Chapter Two

‘USTOPIA’: Time, Space, and Science Fiction in *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, and *Cat’s Cradle*

The experience of war combat, the latent arrival of PTSD, and trauma as such, caused by the Second World War and trauma contained in PTSD did play a significant role in shaping Vonnegut’s narrative art. It made him pursue narratives in which time and space played an important role in reflecting his experiences. Time and space became fluid markers throughout his oeuvre, and through its use Vonnegut redefined ways in which he could express himself. His use of the tropes of time and space is strewn across the fabric of his work. This platform provided him with a multi-genric-matrix where he could experiment with different genres and fuse them to create something novel. The inadequacy of available genres to exemplify the horrors of war and experiences of stress-induced trauma led Vonnegut to experiment with newer ways to reflect his experiences in a pluro-generic, pluro-technical melting pot. The plurality of genres in the current world scenario, where every voice needs an identification to trace its origin in the ever-growing and fluctuating world, pushed writers such as Vonnegut to delve into newer paths. In the earlier novels of Vonnegut, we find the fusion of a futuristic world with time and space travel, dystopian set ups, and narratives adhering to the category of science fiction. A detailed study of the genre of science fiction and its tropes will help us understand the ways in which Vonnegut tries to use time and space in his novels as well as modify them in order to cater to the new sensibilities which came to the fore after the world wars and the subsequent change in the way society and economy countered the transformation. A study of time and space and its use in Kurt Vonnegut’s earlier fiction - *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), and *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) - will
substantiate the ways in which Vonnegut has included and modified time and space in his writing within the framework of science fiction and beyond it.

2.1 Defining Science Fiction – Charting the History of the Genre

Science fiction is a genre of speculative fiction which deals with futuristic scientific methodology or technology which has borrowed its fundamentals from science, but in the tradition of fiction, follows imaginative concepts such as time or space travel, encounters in alien worlds, parallel universes, and so on. There is the ever-going debate as to what demarcates the area for science fiction as most often the genre spills out through the cracks and mingles with fantasy and speculative fiction. It churns out stories which reflect the plurality of genres as they show characteristics from other genres. The territory of genre-specific science fiction is not hard to acquire though. A science fiction narrative can indulge in some space/time travel, with a hero skyrocketing in a spaceship on a journey to a land far, far away. It can also include interactions with some alien race. This seems to be the formula and if you get this right, you get the commercial shelf space of being designated as a “Science Fiction” writer. This is however not the wholesome criteria for identifying works of science fiction. Critics have presented different views on what they define as science fiction. On one level science fiction is also bound by the reader response. The readers generally know what they are looking for in science fiction. This, however, does not add to the credibility of the genre to grow beyond a certain point. The idea that science fiction is generally what is marketed as science fiction for commercial benefits stultifies the growth of the genre. Adam Roberts alludes to this dimension when he writes, “There is a kind of weariness in this sort of circular reasoning, underlain by a sense that the whole business of definition is nothing more than a marketing exercise” (Roberts 2). This sort of response deters authors who do not necessarily want to be called science fiction writers and thus
look for avenues into other more mainstream genres. This does not however cover the whole scope of the genre as the challenge lies in defining the boundaries that demarcates science fiction from the other genres.

In his book *Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts clarifies that though science fiction is imaginative fiction not all imaginative fiction can be classified as science fiction. He further refers to the term ‘novum,’ used by critic Darko Suvin, which explains the point of difference between the worlds portrayed through science fiction and through imaginative or fantastic literature. Novum can be described as scientifically plausible innovations used in science fiction narratives. According to this, a science fiction text may be based on one or more nova. For example, the element Ice-nine in *Cat’s Cradle* can be one novum that Vonnegut experiments with in that narrative. Ice-nine is a fictional element created by the scientist Felix Hoenikker in the novel *Cat’s Cradle*, and does not reflect any element in reality. It is a scientifically plausible innovation, and thus can be categorised as a novum. It is not necessary for novum to be a piece of scientific technology or as a supernatural agent. It might also be a number of interrelated ‘nova’ as in *The Sirens of Titan*, where the concept of time and space travel is related to a number of new futuristic technologies as seen on the space ship of Winston Rumfoord. Roberts writes, “The emphasis is on difference, and the systematic working out of the consequences of a difference or differences, of a novum or nova, becomes the strength of the mode” (Roberts 7). Vonnegut in his writing uses these novas and expand their horizon by adding elements from other genres to flesh out a new writing which can sustain in this pluro-generic\(^1\) world where the

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\(^1\) I use the term ‘pluro-generic’ to signify the plurality of genres and how they create a fusion of different genres together to create a matrix. This results in the creation of some new genres but not rigorously so. Most often than not, the genres just fuse to give meaning to an experience which could not be explained through the possible genres already available.
diverse genres fuse together to give meaning to everyday experiences which cannot be defined easily through the old ones.

Darko Suvin in his book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, defines science fiction as, “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 8-9). In this book, Suvin endeavours to explain our urge to understand and comprehend an alien world as described in science fiction literature or in a science fiction movie. The atmosphere of curiosity about the unknown perplexes the psyche. Man is trying to understand the dynamics of the outer reaches of our planet, and the fascination edges towards the knowledge of what lies beyond it all. The concept of ‘Cognition’ deals with this aspect. When Suvin refers to ‘estrangement’ he is attempting to grasp the difference that one tries to identify with the alien situation. This difference both entices as well perplexes the reader. There is a harmony of these two in the works of science fiction, between estrangement and the cognition that allows science fiction the relevance that is required in this age. Roberts observes that the main point of cohesion between Suvin’s use of ‘cognition’ and ‘estrangement’ operates through the use of ‘novum’. According to Roberts, “Suvin goes on to insist that this ‘alternative’ world of science fiction, determined by ‘estrangement’ and ‘cognition’, must be possible, by which he means it must reflect the constraints of science. This is how he distinguishes science fiction from the looser category of ‘fantasy’” (Roberts 8). This places science fiction writing under the rubric of narrative which includes science and technology as a vehicle to explain travels into futuristic places or explorations into the unknown.
Gwyneth Jones, in her book *Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality*, defines science fiction by locating the scope of science in the fiction that is designated as the term ‘science fiction.’ Jones writes:

‘Science’ in Science Fiction has always had a tacit meaning other than that commonly accepted. It had nothing in particular to say about the subject matter, which may be just about anything so long as the formal conventions of future dress are observed. It means only, finally, that whatever phenomenon or speculation is treated in the fiction, there is a claim that it is going to be studied to some extent scientifically—that is objectively, rigorously; in a controlled environment. The business of the writer is to set up the equipment in a laboratory of the mind such that the ‘what if’ in question is at once isolated and provided with the exact nutrients it needs. (Jones 4)

Jones expands her ideas and focuses on the scientific part in the writing of science fiction. The dependence upon the scientific phenomenon as represented in these texts accentuates the growth necessary for the science fiction genre. The possibility of a query such as “what if?” and “what next” adds to the experience of reading a science fiction text. The focus of such a text should adhere to following the scope of a scientific experiment; it does not matter if it follows the scientific truth. It is accepted more as a thought experiment. It is what Suvin would call as cohesion between estrangement and cognition and resulting in expanding the scope of the text. Both Suvin and Jones were more interested in science from science fiction.

Robert Scholes, another prominent critic of science fiction, focused more on the fiction part and the scope that science provides to the narrative in the science fiction genre. In the book,
Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision observes that the intention in science fiction is to know about these new worlds and know about the disparities that one creates when writing science fiction. He does not dismiss science fiction as escapist or irrelevant; rather he focuses on the fact that science fiction dwells on extremities. On one hand it portrays the differences between these two worlds, ours and the alien planet for example. On the other hand, though distanced because of time-space or because of dwelling in parallel universes, these worlds confront the realities of our world in order to answer the direction of the unknown trajectory. Damien Broderick, another critic as well writer from this genre, has a more contemporary approach to science fiction. In the book Reading by Starlight: Postmodern Science Fiction, Broderick writes:

Science fiction is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by (i) metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics, (ii) the foregrounding of icons and interpretative schemata from a collectively constituted generic ‘mega-text’ and the concomitant de-emphasis of ‘fine writing’ and characterisation, and (iii) certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in literary models: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject.

