanity is "a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world" (qtd. in Broer, *Sanity Plea* 67). And perfectly rational it is for the people destined to live in the fully mechanized, war-torn, and thoroughly materialistic life in postwar America. In a society where conformity is the expected response to every issue and where dissent is likely to be branded as eccentricity, Eliot Rosewaters and Ed Finnerties always stand the risk of being considered insane. And, inevitably, Vonnegut's sympathy lies with those feeble, ineffectual pioneers who are engaged in a desperate effort to rouse the conscience of the people. They become "filthy saboteurs" or "irrevocably bananas," to be silenced or dispossessed. On the other hand, we have people like Malachi or Senator Rosewater who, though blasé, can forever imagine that they are worthy participants in the proud pageant of human progress.
If not to belong is insanity, it is to be cherished at any cost; consequently, any attempt to assuage the feeling of discontent and frustration is reprehensible. Hence it is not surprising to see Ed Finnerty and Paul Proteus refuse to see a psychiatrist even when they have serious doubt about their sanity. Neither Finnerty nor Paul wants the quietude that a psychiatrist can easily give. Instead, they opt to be on the edge where they can see everything in a clearer, detached perspective.

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* even altruistic deeds are viewed as eccentric. An active conscience is enough to produce psychic disorder as in the case of Sylvia, Eliot's wife. Young Dr. Brown coins a new word for her disease—"Samaritrophia"—which means "hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself" (54). As it is the "suppression of an overactive conscience by the rest of the mind," her conscience is to be set free or silenced forever, and the doctor accomplishes the latter. Although he has successfully cured her, he resigns because he knows that what he has done is unpardonable: taking a deep and complicated woman and making her calm, shallow and uninteresting (54-55). Here insanity is perfectly rational as Peter Reed observes: "Having the sanity to feel compassion in such a world is enough to make a man insane. So is trying to act
on that feeling, and so is trying to make love work" (Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. 169). Campbell’s admission that schizophrenia is a boon to mankind has come full circle.

In sharp defiance of the practice of psychoanalysis Vonnegut very often traces insanity to bad chemicals which are universally prescribed for their tranquillizing effect. For him every human being is "a symphony of chemical reactions" (SL 65) and so any chemical, if used for long, may change the constitution of the body and mind. He is particularly severe on the practice of prescribing barbiturates or amphetamine for an immediate relief from anxiety or fear. Analysing his own mother’s insanity he avows that it was "caused by bad chemicals she swallowed rather than created within herself, principally alcohol and unlimited quantities of prescribed barbiturates" (FWD 28). But she was lucky enough to die before some doctor would pep her with amphetamine (28). In Deadeye Dick he presents a young doctor who firmly believes that no human being should ever be dissatisfied or uncomfortable. So he begins prescribing amphetamine to all who are sad or uncomfortable. It wrecks their brains and one, Celia Hoover, commits suicide (165). His passion for scientific experiments makes him perform medical or surgical experiments on human guinea pigs (166).
Wilbur in *Slapstick* suffers from a slight mental aberration for which he takes two pills of tri-benzo-Deportamil.¹ "Two minutes passed," he recollects later, "and then my whole being was flooded with contentment and confidence such as I had never felt before" (155). It resulted in an addiction which lasted for thirty years by which time the pill was no longer available. In his own estimate he has become a "heavily medicated" old poop. In *Houcus Pocus* Vonnegut warns against turning our "brains to cobwebs with amphetamine" (40-41). Eugene Debs Hartke admits that in order to be sane and functioning in Vietnam most of the soldiers were "half in the bag" most of the time with liquor and narcotics (40). Leon Trout, the narrator of *Galapagos*, goes to the extent of remarking that by knocking out huge portions of our brains, we are involuntarily helping evolution in its right path—towards smaller brains (208). Here Vonnegut differs noticeably from most of his contemporaries. Right in the sixties and seventies, while Jack Kerouac and Richard Brautigan celebrated the hippie culture, and while William Burroughs and Ken Kesey celebrated the drug and psychedelic culture, he was engaged in a continuous battle...

¹ Vonnegut gives his characteristic topicality by stating that the pill was made by Eli Lilly Co. Indianapolis. They give the statutory declaration that it is absolutely harmless unless habituated, which is invariably the result (SL 155).
against everything that threatened mental and physical health, and anything that devalued human dignity.

