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Kurt Vonnegut's Early Novels: Searching for Meaning in a Meaningless World

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**Kurt Vonnegut's Early Novels:
Searching for Meaning in a Meaningless World**

By

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THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis investigates three novels by Kurt Vonnegut: *The Sirens of Titan*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and the philosophical stance which informs these works. *The Sirens of Titan* represents Vonnegut's cosmology as well as his first attempts to propose one purpose for human life not based on any absolute knowledge. *Cat's Cradle* proposes a provisional, ever-changing belief system in the religion of Bokonon, a religion which also speaks to Vonnegut's humanism. *God Bless, You Mr. Rosewater* satirizes the discourses of the free enterprise system through protagonist Eliot as he struggles to use his wealth in a utopian project. The novels all represent Vonnegut's early preoccupation with a potential meaning for life in what he sees as an essentially nihilistic universe. We can, Vonnegut argues, have no ultimate knowledge of God or any innate purpose, and we are left to create meaning for ourselves. For his insistence on the subjectivity of reality and his incredulity toward metanarratives, Vonnegut is placed as postmodern. Though his cosmology does suggest an absurd nihilism, Vonnegut nevertheless proposes a moral norm consisting of an ethic of love and a provisional belief in the sacredness of human life; such an outlook has led scholars like Todd Davis to place Vonnegut as postmodern humanist. The essay investigates this claim as it pertains to the early novels. Vonnegut's incredulity toward metanarratives and toward any characters which represent the pretense of having absolute knowledge are ridiculed through Vonnegut's humor and satire, thus, I place Vonnegut as postmodern satirist.

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I. Introduction: The Comforting Lie and Postmodern Satire

Asked in a *60 Minutes* interview from 1969 whether he offers readers a “philosophy that will be good for them” Kurt Vonnegut responds: “I’m giving them information that will make them kinder.” He remarks that writers “can give [readers] certain kinds of information that would make them extremely tough...about what God wants and all that,” instead Vonnegut insists that he “just makes up something that would tend to make people gentle. It’s all made up anyway, you know, we really don’t know anything about that stuff” (*Conversations* 19). This quote captures the subject of this essay, namely Vonnegut’s philosophic stance. In his novels, Vonnegut continuously wrestles with humanity’s search for meaning in an absurd universe. Any “truth” to be had is ultimately subjective, provisional, and, in the words of Bokonon, a “comforting lie.”

It’s “all made up anyway,” implies Vonnegut, so we had better create realities which will make us “brave and kind and healthy and happy” rather than realities which lead to harm, destruction, and alienation. Any knowledge of a purpose for life is ultimately subjective and often individualistic. Any pretense to objective or absolute truth which ignores the very real needs of humanity for love and community is ridiculed and satirized through Vonnegut’s scathing humor. His ethic is simple: love; but puzzling out the epistemological and cosmological basis for this ethic is problematic, for his epistemology brushes up against an absurd nihilism, an admonition that life is essentially meaningless and purposeless, and

yet he persistently insists that we create meaning and that the creation of meaning is ultimately in our control.

I will explore three early novels of Kurt Vonnegut which constitute a representative sample of his persistent puzzling out of humanity's place in the universe and our constant struggle to find meaning: *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965). All three of these novels were published before Vonnegut's most well known novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The lesson of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is arguably fatalistic as Billy Pilgrim's devastating experiences during World War II leads to a kind of passivity which may indeed lead one to conclude that Vonnegut's message is one of fatalistic resignation: war and cruelty will continue and we can do little to stop it. However, Tim Hildebrand argues that, "Vonnegut is essentially a preacher, a moralist, a man with a message" pushing us to take control of our destinies and imploring us to love, or at least be decent and less cruel (128). In order to express this message, Vonnegut creates flawed Messiah figures, who herald his message of love and kindness. In all three novels we have references to the Biblical Jonah, as Vonnegut's novels all serve in some respects to warn humankind of our folly before it is too late.

In *The Sirens of Titan*, the philosophic stance which is presented favors inner knowledge or enlightenment and suggests that the nature of our place in the universe is essentially unknowable, and hence our responsibility may indeed be simply to love whoever is around to be loved. The suggestion of a purposeless universe does not necessarily mean that grappling with futility is meaningless.

