CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

After thirteen novels and some brilliant introspective reflections, Vonnegut stands as the most representative postwar American novelist. He has successfully dissected contemporary American society to show how it has vitiated every dream that the country had boasted of since its inception. He has been an unfailing alarm system continually alerting his readers against various defects and excesses which would otherwise have been overlooked in the smugness of the economic and military superiority of the period. However, due recognition hasn't come to him maybe because of the apparent simplicity of his works. But his simplicity needn't be considered a weakness or a demerit; in fact, as Olderman suggests, the deceptively simple style can be the reason for the peculiar power of his works, for he reveals "both the horror and the mystery that lies beneath the surface of the most placidly dull and ordinary human response" (191). The often simplistic framework is only a facade behind which lurk the sordid realities of life.

Vonnegut has resorted to the black comedy as it appears to suit his purpose; it gives him adequate detachment to view his subjects, besides enabling him to
face even the depressingly horrible aspects of life in an absurd world. As he juxtaposes horror and ugliness with laughter, the readers are taken unawares and this creates in them an awareness of the very problems they would have conveniently overlooked. Rather than dispel serious readers, the humour in Vonnegut serves to enchant them. But the humour hardly alleviates the bleakness of what he depicts; it merely makes it more endurable.

In almost all his works Vonnegut explores some unpleasant aspect of postwar American society that has contributed to the devaluation of the American dream. Taken together, his works constitute a systematic repudiation of the American way of life. The postwar America that he recreates is dehumanized through automation, addicted to war, politically retrogressive and psychologically morbid. He pins the blame not only on the greedy and shortsighted leaders but also on the people who buttress the inhuman system and thereby collude in perpetuating it through passive cooperation. The atmosphere of conformity deliberately nurtured from the beginning of the Cold War is shown to be detrimental to any attempt at a reform. He frequently attacks every attempt to adjust to the unbearable. His characters often submit in front of unyielding forces of cruelty or avarice, but not before revealing the inhumanity and deception involved in those forces. Vonnegut doesn't lose
any opportunity to show that the individual has a great role to play. As Tony Tanner has remarked, his works imply that "if man doesn't do something about the conditions and quality of human life on earth, no one and nothing else will" (200). It has been a major concern in his works to create in his readers an awareness of the situation; he has the strong conviction that this awareness will inevitably lead to firm resolutions.

In their efforts to withstand conformity and resignation his protagonists face ostracism--Paul Proteus, Walter and Eugene Debs Hartke are obvious cases in point--or suffer serious psychological breakdowns as in the case of Eliot Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim or Dwayne Hoover. But he continuously suggests that any serious attempt to fight the inhumanity and the brutality inherent in the system is, in itself, a noble gesture that will disprove the inviolability of the socio-political set-up. Even insanity is better than conformity, as Tony Tanner reminds us (193). Klinkowitz also regards it as a perfectly rational response: "To maintain an integral self in this chaotic world is schizophrenia writ large" (*Literary Disruptions* 42).

While most contemporary American novels show a tragic disintegration of the hero figure, Vonnegut's men survive although they can boast of only fragmented personalities.
Their essential humanity and their unyielding belief in simple human values assist them in tackling the often stupefying forces of extinction or dehumanization. Though none of them comes out unscathed, they have at least tried to maintain the integrity of self. When life becomes too intolerable they take refuge in love or art or in harmless fantasies. The fantasies that help Billy or Malachi Constant go benumbed to the forces of destruction induce some critics like Josephine Hendin to conclude that passivity, acceptance, resignation, and denial are the only viable solutions in Vonnegut (39). But Billy or Constant can hardly be Vonnegut’s mouthpieces; their resignation and passivity are clearly repudiated at the end.