(Broderick 155)

Broderick believes that ‘novum’ is part of the metonymic tactics, and science fiction texts work metaphorically to bring this other world to cohesion. He borrows from both Suvin and Scholes, and adds another aspect to the definition of the science fiction genre. Both the earlier critics believed that science fiction falls under the category of serious writing, but Broderick accepted the populist nature in the works of a science fiction text. Roberts alludes to the same when he
observes that science fiction texts tend to dwell more on the concrete than on the abstract, and thus end up losing on some aspects of high art. He observes, “A science fiction novel is more likely to present us with an actual, concretely realised alien, with blue skin and bug eyes” (Roberts 14). Thus, creating a fixed world for the alien race as different from ours and yet symptomatic of some aspects that are ours.

Vonnegut’s writing reflects the aspect of creating new worlds by implementing changes to the supposed markers or tropes from conventional science fiction. In his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, he writes about the alien race from Tralfamadore. Vonnegut does not use Tralfamadorians as a conventional science fiction technique. On the contrary, their addition adds depth to the narrative. Through the Tralfamadorians, Vonnegut expands on Billy’s delayed response to trauma. They provide Billy a new perspective on life and death, and, more importantly, their idea of time. For the Tralfamadorians time is not linear. It is a jumbled mass of all the moments and at the same time. Thus while one is grief stricken in moment, he can also be happy in the same moment when seen through the perspective of the Tralfamadorians. Thus the introduction of aliens, and alternative ideas of time and space is not restricted to their use of science fiction tropes, but adds a new dimension to the narrative. Gwyneth Jones remarks that science fiction diverts from the usual tactics of mainstream fiction and this does not and should not reflect on the lack of writing that adheres to works of high art or fiction. She observes:

A typical science fiction novel has little space for deep and studied characterization not because writers lack the skill (although they may) but because in the final analysis the characters are not people, they are pieces of equipment… the same reductive effect is at work on the plot, where naked, artless scenarios of quest, death and desire are openly displayed. (Jones 5)
This difference between high art and the pop culture status of science fiction led to further differences in the discussions regarding the application of the term science fiction to literary texts. As Broderick observes, the difference between the seriousness that seems to be lacking in science fiction and the real purpose for writing science fiction bifurcated and led to two different traditions of science fiction writing, where one is to cater to the pop culture market and would just mean science in fiction and the other looks into the other frontiers of writing and would reflect on a more speculative approach to write about science fiction.

In an interview for Paris Review, Ursula K. Le Guin talks about her writing, which has elements of science, but according to her should not be ‘pigeonholed’ into the category of science fiction. She distinguishes her works from the ‘hard’ science fiction writers. Her distinction derives from the observations that Roberts made earlier about science fiction. Le Guin’s writing is derived from various disciplines such as biology, sociology, anthropology, and others. These are not concrete scientific areas such as physics, chemistry, or astronomy but are more abstract. The worlds which she creates are more complex, and the societies therein have a profounder background in terms of story-telling. This distinction in writing is present in Vonnegut as well. His creations are based on his research in social sciences. He created Tralfamadorians as a race of aliens with advanced technology, with their own philosophy of time, and ideas of death and life. These aliens appear in several of his novels, and their story varies from one novel to another. As mentioned earlier, they are seen as a race of aliens who exist in all of time and space in *Slaughterhouse Five*, and thus have knowledge of all future, past, and present events. In *The Sirens of Titan*, they belong to a planet in the Small Magellanic Cloud, and as explained by Salo, a person from their race, Tralfamadore means both “all of us and the number 541” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 273). There is no cohesion in their representation in
these two novels and the primary difference in which they perceive time in these two novels. In *The Sirens of Titan*, the Tralfamadorians move in a linear pattern unlike those described in *Slaughterhouse Five*, where they exist in all time and space. Their inclusion in this narrative not only adheres to the different indicators as described in science fiction writing, like the travel to different unknown planets as well as the interactions with a different race of aliens.

The 1960s witnessed a series of revolutions in the field of arts, fashion, and music. The decade witnessed defining moments in history as it invoked a generational dissent against the establishment. In science fiction, this decade brought a lot of changes as people participated in this dissent that led to crisis and rebellion. This crisis and rebellion were captured through the medium of science fiction as well. This was also the time when people sought out a more specific term for science fiction and would not want to confine it to something as basic as science fiction but rather as speculative fiction. This new wave started from England, where the magazine *New Worlds* heralded a new phase of science fiction writing. Though this phase witnessed the Apollo moonwalk and the American Rocket State, new wave science fiction dismissed the enchantment of the space race. This phase saw writers such as J. G. Ballard, Jerry Cornelius, and Pamela Zoline, among others and also their Americans counterparts such as Frank Herbert and Robert Heinlein. The new wave of science fiction also led to mixing of genres. The 1970s saw experimentations in writing by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Doris Lessing, Angela Carter among others. These writers used the concept of utopia and dystopia by these writers. The period also saw the emergence of women writers into this genre of fiction. The questions of sex and gender were not new to the field of science fiction, but because of the feminist intervention of the 1970s the realisation dawned that science fiction was enmeshed in patriarchal attitudes as well. Ursula Le Guin was one of the champions of this new wave, and in
her writings we find explorations into the realm of technology and science along with inclusion of various cultural aspects of society. These pluro-genric mutations of the category science fiction led many scholars to rethink their idea of science fiction concerning the genre and answer the question of the disappearance of the genre as a whole. Robert Scholes and Erik Rabkin, in their book *Science Fiction: History Science Vision*, discuss the role of Vonnegut’s writing as well. Vonnegut’s works tread with certain apprehension, and Rabkin and Scholes believed that it might moves towards “the impending disappearance of the category upon which a book like this depends” (Scholes and Rabkin 98). The British counterparts of the American science fiction writers, reflected on the idea of melancholia and dissociation from reality through their works. This is also identified by the new wave British science fiction writers as well.

The 80s were associated with the culture of postmodernism, and it is fascinating to examine how science fiction played its part in the larger scope of literature from within. Frederic Jameson wrote the ground-breaking text *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson used the term ‘postmodernism’ as the ‘cultural dominant,’ which was the product of the capitalist state as mentioned by Ernest Mandel in *Late Capitalism*. The 1980s also introduced subgenres such as the cyberpunk into the mainstream science fiction genre. According to Fredric Jameson, postmodernism is enchanted with the ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch. This was also the time when science fiction and the right wing converged on producing literature of the 1980s. The web journal *Science Fiction Eye* inaugurated their first issue with an article mourning the original intent and vision of science fiction. The journal sought to herald a new trajectory for a modified version of science fiction writing. Inclusion of techniques like stream of consciousness, fragmented narrative, psychological realism, among others, broadened the sphere of science fiction writing. This new wave of science fiction writers
widened the scope of science fiction. During the 1950s, America saw a boom in the readership for science fiction as the publishing shifted from magazines to paperbacks. Writers began fleshing out bigger works of fiction and the publication of novels experienced a boom. Another reason behind this rise in science fiction can be attributed to the sudden fascination for experimentation in literature. This decade also witnessed a lot in terms of political activism, which coincided with the scepticism about the technological solutions to issues related to environment. Writers from science fiction as well as mainstream fiction jumped into it and produced literature which was caught between the matrices of different genres. The fusion of these endeavours added richness to the texts and depth to the narrative. Vonnegut believes that science is important to understand this new reality. He aptly observes that writers have a big role in this inclusion. He writes: “All writers are going to have to learn more about science, simply because the scientific method is such an important part of their environment. To reflect their times accurately, to respond to their times reasonably, writers will have to understand that part of their environment” (Allen, Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut 5).