Rather, meaning is created by the individual; such an inward voyage would be the “beginning of goodness and wisdom” according to the narrator. Niles Rumfoord, for all his power and charisma, is himself ridiculed by novel’s end for presenting what he sees as an objective and totalizing world narrative based on God’s indifference. The indifference of God does indeed capture Vonnegut’s apparent philosophic stance regarding our absurd place in the universe, but Rumfoord’s philosophy does nothing to unite the world under Vonnegut’s proposed ethic in the novel (to love) and is thus rejected by protagonist Malachi Constant.

Cat’s Cradle, certainly among Vonnegut’s most pessimistic novels, nevertheless advocates for a provisional and ever-changing set of beliefs in the fictional religion Bokonism, a religion created by the holy man driven to insanity, who creates a workable religion, one which unites the tiny impoverished Island of San Lorenzo. Vonnegut suggests that we are all Bokonists of a kind, our lives were set in motion by some power of which we can have no ultimate knowledge, and we are left alone to create meaning in our lives. It is in *Cat’s Cradle* that Vonnegut offers readers his starkest warning that we are on a collision course with our own destruction, and we will see in some ways that Bokonism, though a parody of religion, nevertheless offers some prescriptive tenets which speak to Vonnegut’s humanism. Our protagonist John, who insists that we call him Jonah, is another Messiah, as he converts to Bokonism and teaches us its main tenets as he struggles to make sense of our use of nuclear weapons and his Christian heritage.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater represents Vonnegut's turn to realism, a style that he employs to great success in many of his later novels. Our third Messiah figure is the fabulously wealthy Eliot Rosewater, who takes Malachi Constant's insistence that we ought to love whoever is around to be loved to its logical, albeit somewhat absurd conclusion. The novel also presents readers with a hint as to Vonnegut's politics, as he fiercely satirizes the free enterprise system through Eliot. Though the novel represents a turn to realism, it is nevertheless consistent with Vonnegut's other works, as it insinuates a position of subjectivity, as we are privy to several opinions and outlooks of many characters as they question Eliot's sanity, while we may indeed be cued to question the sanity of the system in which we live.

In her *Love's Knowledge*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum investigates the ways in which literature might, by the nature of its form, be better at illuminating certain philosophic truths than the "pallid and scientific" language of Anglo-American philosophy (19). In literature, Nussbaum argues, "a view of life is told. The telling itself—the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life—all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what doesn't...of life's relations and connections" (5). She argues that the form of the novel will often work to support a particular reading of life. Of course the novel is not a clarifying or objective work, and she admits that "literary works...are not neutral instruments for the investigation of all conceptions. Built into the very structure of a novel is a certain conception of what matters" (26). Nussbaum

focuses on many classical works of literature from Charles Dickens to Henry James. But we can certainly extend her line of thinking to the works of Vonnegut, as certain formal choices he makes reflect his philosophical stance and his particular reading of life.

Vonnegut's philosophic stance, illuminated both in the style and content of his work, has led scholars to place Vonnegut as postmodern. His views on the subjectivity of reality and his insistence on individual truth reflect the postmodernist imperative:

Weary of all talk of grounding value or even meaning and knowledge in essential foundations, the postmodern attitude regards human meanings as too fragile and indeterminate to support any such inquiry. While the postmodern creative imperative is to illustrate these fragilities and ambivalences, indeed, to tease and play with them disruptively and even sometimes dangerously, the postmodern critical imperative is to challenge the very conceptual frameworks [with which we have made value for ourselves] (Schiralli 11).

In *Cat's Cradle* especially, though in virtually all his novels, page breaks and chapter separations often appear arbitrary and glaringly point out the constructedness of the novel and point to the illusion of objectivity while simultaneously showing "that people are most dangerous when they think they have discovered objective truth and try to make everyone else see the world the way they do" (Marvin 17). *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* is presented in a non-linear way, as we learn of protagonist Eliot through letters and we are given the reactions and subjective conclusions of so many as to the nature of Eliot's sanity, finally culminating in the appearance of Kilgore Trout (a recognized stand-in of

Vonnegut) who explains and rationalizes Eliot's apparently unhinged behavior in a way very different than Eliot's senator father or the money-hungry lawyer Norman Mushari. Thus, in certain interesting ways, Vonnegut's philosophic message corresponds with certain formal choices.