Several horrible diseases or defects--inherited or not--find a place in his novels. He is enraged that some of the genetic defects are transmitted unwittingly to future generations. He himself realized that there was a powerful strain of insanity in his family and always feared to go insane. When Eugene Debs Hartke sees both his mother-in-law and wife getting insane he feels cheated as his children may go crazy anytime and will never forgive him for giving them such a precarious existence (HP 17). Another genetic defect that we find in Vonnegut's works is dyslexia which makes a person unable to read and write. In *Hocus Focus* the Tarkington College in Scipio, New York, houses several learning-disabled children, most of them hailing from wealthy and influential families. In *Galapagos* it is Huntington's Chorea--an incurable genetic defect--that virtually incapacitates Siegfried and Adolf von Kleist. Lying dormant for a long time, it manifests itself at middle age by making the carrier dance involuntarily and see hallucinatory pictures and the sudden spurt of craziness often results in involuntary cruelty and death. As a descendant has a fifty per cent chance of inheriting the disease, Siegfried and Adolf refuse to reproduce (85).
Another frightful disease we hear of is Tourette's Disease of Wilbur which makes him, as we have already seen, an addict of tri-benzo-Deportamil. The disease had made him speak obscenities and show insulting gestures wherever he was (SL 155). It surprises us that so many of Vonnegut's characters are afflicted with diseases--often mental--that impair them for life. Amidst the material plenty and military security, it is a diseased society that emerges.

This morbidity--whether pathological or not--is often shown to correspond to the break-up of the family system. Vonnegut, the anthropologist, looks upon the family--a minuscule folk society--as the most immediately perceptible avenue to intimate human community; the break-up of it bears heavily on the individual. In the "Playboy Interview" Vonnegut recounts the pathetic dissipation of community feeling:

Until recent times, you know, human beings usually had a permanent community of relatives. They had dozens of homes to go to . . . . And this is no longer possible. Each family is locked up into its little box . . . . We're lonesome. We don't have enough friends or relatives anymore. (WFG 242-43)

Family ties have become so fragile that people have started to look for artificial families. About one-third
of the marriages end up in divorce in America. Vonnegut finds the reason in the fact that the nuclear family doesn’t provide nearly enough companionship. The children quite naturally feel insecure and alienated at an early age, and end up as psychological wrecks. We realize the magnitude of the problem when we find that “those who appear vulnerable to schizophrenia as adults are usually people with troubled childhoods, children unusually sensitive, easily hurt, and particularly responsive to the feelings of others” (Broer, Sanity Plea 136). Broer also deals with the "absent, impotent, or fragmented parental authority" that pervades Vonnegut’s novels (136).

His own unhappy childhood, with a mother who had already wrecked her mind and a father who never reconciled himself to the ruin of his artistic career during the Depression, coloured Vonnegut’s imagination. Throughout his fiction we get images of "the coldness, darkness, cynicism and morbidity" associated with his mother, and his father figures are often "hollowed of emotional and spiritual substance" (Broer, Sanity Plea 48; 189). His mother frequently turns up in his works but his father makes his only appearance in the prologue to Jailbird. There Vonnegut plans a story about an imagined reunion between his father and himself in heaven. He yearns to become a very good friend of his father, but, as one could be of any age in heaven, his father chooses to be only
nine years of age causing unending embarrassment to the son. As the story seems to be an unfriendly one, Vonnegut quits writing it (XIV-XV).

Most of the parents in his novels are utter failures with regard to parental duty; they are inconsiderate, too domineering, unashamedly vain or unpardonably cruel, making their children openly disobedient or even rebellious. The memory of an inconsiderate and exacting father is a major factor that makes Paul Proteus rebellious. Malachi Constant meets his father only when he is twenty-one and fails to show any love or respect. In *Cat's Cradle* Felix Hoenikker was never a father to his three children: he was simply "father of a bomb, father of three children, father of ice-nine" (74). His midget son Newt could remember only one instance where Felix attempted to play with him; that too, on the fateful day on which America tried his atom bomb on Hiroshima. When Felix invited Newt to play cat's cradle with him, Newt was repelled by the zany old man and he ran away shrieking.