2.2 Science Fiction and the Pluro-Genric Trajectory

The fusion of different genres led to the creation of a new style of writing. The term pluro-genric signifies a state where the different genres fuse to create a matrix that is interdisciplinary and these numerous genres create hybrids which may or may not be recognised as separate genres. Science fiction writing post the 1980s saw this new blend into science fiction where the guidelines introduced newer genres merged with the traditional tropes of science fiction. In a column for a fanzine called Science Fiction Eye, columnist Bruce Sterling coined the term ‘slipstream’. Sterling coined the term parodying the more stereotypical term “mainstream” writing. He observed that there was a certain difference in writing that did not fall in the category
of science fiction and yet it did not fall under the guidelines of realist fiction. The writing focused on a splendid mix of fantastic meting surrealism, and expanded avenues in speculative writing but not so rigorously. The fluidity that slipstream provides is one of the high points of this new type of writing. It is a contemporary kind of writing that does not produce a state of wonder but one that makes you feel very strange. Sterling equates it with the way one feels in the late twentieth century. He writes, “We could call this kind of fiction Novels of a Postmodern Sensibility. . . for the sake of convenience and argument, we will call these books ‘slipstream’” (Sterling). An interesting observation about science fiction as a genre is the that the growth of writing was limited as it was associated more with pop culture, and this narrowed down scope for any modification to the genre. Bruce Sterling was also associated with the 1980s cyberpunk movement. As mentioned earlier, Sterling found the new visionary, ambitious style of writing distinctive from the earlier writing which was associated with science fiction or cyberpunk. This new identity helps writers who don’t want to define their work in terms of science fiction or fantasy, and would move towards the literary end to decide on their means.

Sterling provides the slipstream writer with certain guidelines with which they can distinguish their writing from mainstream science fiction. One of the tenets, as it were, the need to write outside the box, outside any genre-defined outline and beyond genre-based criticism. The attitude should lead to an aggression against reality. These works should sarcastically tear the basic fabric of everyday life. The slipstream writer should defy the representational conventions of fiction and charge ahead heralding a new approach in writing. Experimenting through jarring viewpoints, violations of viewpoint limits, metalepsis, non-committed reactions to horrifyingly unnatural events, are some of the ways in which the difference is achieved. Slipstream tends not to ‘create’ new worlds, but to quote them, chop them out of context and turn
them against themselves. Sterling further developed this idea when he expanded the understanding of the same. He observed that there was still room for a new genre which is post ideological, polyvalent and de-centred. There was a subjective fragmentation and the only way for slipstream to thrive is to reflect the literary reflection of the new way of living. As mentioned earlier, slipstream writing is not interested in gizmos, or futuristic eras, it is not looking to produce a sense of wonderment or slack-jawed astonishment. Critics James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, in the introduction to their anthology on slipstream writing, *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology*, argue that cognitive dissonance\(^2\) is at the heart of slipstream. They further substantiate the role of strangeness that can be found in a text of slipstream. Kelly and Kessel write, “Where horror is the literature of fear, slipstream is the literature of cognitive dissonance and of strangeness triumphant” (Kelly and Kessel xi).

Kurt Vonnegut’s writing indulges in fusing different styles together to bring out the representation of time and space in his writing. He incorporates devices ranging from time travel, new technology, story within stories, author as the protagonist, or author directly interacting with the reader, to creating new planets and a race of aliens to blurring of characters and their shift from one work of fiction to another. There is no jarring sense of wonder or astonishment in his works. These characters are just limited to their storylines, and do not bring any sense of wonder or differentiation from us, the readers. They are all pieces of the puzzle that reflects Vonnegut’s expression of war experience. Early in his career Vonnegut was labelled as a science fiction writer. There is a strong discord about the same. He did not like to be pigeonholed into a rack space territory, one which does not necessarily give scope for experimentation. As discussed in

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\(^2\) In psychology ‘cognitive dissonance’ is associated with a state of mental disorder when a person holds two or more contradictory beliefs or values at the same time. Humans strive for internal consistency. Slipstream writing as such focuses on bringing this disparity on paper and give new dimension to it. Slipstream writing does not strive for any resolution.
the earlier chapter, the experience of war brought about a great change in the way he perceived the world. Nothing was the same ever again, and one had to adjust to the new realities. There was a looming sense of fragmentation. Words, their meaning or the lack thereof, led to a sense of derangement as the characters in his novels could not figure out the reality. Paul Proteus, Malachi Constant, and John or Jonah as he is known as, are all figures who feature in Vonnegut’s novels, who tread their worlds with a sense of detachment or wondering about their reality with a fragmented sense of feeling. In *Player Piano*, a dystopia, the characters are set in a futuristic world where the machines have taken over the jobs of people. While the protagonist combats the moral moorings of a corporate world which has led to a dehumanised system, Vonnegut is also experimenting with the techniques of science fiction by presenting a world from the future which is realistically plausible. In *The Sirens of Titan*, we have a set of characters who follow a series of instructions from a man who is stuck in a scientific phenomenon of time and space. The journey taken by the characters reflect the meaninglessness of human existence. *Cat’s Cradle* is the story of the Hoenikker family, whose head had formerly invented the Atom bomb and has since then created another element known as Ice-nine, which has the capacity of creating mass destruction. All these novels deal with elements and techniques or novas, as one might call it from science fiction. They deftly fuse these elements and develop narratives which serve as a commentary on the society. These texts express a sense of alienation that comes with the postmodern sensibility in a fragmented world, and thus fall under the shadow of the term ‘slipstream’. Time and space, with their plasticity and bendiness, provides Vonnegut ways of experimenting with them. The aforementioned novels present a mix of irony, satire, and black humour to comment on the way reality is structured after the wars. They also reveal how Vonnegut tried to cope with the trauma of war and expressed it through the cathartic process of
writing. It also reflects Vonnegut’s personal philosophy of kindness and humaneness in a world which is heading towards massive destruction and extinction.

One important aspect of science fiction also relies on the idea of possible worlds as one might create in fiction. Within the scope of philosophy these worlds can be described through diverse avenues. These possible worlds mirror a more metaphysical and metaphoric existence and are used as a way for describing their epistemic accessibility. Margaret Atwood, another prolific writer and critic who has created a niche for herself in the field of SF, wrote in an article in The Guardian about the coinage of the new term - ‘ustopia’. According to her, it is a combination of utopia and dystopia, where the imagined perfect society comes in contact with its diametric opposite. The two templates fuse at times and synthesise into a new state of ‘ustopia’. Utopia is most often a mapped location, but it is also a state of mind as is every other place in literature. Atwood writes, “In literature, every landscape is a state of mind, but every state of mind can also be portrayed by a landscape. And so it is with Utopia” (Atwood). Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985) is a novel about ustopia as well. There is a little utopia concealed in the dystopic world of The Handmaid’s Tale. One is set in the past, and the other is set in the future as an afterword in the story where the world of Gilead stops the tyrannical rule of their republic, and survives as subject for academic papers and conferences.

In Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, and Cat’s Cradle, Vonnegut attempts to create his own ‘ustopias’. These three novels explore the dichotomy of the idea of utopia inside a dystopia. We discern that ‘ustopia’ is not necessarily a cartographic entity. The characters in these novels try to come to terms with the dystopian world outside and the inner sense of utopia that propels them into action. Player Piano is set in a dystopic world and the deals with his sense of romanticism and nostalgia for the era gone by. In The Sirens of Titan, the characters pursue their
personal utopias, and through the journey come to terms with the idea of utopia rather than continue the search for the utopic. In *Cat’s Cradle*, the island of San Lorenzo represents utopia, a vision of the real and a world bordering on dystopic and the characters are still searching for the utopia. Kurt Vonnegut creates a matrix of these public and private struggles. These stories do not necessarily feature gizmos, or futuristic technology, or take us to the realm of wonder and enchantment. In an interview in 1971, Vonnegut discusses his early writing and says, “In the beginning I was writing about what concerned me, and what was all around me was machinery…. And I was classified as a science fiction writer” (Allen, *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* 51). He perceives a trend in science fiction where the writers are not considered to be a part of the arts. Vonnegut does not want to dwell in that category, and thus emphasises through his texts, an acceptance of the modules of this genre as well as challenges to modify the literary tropes of the science fiction genre.