Vonnegut’s refusal to give clear-cut solutions confuses several readers. Max F. Schulz identifies a disquieting inconclusiveness in his novels, for they refuse to provide ultimate confirmation to any of the solutions treated therein. Schulz regards this "programmatic skepticism" as emblematic of Black Humour fiction. For J. Michael Crichton the ultimate difficulty with Vonnegut is his refusal to say who is wrong (35). Jean E. Kennard calls Vonnegut post-existential because he doesn’t give ethical absolutes against which the oddities or absurdities that he highlights can be judged (102-03).
Kennard is of the opinion that Vonnegut's technique of invalidating several previous statements with a final comment contributes to the self-destruction of the novels (106). Lawrence R. Broer examines the "sterile ambivalence, or spiritual stalemate" in Vonnegut that emerges from the continuous tussle between the forces of optimism and pessimism ("Pilgrim's Progress" 154). Thomas P. Hoffman also notices the lack of resolution that is a consistent characteristic of Vonnegut's novels (127).

His novels, however, do attempt to resolve the issues that he highlights. It is especially so when we come to his political novels or war novels. Some of his characters like Proteus, Constant, Campbell or Billy resort to escapist techniques--pretensions or drugging illusions--occasionally but that can scarcely be Vonnegut's message. As Robert A. Hipkiss has pointed out, Vonnegut's entire work is an attack on human pretensions; such illusions, when "treated as absolutes and acted upon consistently," will result in total ruin (70). Those characters who hide themselves in some convenient oubliette do that when every rational response has failed. Some such drugging seems to be essential when they face realities like Dresden or Vietnam (Tanner 199-200). But not even for a moment should we forget the fact that Vonnegut has always fought against indifference or passivity; he in fact views them as tantamount to
participation in the evils. His attack on indifference or passivity is most pronounced in the two novels which ostensibly advocate those responses—Slaughterhouse-Five and The Sirens of Titan. In the former Billy Pilgrim is in an environment insulated from all pain. Back in Ilium he is still in an insulated environment applying his Tralfamadorian philosophy. But when he cruelly ignores a black man who wants to talk to him at a traffic light in Ilium's black ghetto area, we are made to see the falsity and cruelty inherent in any such escapist philosophy. And in the concluding chapter Vonnegut repudiates the comforting fantasies of Billy in an unmistakable authorial voice (186-87). In its fatalistic thrust and the apparent futility of human effort in any direction The Sirens of Titan substantiates the argument that Vonnegut's works exhibit classic stoicism (Ranly 210; Scholes, Fabulation 157). But a thorough analysis reveals that Vonnegut discounts the epicurean philosophy of Malachi Constant on the one hand and the excessive withdrawal of Beatrice Rumfoord on the other. Constant uses his fantastic good fortune to "finance an unending demonstration that man is a pig" (251). And Beatrice, after a lifelong exhibition of the "excesses of reluctance," learns that the great secret of happiness is to be used by someone and to be useful to others (242).
Vonnegut's work is especially intriguing because he severely undercuts much of what his characters seem to profess. For instance, he often appears to be a fatalist or determinist (Hassan 47; Jones 217; Klinkowitz, Practice of Fiction 105). Such a view enables his characters to face the horror and absurdity of their lives. We too are tempted to believe that "no one is responsible for anything, and everything that happens can be cheerfully accepted without concern or guilt" (Wymer, "Machines and the Meaning of Human" 48). But we are made to see the fallacy of such a view; the fact that human beings are not mere robots and that they possess awareness--an "unwavering band of light"--precludes any fatalistic or deterministic preoccupation (Petro 132). Vonnegut is in fact averse to every kind of determinism as is borne out by his novels, especially the later ones. In his fictional world man does have a role to play and a mission to fulfil; any lapse through indifference or fatalism will only strengthen the forces of evil or destruction. What Conrad Festa gives as Vonnegut's ultimate message is quite pertinent:

Vonnegut focuses our attention on evils in our society which make life unnecessarily painful, dangerous, and destructive--evils which, for the most part, can be corrected if only we would avoid our greatest folly: our tendency to escape
unpleasant, threatening reality which demands correcting action, either by slipping into private dream worlds or by pretending that nothing can be done about it anyway. (147)