What Billy remembers about his childhood is the stupefying experiences he had with his parents. His parents are shown to have been unintentionally cruel and inconsiderate; they failed to notice how they damaged the young mind of the frail child. When he was thrown into the pool at the YMCA to learn swimming by the method of
sink-or-swim, Billy lost all hopes of remaining alive and he resented it when he vaguely sensed that somebody was rescuing him from the bottom of the pool (SHF 43). At twelve his parents took him on a trip to the West. When his parents were enjoying the beauty of the Grand Canyon he was horrified about accidentally falling in, and when his mother touched him, he wetted his pants (82-83). Inside the Carlsbad Caverns he feared that the ceiling would fall in. When the guide turned out all the lights "Billy didn’t know whether he was still alive or not" (83). These harrowing incidents left their indelible marks on his subconscious mind, and ultimately hastened the onset of schizophrenia. Whenever his mother visited him in the mental hospital he felt uneasy: "She upset Billy simply by being his mother" (94).

In *Breakfast of Champions* the rich and lascivious Dwayne Hoover repels his son Bunny to such an extent that he runs away from home, ultimately becoming a notorious homosexual. Celia Hoover had long since been addled by too much alcohol and amphetamines. Unable to tolerate his shabby father Leon Trout in *Galapagos* does a suicidal thing: he joins the Marines. The parents in *Slapstick* are perhaps the cruellest in Vonnegut’s fiction. Their twins Wilbur and Eliza were in fact freakish "neanderthaloids" who were not expected to survive long (28). But the Rockefeller-Mellon background didn’t permit them to remain
at home; they were conveniently disposed of—obviously left to die—to an isolated mansion where their parents made annual visits. They are even referred to as "Count Dracula and his blushing bride" (65) by their mother. They survive but their entire lives are warped by the pitiless snobs who are completely oblivious of parental duties.

Walter, Rudy and Rabo too didn’t have a useful, imaginative father figure. Their mothers were no help either. Rudy’s gun-crazy father in Deadeye Dick is to be seen as "a dangerous presence who has turned Rudy’s childhood home into an inferno of violence" (Broer, Sanity Plea 136-37). His mother is tragically unconcerned and inert. "Mother’s story ended when she married the handsomest rich man in town," observes Rudy (216). He continues: "that’s what so many American women are complaining about these days. They find their lives short on story and overburdened with epilogue" (216).

In Bluebeard Rabo Karabekian feels no qualms about leaving his home: "I didn’t have any supposedly sacred piece of land or shoals of friends and relatives to leave behind. Nowhere has the number zero been more of philosophical value than in the United States" (67).

Leon Trout in Galapagos feels only contempt for his father, Kilgore Trout, who had made him his co-conspirator
in driving his mother away by jeering at her for everything she did or had or wanted to do. Running away from home he went on a futile search for his mother, but never corresponded with his father again, nor did he attempt to know whether he was alive or not. Leon observes that marriage in 1986 was so difficult and senseless because of the overactive human brain that "a discussion between a husband and wife under stress could end up like a fight between blindfolded people wearing roller skates" (66). For James Wait marriage was a convenient source of wealth; he would identify rich, ordinary-looking women who were past childbearing and then court and marry them. Then he would grab their wealth and disappear. Although he had deserted seventeen such women, he was never arrested, nor was he under suspicion (8).

The situation is much more complex in *Hocus Pocus*. Eugene Debs Hartke's family would appear to be a lucky, rich family, but within it nothing was right. His mother-in-law, Mildred, was "crazy as a bedbug" and his wife, Margaret would soon go crazy. He refused to send them off to a lunatic asylum because his meagre income did not promise the children's education and even tolerably decent lives. But the children hated him for that; his son never wrote home and the parents soon lost track of him. In spite of all his attempts to be fair to all, his children have only contempt for him for having given
birth to them, for they are in constant dread of going suddenly insane.

Frederick R. Karl has pointed out that Vonnegut sees "the decline of family life as a signal of America's decline" (501). Given the disintegration of the family and of the ideals, one cannot give an optimistic picture of American society. This dilemma has induced Vonnegut to take the role of a didactic humanist, clamouring for a revaluation of existing institutions and practices. Neglect of the family and of the needs of children is to be seen as a cardinal defect of the society, warping the personalities of generations to come. That is why he stands solidly in the "children's camp" (Karl 501). As Gerald Weales has pointed out, in Vonnegut's novels "the sins of the fathers are visited on the children" (53), both as psychological maladjustment and also as social stigmatization. Thomas M. Disch calls him a "father for foundlings of all ages" (1267). And a sympathetic father he is, to the displaced children, to bemused soldiers, and to the dispossessed.