Kurt Vonnegut’s writing reflects a niche for the world weary, for the person in the postmodern world who cannot come to terms with the fragmented reality of our times. Through his writings Vonnegut is also trying to come to terms with his feelings of a fragmented sense of reality. The three novels discussed in this chapter reflect the trajectory of Vonnegut’s career from the beginning, and artistically pave the way for the more resolute Vonnegut who could finally express his trauma and dissociation in *Slaughterhouse Five*. A further detailed discussion of these novels will lead to a better understanding of the ways in which Vonnegut uses science in fiction, the use of time and space as a technique that is used in science fiction, and create worlds which define a fusion of the utopic and the dystopic, and in the process create possible worlds with utopic visions. Science fiction, slipstream, utopia, all add new dimensions to the kind of
writing that Vonnegut presents in the early stages of his writing career, and through them he explores the aspects of time and space in his novels.

2.3 The Mechanized World of *Player Piano*

Paul Proteus, the protagonist from *Player Piano* dwells in a dystopian future where machines have taken over all the jobs, and people with high IQ and higher college degrees hold the jobs. This novel deals with the question of loneliness as created by man in his desire to produce a more scientifically and technically advanced society. This is a vision of utopia for mankind which is fascinated by the world of machines and the future which could possibly exist in such a state. It presents a scenario from the not-so-distant future where mechanization can lead to an advanced economy but which will also lead to unemployment. Written in 1952, this was Vonnegut’s first novel which blends satire with black humour to adjust to a future where the machines have taken over the jobs, leaving a substantial number of people unemployed in its wake. Through satire Vonnegut is trying to comment on the American loneliness as portrayed by the people of Ilium, New York. The fictional situations are tempered with a hint of irony and humour as Vonnegut presents us with the background of a social revolution albeit a failed one. In this society, only the most talented ones can find jobs as most jobs starting from manual labour to high end administrative duties are taken over by the machines and only the top echelons of creative, imaginative, and scientific ends need to be met by people.

Paul Krugman, in an article “Technology’s Revenge,” on modern technology and their advancement, spoke about the issue of unemployment as a result of advanced technology. Vonnegut describes a similar situation in the novel *Player Piano*. The successful economies of the world created the kind of employment situation that Vonnegut introduced in *Player Piano*. 
According to Krugman, the period between World War II and the early phase of 1970s was supposed to herald the era of new job opportunities for the working class. Social critics, writers, and observers dismissed any thought of rejecting such an idea, and focused on the foretold boom in the employment sector. The result of the development in science and technology produced a system where machines displaced manual labour from the equation. This led to unemployment, meagre wages or reduction of wages. The college graduate was not exempt from such a situation as they faced the same issues with wages despite having their college degrees. Vonnegut sets his narrative in a dystopia. He introduces new age technology and by situating the story at a point in time and space different from the reality, Vonnegut has tried to comment on the fractured sense of reality that people dealt with post war. Vonnegut himself had just returned from war and was working at General Electric. His own experience of working with the company, the economy that he found himself in after the war, and the sense of fragmentation and loneliness that he saw in his co-workers have influenced his writing, specifically in this particular novel.

The story of *Player Piano* begins ten years after the end of a war during which period scientists and engineers had built more machines to compensate the absence of men and women who had gone to participate in the war. This led to a point where the engineers and scientists developed machines as replacements for the jobs that were created by those men and women who went to war in all the ‘Iliums’ of America. The machination results in saving democracy and creating a world of standardised progress in domestic life as well. But in the process it took over the jobs of the manual labourers. This created a disparity between the classes, between haves and the have nots. In this society know-how is the currency through which one can pass on to the next class. Dr Paul Proteus, the protagonist of this novel is representative of the upper class, the ones with the know-how and who are the force behind the machines - the managers and
engineers. The other side of the spectrum comprises of anyone who is not a manager or an engineer, which basically in this story refers to the rest of the people. This difference of class is also portrayed in the way people are geographically located. The differences are apparent in job opportunities, wages, living standards, and the way they look at machines.

The fictional city of Ilium, the site for this novel, is a microcosm of the American society. The tripartite division of the city along the lines of labour also reflect upon the class system outside the story. The economy is one of boom with great development in the field of science and technology. One section is comprised of engineers, managers, and civil servants, and is situated in the northwest of the city. The second section is situated in the northeast and it belongs to the machines, and the third section is ‘The Homestead,’ where the rest of the people or live. They are separated from the elites and the machines by the Iroquois river. Pointing to the demographic separation, Vonnegut says: “If the bridge across the Iroquois were dynamited, few daily routines would be disturbed” (Vonnegut, Player Piano 1). This shows how inconsequential the rest of the people had become for the machines and the engineers and managers of the company which employed them.

The narrative follows two different plotlines which converge twice in the story. One follows the life of Paul Proteus, or Paul, as he is referred to in the story. He is the factory manager at Ilium Works and is the embodiment of the man within the system. Through him Vonnegut discusses the man-made loneliness set against the backdrop of a social revolution. The secondary plotline discusses the story of the travels of a spiritual guru known as the Shah of Bratpuhr, who belongs to an underdeveloped nation of six million residents. He tours around America in order to understand the customs and culture of America. His presence can be counted as that of an outsider, who is looking into this society in particular. These two plotlines converge
twice in the book. The first convergence is at the beginning of the book and the other at the very end. Through these two plotlines the reader is provided with twin perspectives regarding the workings of this machine-driven society and the culture as portrayed in the narrative. The Shah of Bratpuhr is used as a scale to gauge the differences and also as a spokesperson who comments on this society as an outsider.

The novel begins with Paul working at Ilium Works. He is but a cog in the larger machinery which supports industrialisation and mechanisation. He is the representative of the elite class of people whose knowledge led to America becoming the superpower after the wars. His father places a lot of importance on knowledge as the know-how provided America with intelligence to win the war. His father, who was an important part of this machinery, believed in keeping the elite of the population safe. Doctor George Proteus was the most influential person during his time. He “was at the time of his death the nation’s first National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director, a position approached in importance only by the presidency of the United States” (Vonnegut, Player Piano 2). When the war came, his father, Doctor George Proteus, along with a few others, wanted to keep the elite, by which he meant the engineers, managers, and the scientists, away from war. It was believed that American know-how was the only way which could help in winning the war. After the war the machines upgraded through three revolutionary stages of their own. Paul describes the various revolutions in a speech that he was preparing for an event which comprised of engineers and managers among the audiences. In an interview for Playboy, Vonnegut reflects on his decision to write Player Piano. He says, “Player Piano was my response to the implications of having everything run by little boxes” (Allen, Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut 93).
According to Paul, the first industrial revolution was inspired to liberate man from the drudgery of manual labour. This was followed by the second one which heralded the change from liberation from manual labour to removal of routine mental calculation. The narrative is situated between the second and the third phase. The aim of the third revolution was to liberate man from having to think at all. Paul belongs to the intermediary stage between the second and the third. The third is represented by a machine along the lines of a giant computer which knows everything and does not need anyone to operate the systems. This society to which Paul belongs to is run by two symbols of power and control throughout the novel. The National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs, and Resources Board, which is referred to as the “Company,” is a symbol of control over the people who work for the company - people like Paul and the others. They are responsible for employing elite managers and engineers to do the various works associated with the machine. Thus it enjoys the power of the state. As mentioned earlier, in this novel the president of this institution is at par with the President of the United States of America. The Company stands with the State in its unified reverence of all mechanical things, and believes in the sanctity of EPICAC XIV. EPICAC XIV is the second symbol of power and control. This machine alone heralds the third revolution in science and technology.