If with David Bosworth (14) we view Vonnegut’s men as neither free to choose nor competent to act, then we miss his message, for his humanism has emphasized the potency of the irreducible inner core of the self. Lawrence R. Broer warns against any such misinterpretation: "To confuse Vonnegut with Billy Pilgrim or to mistake the author as a defeatist . . . represents a dreadful misreading of Vonnegut’s work and a misunderstanding of the affirmative thrust of his career as a whole" ("Pilgrim’s Progress" 145). When we realize the "seductive fatalistic sophistries" (Broer, Sanity Plea 9) for what they are, we confront the humane but moderate optimist in Vonnegut. Any failure to do so will turn us into Billy Pilgrims--insulated from pain but shorn of our humanity and our integrity.

The consistent bleakness that characterizes most of his works has induced several critics to call him a nihilist (Bryant 237; Uphaus 165; Rackstraw, "Craftsman at Play" 66). For some his final response is one of frustration and dismay (Nelson 553; Buck 193). But on closer analysis we realize that he neither endorses a
thoroughly absurdist view of life nor advocates an outright demolition of the existing socio-political organization. That is why several perceptive critics refuse to call him a nihilist (Irving 48; Klinkowitz, American 1960s 56-57; Reed, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. 118).

However, Vonnegut himself has often admitted that he was a pessimist all through. In his Bennington College Address in 1970 he said that whenever he appeared to see "light at the end of the tunnel at last" he knew that he was telling a lie. Taking Shakespeare's remark that "The smallest worm will turn being trodden on," he remarked:

"I have to tell you that a worm can be stepped on in such a way that it can't possibly turn after you remove your foot" (WFG 162-63). He went on to defend the comforting myths that sustain man in his apparently futile march:

"If you want to become a friend of civilization, then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash" (163). But he has successfully fought his pessimism and he comes out more affirmative in his later novels. In spite of all the depressing experiences--both personal and societal--his belief in human worth and in the efficacy of simple human values is on the ascent.

The symbolic liberation of his cynical surrogate author Kilgore Trout in Breakfast of Champions was a deliberate strategy to overcome the pessimistic strain in his work (Broer, "Pilgrim's Progress" 155). But it hasn't
been wholly successful; several critics view him as essentially pessimistic (Bosworth 15; Kennard 126-27; Messent). It is not easy to discredit that view, especially when we analyse the unhappy endings of his novels. In Player Piano his mavericks have shown the courage and insight to oppose a machine culture and its dehumanization, but they surrender. In Mother Night Campbell hangs himself for crimes against himself. Human beings are shown to be mere playthings of inscrutable cosmic patterns in The Sirens of Titan. The pseudo-religion of Cat's Cradle pretends to emphasize human worth but ultimately proclaims human stupidity. In God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and Breakfast of Champions whatever affirmation comes is from an insane asylum. Slaughterhouse-Five details the pathetic attempt of man to drug himself to the horror and lunacy of war. In Jailbird and Hocus Pocus the protagonists are in prison. And in Galapagos human beings have found out peace and harmony but they have long since abdicated their humanity.

In spite of his enduring belief in man, Vonnegut seems to be depressingly pessimistic about the future of mankind. Either through their insatiable greed or through their shortsightedness men have made a mess of the world. In an interview with Charles Reilly in 1980 he disclosed his deepest fears:
My feeling is that human beings are too good for life. They've been put in the wrong place with the wrong things to do . . . it seems to me we're in terrible danger. I see no reason that would persuade me we'll escape a third world war. I see a number of reasons to conclude we're on a collision course with ecological disaster. (226)

Such loss of hope is bound to lead to an apocalyptic vision as we see in several of his novels. But, as John R. May remarks, "Vonnegut belongs to a purer strain of apocalyptic writers, a tradition that imagines the worst because it believes in something better" (192). Vonnegut doesn't implicate any extrahuman force in the disasters; it is man who ultimately causes it--both through a stupid use of technology and through passivity. Daniel L. Zins has correctly evaluated Vonnegut's stance: "If the great human experiment comes to a fiery end, it will be because the Billy Pilgrims of the world, no less than the Felix Hoenikkers, have allowed it to happen" (177).