His dissatisfaction at the tragic dissolution of community feeling makes him seriously ponder about possible alternatives: his much-pronounced alternative is artificial extended families. He knows all the while that they are untenable, yet he fastens his hopes on them, as
he makes clear in his "Playboy Interview": "It’s a sunny little dream I have of a happier mankind. I couldn’t survive my own pessimism if I didn’t have some kind of sunny little dream. That’s mine, and don’t tell me I’m wrong . . . That’s my utopia" (WFG 243). This had its origin in the idea of the folk society that he came across during his anthropological studies. The idea that throughout its history mankind had cosy little folk societies where identity of interests guaranteed perfect unity of purpose and necessitated an egalitarian code of societal behaviour fascinated Vonnegut. He sees its likeness, though not perfect, in several of our existing institutions. Rabo Karabekian’s analysis, in Bluebeard, of the merits of the universities needs special mention:

I learned the joke at the core of American self-improvement: knowledge was so much junk to be processed one way or another at great universities. The real treasure the great universities offered was a lifelong membership in a respected artificial extended family. (184)

Elsewhere Vonnegut views groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and even the corrupted Whitehouse officials of the Watergate period as extended families held together by strong community feeling. His uncle Alex joined the former although he was not an alcoholic, because of the
companionship it offered; the members of the latter stick together also for companionship, but this time, in crime.

In *Slapstick* Vonnegut plays with the idea of artificial extended families. He identifies loneliness as the supreme cause of deterioration; it is viewed as a scheme for misery perpetuated by the powerful family of rich and influential politicians who refuse to recognize the value and power of the ordinary people (53). Wilbur and Eliza, thinking as halves of a single genius propose that "the Constitution be amended so as to guarantee that every citizen, no matter how humble or crazy or incompetent or deformed, somehow be given membership in some family as covertly xenophobic and crafty as the one their public servants formed" (53-54). Wilbur even tries to put it into practice when he becomes the president of the country.

In his social satires Vonnegut deals with other aspects of postwar American life. Sexual promiscuity, for instance, is seen as something that demeans man. Modern man's preoccupation with sexual matters and sexual organs comes out through off-hand comments and caricatures in *Breakfast of Champions*. The material culture is shown to corrupt normal sexual relationship. In *Slapstick* he deals with incestuous relationships. Frederick R. Karl has remarked that it is part of the "fashionable postwar
incursion into incest and incestuous relationships" (501). Wilbur and Eliza, the "specialized halves of a single brain," do not restrict their intimacy to the intellectual aspect alone. Wilbur recalls: "Eliza and I used bodily contact only in order to increase the intimacy of our brains" (SL 50). In Galapagos the thoroughly unprincipled James Wait is the product of an incestuous relationship between a father and his daughter. Fearing that he would become a "moral monster," his several foster-parents punish him relentlessly, but he becomes a successful homosexual prostitute, and ultimately starts a career of swindling old women after marrying them (14).

A factor that should have served as a check on wanton lives, and provided moral guidance, is religion. But there Vonnegut is more circumspect than usual. He was never a believer in any organized religion, as he came from a family of atheists. In his "Playboy Interview" he admits that he learned much of his outrageous opinion about organized religion from his own parents. It is ironical, therefore, that religion occupies a predominant position in both Cat's Cradle and The Sirens of Titan. Stanley Schatt finds out that "often in Vonnegut's fictive universe there is a yearning for a God resembling a gentle, fantasy-father figure" (27). But he doesn't confront the question of God directly though the question
seems to haunt him (Ranly 209). Except for his pseudo-religions\(^2\) he never deals with religious matters or with theological interpretations in his novels.

Rather than analyse the significance of religious beliefs and notions, Vonnegut details the failure of organized religions in coping with modern realities. Like families and art and love, religion has failed as a guiding force or as a source for ethical well-being. He is convinced that Christianity has failed; people have adopted only those teachings that justified cruelty or inequality. For instance, in *Jailbird* he comments on a particular statement by Jesus Christ as reported by Saint Matthew. Jesus said that he would say thus to sinners on Judgement Day: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Walter observes: "These words appalled me then, and they appall me now. They are surely the inspiration for the notorious cruelty of Christians." He is so depressed by what has transpired of such an atypically harsh command by Jesus that he suggests Jesus was not his true self when he said it (38).