Vonnegut creates a futuristic world with the use of the techniques of SF. He gives the world of Player Piano a machine that can solve all riddles of the world and is fully automated. EPICAC represents that world of the future where machines can take over the thinking function of men. Man’s thinking capacity is redundant in this state and is seen as a secondary phenomenon. EPICAC XIV is a symbol of great power and control. In a speech given by the President of the United States, Jonathan Lynn, he explains that EPICAC XIV is “the greatest individual in history, that the wisest man that had ever lived was to EPICAC XIV as a worm was
to that wisest man” (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 120). EPICAC XIV stands as the biggest achievement of the machines; EPICAC systems herald the third generation that Paul spoke about in his speech. They could “consider simultaneously hundreds or even thousands of sides of a question utterly fairly, that EPICAC XIV was wholly free of reason-muddying emotions, that EPICAC XIV never forgot anything—that, in short, EPICAC XIV was dead right about everything” (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 117). The war EPICAC series was of immense help to the American civilization and in their supremacy over the other nations. EPICAC XIV could also decide and create enough machines to remove the manual labour to a basic minimum and only keep a select number of high IQ- and aptitude-level managers and engineers.

The protagonist, Paul, struggles with this sense of detachment. Machine-made perfection comes to loggerheads with the imperfection of humanity. The protagonist stands at the crux of this duality. The sense of loneliness permeating this situation is seen not only in Paul but also in the ‘player piano’ which was kept in a bar in the Homestead. It represents the first of the many changes that was brought by the machines. It also portrays the age gone by. Vonnegut has left such trappings or time portals throughout Paul’s vicinity as a reminder of the past era. Vonnegut uses futuristic time not only as a vehicle to present a world where the scope of science and technology has taken over our living and thinking but also as time that works as nostalgia. Time is embedded as memories in these portals. The player piano, which stands in the bar at the Homestead, is a reminiscent piece of the time gone by. The grungy old neighbourhood bar is representative of the laid back lifestyle of the earlier eras. The presence of the rusty old gun, or the talk about a craftsman’s large and once-powerful old hands, or of building 58, which was Edison’s old machine shop, all of them represent a sense of nostalgia. Paul is the eye of this nostalgic moment.
Contemplating the image of farms around building 58 is a favourite pastime of Paul as he keeps romanticising the era that is gone by. He recounts how, “all of the employees, most of them recruited from surrounding farms, had stood shoulder to shoulder amid the crude apparatus for the photograph, almost fierce with dignity and pride, ridiculous in stiff collars and derbies” (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 7-8). Paul vies for the identity, dignity, and valour that one attains with war, and at one point wishes that he had taken part in the war. He also romanticises the idea of farming which does not hold any meaning in the present scenario. It works as a reminder of the generation which showed its strength and tenacity with farming. Paul daydreams about farming and eventually manages to get a farm which is not connected with the farming system. The last owner of the farm wrote in his will that it should be kept intact and just like the old days. The farm works as a time and space portal for Paul as he submerges himself into the world gone by. The farm house and the lack of technology give it a feel of the old world charm. As mentioned earlier, the bar provides him with the same sense. The bar is a portal to travel back in time and space. There is a sense of ‘utopia’ in this mix as both the outside world of a potential dystopia is at work with the inner desire to find utopia. More than anyone else, Paul is drawn to this dichotomy, and in his search for an explanation ends up being the part of the Ghost Shirt Society revolution.

The Ghost Shirt Society comprises of the labourers who stay in Homestead. The leader of this group is Lasher, who named it after the Indian martyrs. Robert T. Tally, in his book *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel*, observes that throughout *Player Piano* Vonnegut uses the ‘ghost in the machine’ trope and thus ends up creating this plot for the Ghost Shirt Society. The labourers have become ghosts, “spectral players of the pianos whose tunes are prerecorded” (Tally Jr. 27). The irony of the situation lies in the fact that both the leaders of Ghost Dance
Indians and Ghost Shirt Society knew about their predestined defeat. In the present scenario the Ghost Shirt Society and its members are detached from reality. They are in their own realms of utopia, and no one more so than Paul Proteus. He is one of the four main parts of the group, the others being Ed Finnerty, Professor von Neumann, and Lasher. Ed Finnerty wanted to strike at the system and through the society he got to do exactly that. Professor von Neumann thought of this whole exercise as an experiment. He too was satisfied with the result of this revolution. Lasher was the most realistic of this group, and knew about the predestined defeat. He wanted the revolution to be a symbol for the future. Paul is the only one who is disillusioned by the revolution and its eventual defeat. It is only at the end of the novel that he gets to know about the horrible end of the original Ghost Dance Indians and how they were massacred by the U.S. cavalry. This ironic twist subverts whatever ideas that Paul had about the end of the revolution and instead of toasting to a better world he goes on to smash the bottle against a rock at the end of the novel.

Kurt Vonnegut created the spiritual guru from Bratpuhr as a contrast to the world sustained by EPICAC XIV. He belongs to a third world country and is on a tour of America. He is not taken by the concept of mechanization and presents the outsider’s view of the world. He finally gets to interact with the EPICAC because he thinks that if EPICAC is the greatest wise master in the whole world then it would be able to give an answer for the age old riddle. To Shah’s disappointment the meeting does not go as he wishes it to be. The EPICAC is unable to answer Shah’s riddle, and the guru claims that EPICAC is nothing but a false god. This interaction presents a very important aspect in understanding a society comprising of people who worship technology - they are in reality deifying a false god. Technology is seen as an empowering entity which helps in creating a more stable system, and yet it cannot give answers
to the more human, spiritual kinds and thus fails as a result to be nothing more than a ‘baku,’ a false god.

Vonnegut presents the conflict between man versus machine and the dichotomy of machine-made perfection against the imperfection of humanity. Paul’s wife, Anita, is a product of the mechanised world. She believes in the utopia that is created by the machines. She abhors the idea of living without technology, and shuns the idea of Paul buying the farm. She wants Paul to succeed in his career and she does not care about the breakdown that Paul is going through. Anita’s hatred for all things old is apparent in which she hates Homestead. Ironically, if Paul had not married her after she claimed to be pregnant, Anita would have wound up in Homestead. Anita is portrayed as an expert in the machinery of human interactions. She is adept at making all the right moves and tries to get Paul promoted to a higher position. She tries her best to hide rumours about Paul and eventually leaves him. Paul is left to his own devices and he finally realises that he should join Finnerty and his group to stop the socio-economic system of machines taking over the humans and their jobs. One important question would be how even Paul is trying to create his vision of utopia which he wishes to manufacture and thus mechanise the world again. The idea of Paul’s personal utopia and the one that Ghost Shirt Society wants to achieve are predestined to be a failure. Vonnegut creates this dystopian world, which comes to loggerheads with Paul’s vision of personal utopia. The journey through this utopia is full of irony and reflects the romanticism one associates with nostalgia. The object ‘player piano’ is also symbolic of the irony and romanticism of nostalgia. Vonnegut presents to us a world which is built on technologies borrowed from science and yet are not far from truth as we are gradually moving to a state where machines and computers think on behalf of us. Kurt Vonnegut uses futuristic technologies and uses them to present a time and space portal for his characters.
Through the use of devices and techniques from SF writing, Vonnegut has given us a story which deals with the question of man versus machine and how the sense of lucidity is thwarted by the mechanisation of our lives. The next section deals with another novel which is set in the distant future, and moves forward to this state of meaninglessness of man’s existence that one attains in the future. It also reflects a distant future where travels of time and space travel are used beyond the capacity of tropes of science fiction.