Vonnegut's vision is very often pessimistic but his works always have a note of affirmation (Klinkowitz, "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the Crime of his times" 52; Todd 107). John Somer even praises Vonnegut for his unflinching affirmation of life which is based on "the greatness of the human spirit confronted by great
adversity" (253). Frequent images of goodness, love and generosity ameliorate whatever despair Vonnegut conjures up (De Mott 38). As Robert Scholes has remarked, Vonnegut succeeds, like Joyce, in creating the conscience of the human race; he encourages us "to keep our humanity in shape" ("Mithridates, He Died Old" 11). His pessimism and his occasional cynicism have not doomed his fiction; they have, in fact, been mitigated by his love for mankind and his undying confidence in man.

In his role as a social critic--critic of the American way of life--Vonnegut has been acerbic, but he never gives up on man. What distinguishes him from a satirist is his inability to feign a superior position for himself; being a member of the society he too is culpable through direct participation or through passive acceptance. There is a tinge of sadness at the disillusionment of his age. Along with it we find the queasy feeling that what is in store for man is nothing short of total extinction. His letter to Earthlings a century from now is a wail of grief at the lost opportunity of mankind: "There is no stopping us. We will continue to breed like rabbits. We will continue to engage in technological nincompoopery with hideous side effects unforeseen. We will make only token repairs on our cities now collapsing. We will not clear up much of the poisonous mess that we ourselves have made" (FWD 116).
His message will quite fittingly express the stupidity of man to whomever comes here and finds mankind gone:
"We probably could have saved ourselves, but were too damned lazy to try very hard and too damn cheap" (116).
In the foreword to a radio script he expressed the same idea: "Man is not evil . . . He is simply too hilariously stupid to survive" (qtd. in Klinkowitz and Lawler 10).
He doesn't suggest that isolated individual acts of courage are enough to survive in a nuclear age; he knows that every lapse into despair or helplessness hastens the catastrophic end (Zins 176).

Vonnegut has attempted all through to advocate a life of moderation. He sees through the hollow superciliousness of his countrymen. The haughtiness brought along by material plenty and military superiority is seen as motivating the leaders to spread pollution and ruin. He is pretty circumspect about all grand schemes; behind every such scheme there lurks a callous disregard for the ordinary people as well as a shameless display of cruelty or avarice. All his characters are poor victims of big schemes or programmes concocted to safeguard the interests of a precious few. Whether the mad race is for technological superiority, military might, or for material plenty, it is the inconsequential individual who is relentlessly thrown to oblivion. Moderation alone will help; it will retard the rapid spread of destruction,
besides facilitating an evaluation of the situation. At the very end of his last novel he reminds his people:
"Just because some of us can read and write and do a little math, that doesn't mean we deserve to conquer the Universe" (HP 302).

What is the ultimate message in his novels? It is true that he doesn't give any sophisticated programmes or ideologies, but in his gentle way he gives his message which will make life less of an ordeal. His solutions are always simple—even simplistic—but his seriousness and his sincerity can never be questioned. Quite often his solutions appear like the morals of simple fables, and consequently he is often taken to be didactic (Olderman 219). The criticism that his solutions are not workable is very valid, but as Olderman says, they at least help us stay alive and also have some fun (191). Kathryn Hume points out that given his depressing experiences and his characteristic pessimism, even a modest attempt to give positive values is no mean achievement ("Myths and Symbols of Meaning" 215). It is in fact his humanism that inspires Vonnegut to advocate simple human values as the ultimate solution. In the preface to Vonnegut in America Klinkowitz reminds us that "to see Vonnegut as a humanist as well as a humorist, is to see him in true relation to his times and his culture" (xv).
In *Mother Night* Vonnegut gives its moral: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (ix). In the mutability and frequent changes in identity prevalent in our times this message is of paramount importance. It smacks of existential questions of identity where man becomes what he does (Pauly 69). In the frenzy of nazism Campbell's pretended self becomes his real self, and he ultimately bows out with the sore knowledge that the harm done in his assumed role far outweighs the good that he really wanted to do. The laborious task of distinguishing between good and evil has always been a major theme for Vonnegut (Schatt 16). The confusing nature of right and wrong has induced him to quote from Hippocrates in his *Slapstick*: "If you can do no good, at least do no harm" (141).