\(^2\) Thomas L. Wymer calls them "gimcrack religions" which are not Vonnegut's answers but pseudo-explanations which provide an excuse for man for "denying his own responsibility" ("Swiftian Satire" 259).
What he finds fascinating in Jesus is the true concern for men with all their weaknesses and imperfections:

Jesus is particularly stimulating to me, since he noticed what I can't help noticing, that life is so hard most people are losers or feel like losers, so that a skill essential to most of us, if we are to retain some shred of dignity, is to show grace in defeat. That to me is the lesson he taught while up on the cross... while in unbelievable agony. (FWD 238)

He is furious when he comes to the way Christianity and Jesus himself have been manipulated for selfish or tyrannical designs. In an article in 1986 he expresses contempt for "all the rascals and nitwits and sociopaths and hustlers who by means of armies, torture chambers, alliances with tyrants... and cynical misinterpretations of the Bible have entered history as the closest friends God and Jesus could ever have" ("Requiem: The Hocus Pocus Laundromat" 35). He also feels that in America Christian preachers refuse to talk about blatant excesses:

I've never heard a sermon on the subject of gentleness or restraint; I've never heard a minister say it was wrong to kill. No preacher ever speaks out against cheating in business.
There are fifty-two Sundays in a year, and somehow none of these subjects comes up. (WFG 274)

Vonnegut, however, distrusts all absolutist religions; just like arbitrary political or philosophical systems, they will ultimately turn tyrannical. An absolutist religion can become a convenient tool in the hands of megalomaniacs who will readily enslave others (Klinkowitz, Slaughterhouse-Five: Reforming the Novel 70). Nonetheless, some form of religious or philosophical system that gives comforting lies to the bewildered people has become an imperative. That is why Eliot Rosewater tells his psychiatrist: "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people aren’t going to want to go on living" (GBR 93). Several critics have pointed out that, for Vonnegut, religion is a pack of comforting lies and a reinvention of reality that enable man to live out his life.\(^3\) All his new religions—'Bokononism' in Cat's Cradle, 'The church of God the Utterly Indifferent' in The Sirens of Titan or 'the Church of Jesus Christ the kidnapped' in Slapstick—are attempts to ameliorate man’s suffering,
and the means to cope with reality. Consequently, they are an opiate, but, as Jerome Kilnkowitz suggests, they are necessary under modern conditions where "the opiate of the people is more likely to become opium" (American 1960s 52).

Vonnegut's messiahs admit that what they profess are, as often as not, mere lies. "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies;" thus begins The Books of Bokonon in Cat's Cradle (9). What is given in the novel as the cruel paradox of Bokononist thought is relevant in the case of all the comforting lies in Vonnegut: "the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it" (177). Although such pseudo-religions are built on lies, Vonnegut knows that man needs such structures to explain his existence (Kennard 116). To sustain oneself amidst unsurmountable tribulations, one needs an opiate too. Hence Bokonon exhorts us to live by the "foma" (harmless untruths) which will make us brave and kind and happy. Yet what Thomas L. Wymer says is quite pertinent: "Bokononism attempts to shelter man from a knowledge of himself by diverting his attention from his own inwardness" ("Swiftian Satire" 259). In so far as it diverts man from the reality of life through a total reinvention of reality, it is yet another escapist theory and Vonnegut suspects it as such.
Vonnegut's god is usually indifferent or even wholly absent. In *The Sirens of Titan* Rumfoord's god is quite indifferent about what man does or aspires to. Quite predictably, the 'Church of God the Utterly Indifferent' is, as Robert W. Uphaus has pointed out, only a pageant befitting the desensitized society (167). Bokonon's god delegates the duty of finding out the purpose of life to man himself. When the whole world has frozen, thanks to the human stupidity that unleashed ice-nine, Bokonon himself forsakes his disciples: telling them that god is finished with them, he exhorts them to commit suicide, which they willingly do by touching the bluish-white crystals of ice-nine to their mouths. The final sentence of *The Books of Bokonon* is indeed a macabre finale:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my book with my history for a pillow . . . and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, and grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (178-79)

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4 We cannot overlook the dangerous potential manifest in this especially when we have witnessed the Reverend Jim Jones experiment of 1978.
The chief tenets of Rumfoord's 'Church of God the Utterly Indifferent' in The Sirens of Titan boil down to the same thing: "Take care of the people, and God Almighty will Take Care of Himself" and "Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty" (180). Though conspicuously escapist, such religions reorder "our notion of the finite world so that we may accept it, rather than simply rebel against it in fruitless anger" (Klinkowitz, "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the Crime of his Times" 46).