No scholar has influenced my views of Kurt Vonnegut's philosophic stance more than philosopher Todd Davis, who places Kurt Vonnegut as postmodern humanist. Drawing on the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Davis speaks of postmodernity's refusal of "the authority of modern metanarratives, attacking their discourse on the ground that they are logocentric, linear, and totalizing; such narratives claim to be scientific and objective while reaffirming modernity and its truth"; as this study of Vonnegut's early novels will suggest, "the exposure of modern metanarratives and the subsequent deconstruction of the illusory but controlling discourse that helps to propagate their myths of essential truth remain a consistent target for Vonnegut" (17). As postmodern humanist, Vonnegut challenges the narratives of religious dogmatism, nationalist fervor, scientific objectivity, and the moral superiority of America's institutions and beliefs. He challenges and ridicules the possibility of a totalizing narrative on which a world society might be based, instead favoring the proliferation of local and personal truths. By continuously insisting that even the strong ethic of love and an arguably liberal humanist stance is merely a "lie" like any other rather than an absolute ("one possible purpose," as Malachi puts it) his ethic and his postmodern stance are reconciled.

According to Davis, Vonnegut's humanism differs from modernist conceptions of humanism, as

Postmodern humanism openly acknowledges that, in the absence of a 'given' center of value, it creates a center of value, that it constructs a position that reveres all life...postmodernism feigns no assurance that 'truth' may be founded on the knowledge of providence or science or any other grand narrative that wishes to establish itself as the essence or center on which discourse may be grounded...in other words, postmodern humanism works with an awareness of its own constructedness toward a symbolic construction of a better 'reality' (32).

The religion Bokonism certainly speaks to this postmodern humanism, as the founder of the religion, Bokonon, insists that the belief that humanity is sacred is a lie like any other. Vonnegut said in a 1973 interview with *Playboy* that "everything is a lie, because our brains are two-bit computers, and we can't get very high-grade truths out of them. But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that...we do have the freedom to make up comforting lies" (*Conversations* 77).

Thomas Marvin also speaks of Vonnegut as an experimental or postmodern writer, as his writing

Involves a reaction against the belief that science can reveal the truth about the world, instead arguing that 'truth' is not 'objective,' meaning that it is not out there in the world waiting to be discovered. Instead, truth is 'subjective' because it depends on how different individuals look at the world and it varies from person to person (16).

The Sirens of Titan challenges humanity's search for purpose outside of the individual, while *Cat's Cradle* demonstrates the dangers of looking to science for truth, and, as is most clear in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut does not try "to create the illusion that readers are getting a glimpse of the world as it really is"; rather, he "reminds them that everything in the novel is based on his own limited, individual, subjective understanding" (17). Bill Gholson, in exploring Vonnegut's moral position, insists that Vonnegut

questions the possibility of developing discourses of morality and identity in the face of contingency: How is it possible to speak of morality or identity once one accepts that there is no Truth or metadiscourses to access outside of human-made language and contexts? What does a moral self, which finds its sources within the things people do as opposed to being the product of universal worth and intrinsic value, look like? Is the only recourse a slide into radical relativity? (136).

Kevin Brown, in his discussion of Vonnegut's postmodern humor, argues that "a postmodern belief in the lack of objective truth, especially in relation to morality" in combination with the horrors of the twentieth century, renders postmodern humor and satire impotent, as such a philosophic stance makes moralizing impossible (47). However, Vonnegut does create a moral norm that he works through in his novels. This moral norm, however, is based on an individual's subjective response to reality; any pretense that humanity has some intrinsic or essential value is persistently challenged. The notion that we ought to love one another and be kind is simply a provisional truth, one which Vonnegut hopes will inspire readers to create better realities for ourselves.

The characters which represent nationalism or our economic system draw readers' attention to the postmodern "cultural awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not reflect society so much as grant meaning and value within a particular society" (Hutcheon 8). Vonnegut exposes the absurdity and danger of placing our trust in power systems as he exposes them as alienating and dangerous, both for ourselves and our environment. These power systems ultimately place value outside of the individual, and as humanist, Vonnegut is wary of such systems.

Vonnegut is persistently concerned with the modern world and its problems. The conventions of science-fiction are used as a means of turning our attention to the world we have created and Vonnegut's relentless warning that we are on a collision course with our own destruction. Thus we may indeed be led to label Vonnegut as pessimistic. However, as moralizer, Vonnegut persistently insists that we have the ultimate say in whether our billion year space voyage is going to be heaven or hell. Vonnegut maintains that the institution and belief systems that we have created which may indeed lead to our ultimate destruction, from rampant nationalist fervor to the free enterprise system, are merely the subjective creations of our species, not immutable creations which spring organically from human nature or Divine Will.