The view that Vonnegut offers only passivity and resignation as solutions to the engulfing and paralysing problems misses what his works actually disclose (Broer, *Sanity Plea* 8; Mustazza, "Vonnegut's Tralfamadore" 309). Mustazza also counters the argument that Vonnegut is indifferent to ethical conduct: "Vonnegut's novels are a plea for ethical action, for the exercise of reason, for human will to be placed at the service of peace" (309). Rebecca M. Pauly also has noticed the "strong moral responses to man's fate" that emanate from his humanism (69). As Thomas L. Wymer says, despair or
laughter or comforting illusions are not his answers; they are responses which he critically examines and categorically discards before exhorting us to make our own moral judgements ("Swiftian Satire" 262).

What Vonnegut hates most in the people is apathy and indifference. While the former will condone any outrage against individual dignity the latter negates all human warmth. A strong feeling of aloofness—either through the fear of contamination or through an innate sense of superciliousness—can blight personal relationships and social cohesion. In Slaughterhouse-Five Eliot Rosewater tries to behave warmly to everyone just to make life more bearable: "He was experimenting with being ardently sympathetic with everybody he met. He thought that might make the world a slightly more pleasant place to live in" (94).

Most of his characters bow out before the debilitating forces that weigh them down, but they realize the great value of kindness and love and togetherness. "Unbridled charity and unbounded love" appear to be Vonnegut's answer to the ills of his society (Pinsker 95). Malachi Constant in The Sirens of Titan learns belatedly that "a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (313).
Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* gives the salutary warning to his successors: "Be generous. Be kind. You can safely ignore the arts and sciences. They never helped anybody. Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor" (23). Baptizing two babies Eliot gives the only advice he can think of: "God damn it, you've got to be kind" (109-10). Exhortations to practise love and compassion appear in all his works. Consequently, his men and women come out gentle and kind although they are destined to lead futile, fragmented lives.

Critics like Clinton S. Burhans, Jr. regard Vonnegut's solutions as merely illusory and impracticable (189). This argument gets significance when we remember that life as Vonnegut sees it is very often absurd and hence every attempt made by man to find a rational response to it is futile. But, as Stanley Schatt suggests, irrespective of whether it is a godless universe or not, we must "seek to create a better world in which human love and compassion are paramount" (78). Vonnegut is quite correct when he suggests that whatever change there can be must come from within the individual (Hartshorne). Beneath it is the sad realization that the world can be saved only through the hard way, "by the commitment of enough individual human beings to the task of finding a way to resist without destroying, of causing less pain without flying from
responsibility . . . of becoming, in short, better human beings (Wymer, "Swiftian Satire" 261). Thus every attempt, however feeble, at goodness is inherently valuable. What Vonnegut ultimately conveys is that "the insane world of soulless materialistic lusts for fame and money, of suicidal wars and self-serving religions that we presently inhabit, is a world of our own lunatic invention" (Broer, Sanity Plea 9). Hence it is our own duty to effect a change of heart so that life will become a more meaningful and rewarding experience.

Ever gentle, ever humorous, Vonnegut remains one of the most famous among contemporary American novelists. His signal role as a relentless social critic and as an innovative writer ensures his continued acceptance as one of the most influential novelists of the time. He can confidently go on depicting his world and suggesting characteristically simple solutions to the ills of his time.