That finite world is on the verge of an apocalyptic disaster in most of his novels. It is frozen, depopulated by neutron bombs or crushed by fatal fluctuations in gravity. Inordinate cruelty and a miserable lack of foresight make Vonnegut's world uninhabitable. Vonnegut conceives alternatives, alternatives of a humanist and a humanitarian, to the eschatological impasse. He is a true camp follower of conservationism; he believes that man, in his endless avarice and unlimited stupidity, is hastening universal destruction. In his speech to the graduating class at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, in 1974, he raises conservationism to the sphere of ethical absolutes:

As an ordinary person, appalled as I am by the speed with which we are wrecking our topsoil, our drinking water, and our atmosphere, I will
suggest an idea about good and evil which might fit into a modern and simple moral code . . . that anything which wounds the planet is evil, and anything which preserves it is good. (PS 203)

But he has little hope in popular wisdom: "I don't think people give a damn whether the planet goes on or not" (qtd. in Cargas 1050). Nobody bothers to worry about the future: "It seems to me as if everyone is living as members of Alcoholics Anonymous do, day by day. And a few more days will be enough. I know of very few people who are dreaming of a world for their grandchildren" (qtd. in Cargas 1050). He goes on to say that anyone who has a scientific mentality or reads scientists will not fail to notice that we are in terrible danger. But even President Ford opts to overlook it:

President Ford is optimistic, and he would hear me prophesying doom and he would say "Nonsense." He's an optimist, but he's a lawyer. He will argue that our atmosphere will not become poisoned . . . Meanwhile, our atmosphere is deteriorating in measurable ways. (1050)

Vonnegut's apocalypse is man's own handiwork; those who kill the planet "with the by-products of their own ingenuity" (HP 20), and those well-informed people who condone it are equally culpable. What Kilgore Trout says
to his parakeet is Vonnegut's ultimate response to our wastefulness: "humanity deserved to die horribly, since it had behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet" (BC 18). The tragedy is two-fold: on the one hand, all the conventional energy sources are used up, and most of the arable land is made sterile; on the other hand, poisonous exhausts and non-degradable wastes make the planet uninhabitable.

Vonnegut is particularly severe with indiscriminate consumption of fuels and exploitation of energy sources. For instance, in *Jailbird* he speaks about the armed forces that use up energy unnecessarily: "A fighter plane leaped from the tip of a nearby runway, destroyed enough energy to heat one hundred homes for a thousand years, tore the sky to shreds . . . . It happened all the time" (2-3). The criminal dissipation of fuels is subtly implied in a story of Dr. Bob Fender in the novel. On the planet Vicuna scientists find ways to extract time from topsoil, the oceans and the atmosphere and use it as fuel. They learn "to heat their homes and power their speedboats and fertilize their crops with it; to eat it; to make clothes out of it; and so on." The Vicunians squander it just to show how affluent they are. They watch in delight when a million years of future is put to the torch to celebrate the birthday of the queen. Then they run out of time.
When only a few weeks of future remains, the vicunians are compelled to search for suitable bodies to inhabit, and they are "scattered far and wide" (56-57).

His novels abound in references to the devastation of arable land through deforestation and strip-mining, and the violation of natural habitats of birds and animals. The extent of the harm done by the avaricious corporate giants is suggested by a passage in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* where Eliot finds the once green hills of Kentucky "gulched and gashed by strip mines" (45). In *Breakfast of Champions* Kilgore Trout takes us through the arid wasteland of West Virginia where most of the topsoil is gone due to excessive mining for coal. The surface is fast falling into the holes dug by miners. Vonnegut chips in with a repudiation of all responsible for it: "the demolition of West Virginia had taken place with the approval of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the State Government . . ." (119).