Vonnegut may indeed be viewed as a Luddite of sorts, a position which runs counter to many science-fiction writers, for he constantly wrestles with automation and what it might do to the human spirit when we are living in a world which prizes work and productivity. Nowhere are these concerns more clearly

worked through than in his dystopian first novel, which will not be addressed in this thesis, *Player Piano*. However, the concern that we may be made useless by machines permeates virtually all of his early novels. From these fears come Vonnegut's critiques of our values: on what new value system might we place individuals if not in their ability to be productive members of a consumer based world? Vonnegut wrestles with these issues and is left pondering our capacity to love one another and create better realities for ourselves. Vonnegut is also concerned with science in general and its claims to objectivity. Vonnegut attacks this position most clearly in *Cat's Cradle*, as the substance Ice-nine is created by the amoral scientist Felix Hoenikker, who fails to take into consideration the destructive nature of his creation, and science's responsibility to improve life on earth.

Vonnegut's portrayals of certain characters are often exaggerated and archetypal and as such Vonnegut can be understood in terms of genre as a satirist, for he "pokes fun at human failings, makes readers laugh at the absurdities of their own societies, and turn that laughter into a weapon in the battle to improve the human condition...satirists believe that if people can be made to see, and laugh at, their own faults and the injustices of society, they will be inspired to work toward reform" (Marvin 14). By drawing our attention to the subjectivity of reality, as postmodern, Vonnegut achieves the philosophic stance that our world is indeed changeable, for better or worse. Through certain formal choices, Davis sees Vonnegut as "a paradigm of postmodernity that allows the author to struggle with philosophical ideas concerning our condition in a form that reflects this very

struggle” (6). Thus, his philosophic stance works in tandem with his particularly postmodern style and his scathing satiric voice, and as such I place Vonnegut as postmodern satirist. How he achieves his philosophic stance, and how certain formal choices make his message all the more effective will thus be explored in tandem with the content of the novels, and the unifying message apparent in them.

Vonnegut takes a critical position, a position which leads to some of his greatest satire and black humor, as he relentlessly points at human folly while simultaneously insisting that the world need not be quite so cruel. The beginning of goodness and wisdom occurs when humanity began to look inward for answers to life’s tough question rather than looking to God, country, or greedy self-interest. Though his insistence on the subjectivity of reality does suggest a kind of absurd nihilism, he nevertheless insists that man is sacred and implores us to love and be kind, even if love and kindness is simply another fantasy; he insists that human life is sacred and should be nurtured even if this insistence is merely another “comforting lie” in a long string of lies on which we have based our understanding of reality.

II. *The Sirens of Titan*: An Inward Journey through Outer Space

The Sirens of Titan follows two philosophic strands: first a pessimistic (and ultimately absurd) cosmology and second, a call for inward reflection in our search for meaning. The latter, a commentary of our search for meaning, is existential in scope and we will see that this interpretation will work well in an examination of Malachi Constant who goes from richest man in America to destitute Martian, to finally the sire of the sentimental ethic that the novel suggests: love. Kurt Vonnegut successfully uses conventions of science fiction in order to wrestle with profound and lasting concerns of humanity, namely, the purpose of human life. Vonnegut, through the adventures of his protagonist Malachi and the aristocrat Rumfoord, creates a clear distinction between looking within for answers to these questions and looking outward. He shows that looking outward, in a variety of ways, is one of the great follies of humanity and the modern world in particular, which speaks to Vonnegut's postmodern stance. The universe Vonnegut creates becomes the plaything of the proposition that looking outward is foolish and looking inward is noble.