2.4 Slipstream and *The Sirens of Titan*

*The Sirens of Titan* is one of those novels which present time travel, futuristic technology which can accomplish time and space travel, an alien race, and scientific phenomena running all through the novel. These are some of the prominent tropes for a science fiction novel, and yet through them Vonnegut attempts to create a cacophony of meaninglessness that drives the characters to seek out their personal utopias in a futuristic world. This is the quest of humans for that one last outward push to figure out the creator of this universe. If *Player Piano* focussed on man’s role in a mechanized world, then *The Sirens of Titan* focuses on the question of his existence and meaning in this world. This is probably Vonnegut’s most ‘scientific’ novel in terms of using the tropes from SF. Peter Reed observes that among Vonnegut’s novels, this one goes farthest into the future, and still there is absolutely no emphasis on prediction. He writes:

> The novel remains less concerned with social commentary be it in past, present or future, than with the timeless question of man’s relationship to his universe and to his own inner being. One of the strengths of this novel, which might well be considered Vonnegut’s best, is the success with which the science fiction technique is employed to those ends. (Reed 61)
*The Sirens of Titan* begins with a narrator from a future which man is yet to arrive at or to conceive. The narrator speaks about how man was not always able to understand the nature of beings and about his role in it: “They could not name even one of the fifty-three portals to the soul” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 1). The narrator describes it as the Nightmare Age, an era of utter meaninglessness, empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death.

The narrative begins somewhere between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression. It revolves around two characters, Winston Niles Rumfoord and Malachi Constant, both millionaires and both Americans. Their paths intersect when Wiles Rumfoord calls Malachi Constant to his earth mansion and tells him about their eventual fate. Before the novel commences we understand that a certain space exploration led to Rumfoord being stuck in “the heart of an uncharted chronosynclastic infundibulum two days out of Mars. Only his dog had been along” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 7). This incident led to the transformation of both Rumfoord and his dog, Kazak to become wave phenomenon. They are in a matrix of infinity and are scattered throughout time and space, materialising routinely everywhere or all at once. The narrator explains the definition through the fourteenth edition of A Child’s Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do written by Dr Cyril Hall. The entry explains that there are numerous chronosynclastic infundibula strewn across the universe and there is room enough for all the universes to exist within those chronosynclastic infundibula. Dr Hall writes:

> The Solar System seems to be full of chrono-synclastic infundibula. There is one great big one we are sure of that likes to stay between Earth and Mars. We know about that one because an Earth man and his Earth dog ran right into it.
You might think it would be nice to go to a chrono-synclastic infundibulum and see all the different ways to be absolutely right, but it is a very dangerous thing to do. (Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan 9)

Rumfoord and Kazak are part of this collision on their own volition. It was Rumfoord himself who went ahead into the chronosynclastic infundibulum to find out the unknown, the origin of the universe, and the creator behind it. It is also because of this infundibulum that Kazak and Rumfoord have the liberty to materialise all over time and space, and because of this Rumfoord also can predict the future as he has already seen it. Rumfoord is thus parodied as the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent God. Vonnegut parodies this God-image, and creates in Rumfoord an imprint of the divine by giving him the sight of future as he coexists throughout time and space. Rumfoord even creates a new religion and formulates his own Bible.

Rumfoord, on the contrary, does not show any inclinations of being God: “He never gave in to the temptation to declare himself God or something a whole lot like God” (Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan 243-244). Yet his travels to future and past reveal a more soothsayer sensibility, one through which he tries to propel people to do his sayings. Vonnegut parodies this power by restricting his actions. Though Rumfoord can see all of time and space, he cannot see it all as he later confesses to Beatrice, his wife. When asked about the eventual extinction of the human race, Rumfoord responds in this manner: "I thought you knew everything," said Beatrice. "Just take a look at the future." "I look at the future," said Rumfoord, "and I find that I shall not be in the Solar System when the human race dies out. So the end is as much a mystery to me as to you" (Vonnegut, The Sirens of Titan 48-49). The character of Rumfoord also signifies the paltry ends to which he is used by the aliens. When Beatrice rebukes him saying that he is neither omniscient or omnipotent, we face the fact that Rumfoord’s travels are limited by the
infundibulum and that it occurs within the spatial limits of his spiral. Interestingly, it is only on Titan, the moon of Saturn that Rumfoord and Kazak truly stay at all times: “For reasons as yet mysterious, the spirals of Rumfoord, Kazak, and Titan coincided exactly. So Rumfoord and his dog were permanently materialized on Titan” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 271). Rumfoord is not in control of things, and he tells Beatrice, “Some day on Titan, it will be revealed to you just how ruthlessly I’ve been used and by whom, and to what disgustingly paltry ends” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 60-61).

Kurt Vonnegut deals with this novel differently from *Player Piano*. *Player Piano* has all the elements of a science fiction novel, and yet he is criticised that he is not serious about these. This is the kind of writing that does not leave the reader wonderstruck; rather this is the novel that leaves you feeling strange, as Sterling described it in his articles on Slipstream. Vonnegut is dabbling into Slipstream writing. The scenarios are wildly improbable, and Vonnegut does not go into extrapolating the future of present institutions and organisations. Ellen Cronan Rose writes: “Vonnegut is not apparently using alien life-forms to throw into relief peculiarities or inadequacies of humans, nor does he seem to be using Tralfamadorian technology to say something about ours. While Sirens abounds in science fictional ingredient, they are not combined to produce the effect readers have come to expect of science fiction” (Rose 16). The use of forms and techniques from SF are used differently here. The tropes of time and space are used not only as techniques of SF but also to comment in a more metaphysical and ethical manner on the state of human beings in this futuristic state.

The story begins during one such materialisation of Rumfoord and Kazak and their eventual first meeting with Malachi Constant. Malachi was summoned by Rumfoord through his wife to visit him during this particular materialisation. Rumfoord and Malachi stand on two
different ends, and are brought together here by the workings of Rumfoord. He wants to bring a change in the society and make it better. He chooses Malachi as his vehicle for doing that. Incidentally, Malachi’s name meant faithful messenger. Malachi, on the other hand, has lived quite a successful and lucky life till now after inheriting billions from his father’s business ventures. At this juncture of the novel he pined for just one thing, “A single message that was sufficiently dignified and important to merit his carrying it humbly between two points. The motto under the coat of arms that Constant had designed for himself said simply, The Messenger Awaits. What Constant had in mind, presumably, was a first-class message from God to someone equally distinguished” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 12). Rumfoord does deliver a message, or rather a prediction, for Malachi but it was not the one he was looking for. According to Rumfoord’s prediction, Malachi and Beatrice were to go to Titan, the moon of Saturn, and have a baby named Chrono. Both Malachi and Beatrice are averse to this idea and try different methods to get away from it. Beatrice even tries to dissuade her husband and try to figure out a way to get out of this predilection. Their ways are not successful and they eventually find themselves on Mars, where Malachi forgets his identity and becomes part of an army who is set to attack Earth. This turns out to be a plan of Rumfoord’s as in this futile attempt he tries to thwart that attack so that people of the Earth can again be united. After this he starts a new religion on Earth which goes by the name of ‘the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent.’ There are two main teachings of this religion. Rumfoord explains them as the following: "Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 183).

One of the features of *The Sirens of Titan* is its arbitrary, random, and unpredictable cosmos. Vonnegut creates this universe reflecting how reality works in the same manner. There
is no cause and effect, and every action sends a meaningless wave to no one in particular. In an article on *The Sirens of Titan*, Joseph Sigman observes that Vonnegut is trying his systematic use of uncertainty.³ Rumfoord directs the army on the Mars to attack the Earth just so he could create a new religion on the Earth. But in reality he is getting used by an alien from Tralfamadore, Salo. According to Salo, Tralfamadore is a planet from the Small Magellanic Cloud. In another conversation Salo tells Rumfoord that the name ‘Tralfamadore’ actually means both ‘all of us’ and the number ‘541.’ The pattern of uncertainty and accidental setting is rampant throughout the novel. Salo is another person who is stuck with Rumfoord on Saturn. This race of Tralfamadorians are a bit different from the ones Billy Pilgrim encounters in *Slaughterhouse Five*. But just like the Tralfamadorians from *Slaughterhouse Five*, Rumfoord can see all of time and space, and exist in that temporal and spatial matrix throughout his life. Only later that we understand that the whole of human history has been driven by the Tralfamadorians in the attempt to deliver a message from their end of the universe to the farthest end of the universe, from “One Rim of the Universe to the Other” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 274).