Indiscriminate disposal of dangerous wastes is highlighted as a potential threat to the environment. He makes his intention clear when he calls the Ohio an "open sewer" where "Carp as big as atomic submarines fatten on the sludge of the sons and grandsons of the pioneers" (GBR 45). In *Breakfast of Champions*, the Barrytron Plant manufactures a new anti-personnel bomb
which uses plastic pellets. It is cheaper and, moreover, X-ray machines will not locate them in the bodies of the wounded. The irony is that they deposit the non-degradable waste to the nearby Sugar Creek. The company that operates an effluent disposal plant dumps it into the Creek through hidden pipes. When Kilgore Trout steps into the Sugar Creek, both his legs are coated with a thin plastic substance which, when exposed to air, dries up leaving a skin-tight plastic coating (224). That what Vonnegut portrays is no exaggeration is well borne out by the account Angus Black gives of environmental pollution in his *A Radical's Guide to Self Destruction*. Black shows that the country is literally inundated by plastic garbage. He underscores the gravity of the problem by reminding us that the half-life of plastic is two hundred years (3).

Sugar Creek is shown to be filled with non-degradable disposables and wastes ranging from discarded automobiles to plastic toys. Here also we remember what Angus Black said—that in the year 1971, there were "seven million junked cars a year, several million tons of discarded plastic packaging, and a hundred million used toothbrushes" (6). He goes on to say that in Ohio at least fifty tons of pollutants were dropped on every square mile. Houses had to be repainted every year, sometimes more often. One heavy rain "brought down so
much hydrogen sulphide that hundreds of houses turned pitch black" (6-9). It is hardly surprising that the "Sacred Miracle Cave" of Midland City is nearly invisible in *Breakfast of Champions*.

Vonnegut pins the blame squarely on those who knowingly plunder the resources and scatter their poisonous wastes all around. In *Galapagos* he indicts the rich and influential who refuse to check it: "the people who were best informed about the state of the planet . . . and rich and powerful enough to slow down all the waste and destruction going on, were by definition well fed." Thus he accounts for their complacency: "So everything was always just fine as far as they were concerned" (129). Their hypocrisy is also brought to light: Andrew MacIntosh was a famous conservationist and always strived to express his concern for nature and natural habitat, but "so many of the companies he served as a director or in which he was a major stockholder were notorious damagers of the water or the soil or the atmosphere" (102). In *Hocus Pocus* Vonnegut devises a televised discussion between Ed Bergeron, dedicated conservationist who had sold all his assets to work full time for nature conservation and Jason Wilder, conservative journalist and TV celebrity. Bergeron remarks that we may be forced to write "the epitaph for this once salubrious blue-green
Wilder counters by saying that people expressed the same doubt all through human history—-that it is only a cry of doom. Bergeron then gives what can as well be Vonnegut's abiding opinion:

The difference is that we have the misfortune of knowing what's really going on which is no fun at all. And this has given rise to a whole new class of preening, narcissistic quacks like yourself who say in the service of rich and shameless polluters that the state of the atmosphere and the water and the topsoil on which all life depends is as debatable as how many angels can dance on the fuzz of a tennis ball. (139-40)

Writing to Earthlings a century from now, Vonnegut says in *Pates Worse Than Death*: "The sort of leaders we need now are not those who promise ultimate victory over Nature through perseverance in living as we do right now, but those with the courage and intelligence to present to the world what appear to be Nature's stern but reasonable surrender terms:" the surrender terms include a reduction of population, curtailment of pollution, stoppage of the hectic preparations for war, and the realization that science cannot fix everything (112).
But this needs the courage of convictions and the foresight to leave our earth as unhurt as possible--something which is highly suspect, given our greed and our impetuosity. That is why Vonnegut's vision turns apocalyptic very often. Yet he passionately believes in the possibility of creating a better world. That necessitates a thorough revision of our value system and our priorities. Vonnegut exhorts his people to accomplish that or watch their world "go up like a celluloid collar by-and-by" (WFG 184).

After a thorough analysis of contemporary American society Vonnegut seems too much frustrated about the tragic turn things have taken. It is an alienated, resigned community, left adrift amidst the multifarious entanglements--both man-made and accidental--of a technological society. The very institutions that used to sustain their forefathers have suddenly lost their efficacy and the values which they had professed all through have evaporated or been inverted. And the future is likely to be bleaker unless they put in a concerted effort to effect a change of heart. That seems to be the only message in Vonnegut.