The plot of *The Sirens of Titan* is, like much of Vonnegut's fiction, notoriously elaborate, so some summarization is in order. First, it should be noted that before the action of the novel begins, the aristocrat Nile Rumfoord flew a spaceship into a chrono-synclastic infundibula; a fictional cosmic phenomena. After flying his ship into it, Rumfoord is able to see into the past and future (and for kicks he can read minds). He exists as a "wave phenomena" materializing in

various parts of the galaxy at specific times and intervals. The novel begins with protagonist Malachi Constant entering the Rumfoord mansion, where he is to witness a materialization. Malachi learns that he will soon embark on a space adventure that will take him from Mars, to Mercury, then back to earth, and finally to Titan, a moon of Saturn. After losing his fortune, the plot line skips forward several years where we find Malachi (whose memory has been erased) on Mars where he befriends Boaz and learns that he has a wife, Bea, and son, Chrono. We learn that Rumfoord has organized an army of mind controlled earthlings to invade earth. Instead of being sent with the invasion fleet to earth, Malachi and Boaz are sent to the caves of Mercury where they are trapped for two years. After his escape Malachi returns to earth where he discovers a new religion has been founded there which has united the whole earth. The religion has been started by Rumfoord; Malachi's trip to Mercury was part of Rumfoord's plan, as Malachi's return was predicted by Rumfoord, and thus Rumfoord provides his followers with the miracle of Malachi's return to earth.

Malachi is reunited with his wife Bea and son Chrono and the three are then sent to Titan, where Rumfoord is permanently materialized. Malachi meets Salo, a machine from the planet Tralfamadore, who is stranded on Titan awaiting a replacement part for his space ship. Rumfoord, the novel's great manipulator, discovers that he has been manipulated by the Tralfamadorians in order to get a tiny piece of metal (the replacement part) that Chrono carries around as a good luck piece. Given merely these plot developments, one might be convinced that this novel is the crudest form of science fiction, full of coincidences and space

travel, but with this zany story Vonnegut proposes his cosmology and begins to establish an ethic which will carry through his early novels, as Malachi finally arrives at one possible purpose of human life. Malachi's trip through outer space thus serves as a satire for all the ways man looks outward for meaning instead of looking within.

The novel opens, "Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself, but mankind wasn't always so lucky...mankind, ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward...What mankind hoped to learn in its outward push was who was actually in charge of all creation, and what all creation was all about" (1). In Vonnegut's universe what we find looking outward is a vast and indifferent universe and finally an absurd punch-line that some of our greatest achievements, from Stonehenge to the pyramids were done at the behest of an alien power, which serves to underscore the absurd situation in which humanity finds itself. On the copyright page of the novel readers find a familiar disclaimer inverted, claiming "All person, places, and event in this book are real." Thus Vonnegut, in this, his second novel, already begins to blur the distinction between fiction and reality as part of his postmodern project to point out the constructedness of reality.

Thomas F. Marvin writes, "Most people consider reality something outside of themselves. What is inside is somehow less real,...but as Vonnegut points out in the opening pages, human would rather look outside themselves for answer than look within" (56). Vonnegut, in the opening pages of the novel begins to make his arguments, which Todd Davis places as postmodern, for the

subjectivity of reality, for the extent to which it is constructed, and that our understanding of the world is contingent on these constructions. He will return to this theme more fully in *Cat's Cradle*. The clear opposition between looking in and looking outward is a distinction which can be used to unravel Vonnegut's apparent position concerning our search for meaning.

James M. Mellard recognizes a departure from *Player Piano* in *Sirens of Titan*, his second novel: it is less literary with a plot which includes "traditional character types, traditional episodes, and tradition controlling structures" (192). Many of these structures, such as textbook style epigraphs which occur at the beginning of the novel include what Mellard describes as "artifacts of human expression" which are familiar to our technological age. These artifacts serve to signal to readers that the novel is in part a critique of the modern world and as a warning to Vonnegut's readers about where we may be headed.

The epigraph at the opening of the novel reads: "Every passing hour brings the Solar System forty-three thousand miles closer to Globular Cluster M13 in Hercules—and there are some misfits who don't believe in progress" (1). Vonnegut uses this rather cold and indifferent statement of seeming fact to introduce important themes in his work: "Clustered around progress, then, are several related concepts, time, history, eschatology, which have to do with the question of the meaning of human life" (Mellard 192). But his factual language is ultimately uncomfoting and indifferent to humanity's dilemmas; as Vonnegut suggests, we must look within.