Salo’s spaceship broke down some 200,000 earth years ago and since then the whole history of mankind has been one manipulation at the hands of Tralfamadorians. Salo’s ship is technologically advanced: “His ship was powered, and the Martian war effort was powered, by a phenomenon known as UWTB, or the Universal Will to Become. UWTB is what makes universes out of nothingness—that makes nothingness insist on becoming somethingness” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 138). It is believed that the Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, and few other monuments were also part of Tralfamadorian messages sent to Salo. The runes of

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³ The article mentioned above is written by Joseph Sigman, titled “Science and Parody in Kurt Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*” (p 25-41), and is part of a book edited by Leonard Mustazza, *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut*. 
Stonehenge are a message which when viewed form above reads as: "Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed" (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 276). It is discovered that:

The Great Wall of China means in Tralfamadorian, when viewed from above: "Be patient. We haven’t forgotten about you." The Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero meant: "We are doing the best we can." The meaning of the Moscow Kremlin when it was first walled was: "You will be on your way before you know it." The meaning of the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, is: "Pack up your things and be ready to leave on short notice.” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 276-277)

Within the larger scope of the story one realizes the meaningless of human existence and their fascination over wars and religion. The war between the army of Mars and the Earthlings is one such instance. The religion of Rumfoord is no more than a mockery of the religions found on earth and this is also the reason behind the meaningless of life and of this story itself.

Vonnegut’s narrative is fraught with bizarre discontinuities and startling occurrences. It is in parts comical, satiric, surreal, and ridiculous to the point of being absurd. Certain instances from the narrative signify the absurdity of the situation created by Vonnegut – Tralfamadorian Salo becomes Rumfoord’s friend, Rumfoord gets stuck in a chronosynclastic infundibulum, Malachi forgets his name and identity and becomes Unk on Mars, or Beatrice being a pawn throughout the narrative- there are all instances of patent absurdity. The absurdness abounds and so does the point that Vonnegut wants to get across to people. The meaninglessness of Rumfoord’s existence and his journey flashes in front of him, and he accepts that he was used by the Tralfamadorians. As Cronan Rose observes, “That the universe is not schemed in mercy.
That as flies to wanton boys, so are we to the gods - who are utterly indifferent” (Mustazza 21).

In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut tries to question man’s existence and purpose in this universe. Through use of time and space travel, inclusion of alien race, a futuristic religion, and a magical thing such as the Universal Will to Become (UWTB), Vonnegut creates this future world. His characters are in search of their personal utopias but it is denied to them. The next section will deal with another novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, and through which Vonnegut explores the idea of apocalypse as a manmade disaster.

### 2.5 Cat’s Cradle and the End of the World

Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* begins where his other two novels, as discussed above, end. If *Player Piano* contributed to the discussion of mechanization of society and people, and *The Sirens on Titan* commented on the meaninglessness and purposelessness of man’s state in a future where time and space travel is possible, then *Cat’s Cradle* falls in the category where Vonnegut discusses the possibility of the end of the world because of man’s deification of science and technology and his engagement in numerous religions. The story of *Cat’s Cradle* revolves around the element known as Ice-nine and shows how that leads to the eventual end of the world. Vonnegut satirises the structures that construct our society. Politics, science, and religion are some of the structures that he eyes suspiciously and satirically in this novel. He deconstructs these institutions and presents us with the truth of these lies. It features the opposing teams of Hoenikker and Bokonon and the ideas that they represent. Felix Hoenikker is the creator of the world-destroying Ice-nine whereas Bokonon is the rebel Rasta-like inventor to a fake religion which under the guise of harmless lies tries to tell its follower the harshness of reality.
The story of *Cat’s Cradle* begins with the Jonah figure. The reference is to the Biblical Jonah figure who was swallowed by a whale as a form of punishment from God. He is eventually saved, and learns his lesson and henceforth he does God’s work. The narrator begins the story with, “Call me Jonah” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle* 11) which refers to the famous opening line from Melville’s *Moby Dick* with, “Call me Ishmael”. The narrator begins:

CALL ME JONAH. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John. Jonah—or if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still—not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there. (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 11)

Ishmael bears witness to Captain Ahab’s pursuit of Moby Dick. It is metaphorical for man’s futile quest for truth. In *Cat’s Cradle*, John also embarks on a journey of his own. His quest leads him to the search of Felix Hoenikker from where it leads to his kin, and eventually, like any other quest-narrative, becomes a quest for truth and meaning. This quest develops as he gets to know the particular details about the new element Ice-nine. Ice-nine is an isotope of water that is solid at room temperature but contaminates any other water when it touches it. All the Hoenikker children had a part of it. This leads John on this journey. It is never mentioned as to what he is going to do with his research when his search ends. The story ends with the eventual destruction of the world, the event signifies that the end of the world is going to be because of man’s foolishness and revered deification of science and technology. The quest for truth finally comes to an end with the end of mankind as a species and the destruction of the world.
John is on a quest to write a book that will document the day of important Americans and what they did on the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Felix Hoenikker is the chief scientist behind the creation of the atomic bomb. In his pursuit to finish the book, he contacts the youngest Hoenikker, Newt Hoenikker, who tells him about the day on which the bomb was dropped, but can barely remember much except that his father was playing with a string of wire and would gleefully move around the house after making a cat’s cradle out of it. In his letter to John he describes his father as a perfectly innocent man and one who does not know or understand the repercussions of the scientific advancements or destruction that takes place as a result of his scientific inventions and discoveries. The speech that Felix Hoenikker delivered when given the Noble Prize affirmed his childlike wonder that is associated with him throughout the book. He was a happy man who would always look at everything with wonder. Newt writes to John regarding another incident right after the bomb was tested for the first time. He writes, “Do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, ‘Science has now known sin.’ And do you know what Father said? He said, ‘What is sin?’ (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 21). Through Newt’s revelations in the letters we understand that Felix was not a good parent, and as a result we see the repercussions in all his kids, who later all try to use Ice-nine in their quest to find love, and eventually are ready to buy it at such a great cost. Through the character of Felix Hoenikker, Vonnegut presents a man of science whose primary aim is in research, in the creation of something, and not in the responsibility for the repercussions of such a creation. When Felix was asked to make the atomic bomb, it was pure play on his part. It is equally interesting to see him play with a string of wire on the day the bomb was finally dropped. There is a perverted sense of
play that works with Hoenikker’s idea of research for weapons of mass destruction. The creation of Ice-nine was a result of such a playful endeavour.

In his endeavour to collect more details about the life of Felix Hoenikker, John decides to meet Felix’s old supervisor from his days at the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company, Dr Asa Breed. Dr Breed defines Felix as a man who was a force of nature. Through the characters of Asa Breed, Felix Hoenikker, and San Lorenzo’s dictator, Vonnegut presents men of science or those who deify science as pure knowledge, the supreme truth through which humanity can gain knowledge about the whole universe and beyond. Breed is angered by the general crowd response, and laments that he is sick of people who misunderstand science. According to Dr Breed, the real work that a scientist does in unearthing new knowledge as new knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth according to Doctor Breed. The reaction from some of the other characters in the novel regarding science also substantiates this point. H. Lowe Crosby and his wife, who had moved to San Lorenzo in the course of the story, also speak in high terms about science and technology. Vonnegut presents these characters not just as a warning. He argues that people should not obliterate reasoning and sense of moral responsibility in blind submission to the pedestal of science and technology.

As the narrative progresses we get to know about the third Hoenikker child, Frank. He has settled in the fictitious country on the Caribbean Islands known as San Lorenzo. The other Hoenikker children are invited to his wedding, and John joins in his quest to unearth their story. San Lorenzo is one of the poorest countries, and is under the dictatorship of “Papa” Monzano, who is a staunch ally of the United States. When he greets the Americans who came to attend Frank Hoenikker’s wedding, he profusely admires and appreciates the American government and the President of the United States of America. It is interesting to note that in their attempt to be
an ally of America, they have incorporated their currency, insignia and the flag from the United States. Both of them are named after U.S. Marine Corporal Earl McCabe. He ironically deserted his company while stationed here during the American occupation in 1922. Though they have been allies with the Americans, their country does not show any progress and is described as dilapidated with no infrastructure, making it the poorest country in the world. The language of San Lorenzo is a fictitious English-based creole language, which is referred to as “the San Lorenzan dialect”. The most important part of San Lorenzo is its indigenous religion known as Bokononism. Bokononism is a religion that is based on lies or untruths known as “foma” in San Lorenzan dialect. Bokononism was created from the sayings of Bokonon, who was actually an accomplice of McCabe. His real name was Lionel Boyd Johnson, which was pronounced as Bokonon in the San Lorenzon dialect. He was the originator of Bokononism.

Julian Castle, who wrote a book about the history of San Lorenzo, tells John about the creation of the religion called Bokononism. According to him, it was McCabe and Johnson, or Bokonon as he is known, who started the religion as a way to give hope to the people of this island. He says, “they threw out the priests. And then Bokonon, cynically and playfully, invented a new religion” (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 118). The religion was one true inspiring and hopeful thing for the people as no governmental or economic reform would help them in the long run. John further gets to know that it was Bokonon’s idea to outlaw himself and the religion so that the sham behind the religion goes on and so that it gives the religious life of the people more zest. Those who followed Bokononism would be sent to the hook. Initially it was just a hoax and there were no causalities, but later there would be some deaths every two years to keep the rumours alive. Castle explains, “At first it was all make-believe. Rumors were cunningly

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4 This is an allusion to Mikhail Bakunin and the Latin American States which adopted communism.
circulated about executions, but no one really knew anyone who had died that way. McCabe had a good old time making bloodthirsty threats against the Bokononists—which was everybody” (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 118). This situation also led to a lot of jobs for the unemployed who were asked to join the hunt for Bokonon. Every few months, news would reach about the capture of Bokonon but it would be another hoax as Bokonon would have done the impossible, by escaping and living to preach his tenets to whoever was ready for it.

Vonnegut created an interesting thread through the inclusion of the new religion of Bokononism. Though it is the dominant belief system of the San Lorenzons it is officially banned and anyone practicing it is to be punished by death penalty. Even Bokonon, who stays on the island has been punished with death penalty. The official religion of the island of San Lorenzo is Christianity. Vonnegut creates new terms for this religion and a lexicon consisting on words such as granfalloons, foma, wampeters, karass, and kan-kan, among others. Though these may sound funny, they provide the narrative with a comic sense which is otherwise mingled with stories of destruction of the world, use of weapons, and an impending ecological apocalypse. As the narrative progresses we get to know that everyone practices Bokononism on this island, even the dictator himself. John converts from Christianity to Bokononism as he realizes that nothing can provide him with any meaning.

This is a world where humanity is divided into “karasses” (teams). According to Bokonon, they are performing the work of God without knowing what that work is. Robert T. Tally observes that “Bokononism is really a kind of re-enchantment of a post-Enlightenment world, a world ‘abandoned by God’ but one in which we must soldier on, hoping against hope that there is some transcendent meaning” (Tally Jr. 55). Religion has become a valid pretence and Vonnegut endeavours to bring that aspect out: “Busy, busy, busy, is what we Bokononists
whisper whenever we think of how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is” (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 51). The tragic and the comic blend in the way religion is perceived by the dictator and the people of San Lorenzo. It also adds background to the apocalypse that is going to follow.

In *Cat's Cradle*, personal utopias are created in a way so that the characters can come to terms with the reality of the world outside. As for Felix Hoenikker science is his utopia. It is a state he has created for himself, a place where he can ‘play’ with science. His vision is not dependent on anyone else, nor is his thirst for knowledge, for the truth he is on a quest for. The night he was about to die, he presents the riddle of Ice-nine and quizzes his kids about it. It is another play thing for him, just like the invention of the atom bomb. The narrator describes the scene where Felix in his euphoria teases his kids about Ice-nine: “Come on now, stretch your minds a little. I’ve told you that its melting point is a hundred fourteen-point-four degrees Fahrenheit, and I’ve told you that it’s composed of nothing but hydrogen and oxygen. What could the explanation be? Think a little! Don’t be afraid of straining your brains. They won’t break” (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 165). Oddly enough, it was during the process of making Ice-nine that Felix Hoenikker died. His last gift to humanity and his kids was Ice-nine, which they divided among themselves and used for different ends.

The Hoenikker siblings divide the Ice-nine and through its use try to create their own personal utopias. The youngest Hoenikker, Newt, gives it to the Ukrainian midget dancer for a night of passion and love. It is later revealed that the dance is a Ukrainian spy and hands over her Ice-nine to the government. It turns out to be more lethal than the atom bomb. The middle Hoenikker, Frank, is now part of San Lorenzo and was to be appointed the president, a position he bartered for Ice-nine. It is through his Ice-nine that the end of the world becomes a reality.
Felix Hoenikker leads from a situation of utopian dreams to a dystopia where the survival of any human form is unknown of. The eldest Hoenikker of the three, Angela, sells her Ice-nine for her dream of utopia in the form of love and marriage that she manages to find with another scientist who eventually gives it to the American government. These characters are on their own journeys to their utopias. Their utopias do not always consist in the physical but are metaphorical and mostly private. Vonnegut writes, “Americans are forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be. It must be something with the vanished frontier” (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 45). The Hoenniker kids testify to this statement, though on a more personal level. The love that their parents and especially their father could not give them was later on bought through their father’s work. In one of the last moments in the book, Newt observes that no wonder they are all crazy. He derives his conclusion from the age old game of *Cat’s Cradle*. He explains his thoughts to John in the conversation that follows. Newt Hoenikker says, “No wonder kids grow up crazy. A *Cat’s Cradle* is nothing but a bunch of X’s between somebody’s hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X’s” (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 114). The futility and meaninglessness of life in the fact that there is indeed no cat or any cradle. Just like the game, life seems a journey of meaningless points.

Kurt Vonnegut draws from his personal experiences to create this characters, and comments on how these characters have no means of escaping the meaninglessness that distinguishes our modern sensibilities about life, culture, society, and religion. In his 1973 review, Michael Wood (1973) concluded:

The novels themselves are not sticky nets of human futility but means of escaping from such nets. *Cat’s Cradle* is built around a jaunty, hip, fatalistic gospel delivered mainly in calypsos, and based on the principle that everything that
happens has to happen; that a conflict between good and evil, if properly,
skeptically staged, is a fine, constructive fiction. It keeps people busy, takes their
minds off their moral and economic misery. (Wood)

Kurt Vonnegut had supported his books with modern science and technology, societies
which are heralded to be utopias for some of his characters. There is a fine balance which is
created between the techniques of slipstream and of characters pursuing their personal utopias.
In *Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan*, and *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut has created a pattern for
utopias and dystopias to coincide along with the possible worlds which serve as metaphors for
the one we live in. This is not a possible world, but a real one. These possible worlds comment
on the way we look at man in a desensitized world which dwells on meaningless banter and a
cyclical and purposeless life. His real feelings for humanity are more optimistic though. In an
interview in 1980, he spoke about the humans being too good for life. They are put in the wrong
situation and at the wrong time. The novels which we discussed in this chapter focuses on
redefining reality, and creating portals through which Vonnegut’s characters have a scope to
redefine themselves. The characters redefine not only themselves but also the perceptions of time
and space. Vonnegut uses these transformed identities, and places them in a pluro-genric matrix
which supplements the sensibilities in a post-war, pluro-technical melting point. The next chapter
will focus on how Vonnegut redefines aspects of time and space in terms of mythology.