Vonnegut later pokes fun at the value of progress when the President gives a speech in which he “gave the word ‘progress’ a special flavor by pronouncing it ‘prog-erse’. He also flavored the word ‘chair’ and warehouse’ pronouncing them *cheer* and *wirehouse* (ST 56). We learn that humanity has begun to exhaust the productivity of earth:

One man...I remember, was a cheer manufacturer, and he had way overproduced, and all he could think about was all those cheers in the wirehouse. And I said to him, ‘In the next twenty years, the population of the world is going to double, and all those billions of new people are going to need something to sit down on...Space can absorb the productivity of a trillion planets the size of earth. We could build and fire rockets forever, and never fill up space and never learn all there is to know about (57)

Here we have the language of scientific and productive progress intertwined. The comical folksy manner in which the president speaks draws attention to the further absurdity of his unspecific plan for space flight as an answer to humanity’s problems. Vonnegut suggests that the “artifact of communication” which come from our technological age are inadequate for expressing humanity’s search for meaning. This language mirrors the opening lines of the novel, this “outward push” being, according to our narrator, not the way to find meaning. With the seemingly unstoppable commodification of the globe and production and output often being the preferred language of progress, this speech has a continued salience. The latter part of the speech suggests that the world itself is somehow exhaustible. Once used up, we can move on to other planets in our continued push outward. Readers are thus tempted to question the ultimate strength of this

narrative of unabated production and consumption that we have created for ourselves, tempted to consider where this might lead.

Consider also the legend of Tralfamadore, which was once peopled by creatures that were not machines, like Salo. These creatures were undependable and not very durable. They were obsessed by finding meaning for themselves. They find purposes so low that they are filled with disgust:

And, rather than serve such a low purpose, the creatures would make a machine to serve it. This left the creatures free to serve higher purposes ...and the machines did everything so expertly that they were finally given the job of finding out what the highest purpose of the creatures would be...the machine reported in all honesty that the creatures couldn't really be said to have any purpose at all. The creatures thereupon began slaying each other, because they hated purposeless things above all else. And they discover that they weren't even very good at slaying. So they turned that job over to the machines, too. And the machines finished up the job in less time than it takes to say, "Tralfamadore." (280).

This legend of the distant planet Tralfamadore serves as Vonnegut's interpretation of human history, "and by using a machine, he gains a distant objectivity that allow the reader more freedom to mull over this pointed and practical history lesson" (Davis 52). Rather than use the genre of science fiction in service of creating utter fantasy, Vonnegut draws our attention to the modern world and its concerns. Vonnegut appears to take his vision of the world to its natural terminus; we will eventually destroy one another or destroy the planet or both. It is pessimistic at best, but with so many of our military's murders taking place by

computer piloted predator drones, readers may certainly be lead to consider the truths behind these statements even today.

Vonnegut uses his explanation for the chrono-synclastic infundibula not only to explain a science fiction element, but to introduce another philosophical stance which resonates through most of his fiction. The explanation comes from “Dr. Cyril Hall’s A Child’s Encyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do:”

Just imagine that your Daddy is the smartest man who ever lived on Earth...Now imagine another little child on some nice world a million light years away, and that little child’s Daddy is the smartest man who ever lived...Both Daddies are smart, and both Daddies are right...the universe is an awfully big place (8).

The entry continues to explain that all these truths “fit together like a solar watch” in the chrono-synclastic infundibula. Vonnegut uses an explanation for one of the science fiction elements in his novel in order to make an assault on absolutism: the universe Vonnegut creates is vast and no one seems to have the market cornered on truth: as Boaz says to Malachi in the caves of mercury: “Don’t truth me...and I won’t truth you” (216). Rather than cuing readers to consider the validity of truths found somewhere far across the galaxy, readers are cued to consider the strength of these arguments right here on earth. Here we have another clue to the philosophy which undergirds the novel. The language of the President can be seen as part of a narrative which is “logo centric, linear, and totalizing; such narrative claim to be scientific and objective while reaffirming modernity and its truth. The truth of modernity, of course, excluded most of the world, establishing as normative western European and American ideal/ideal” (Davis

17). Vonnegut clearly questions the truth being offered by the West and through the legend of Tralfamadore, suggests that there exists no totalizing narrative of which we are all a part. Thus, the novel suggests an incredulity toward metanarratives, a characteristic Davis places as postmodern.

Vonnegut's assessment of certain values and presumptions are pessimistic and pointed, but as James Mellard argues, Vonnegut also attempts to "reinstatement popular sentimental values as command—to love, to be courageous, to be kind" in the novel (200). It is through the misadventures of Malachi Constant that Vonnegut shows us the power of looking within for meaning. His adventures become the vehicle through which Vonnegut tests out his cosmology and his philosophy. According to our narrator: "Only inwardness remained to be explored. Only the human soul remained *terra incognita*. This was the beginning of goodness and wisdom...what were people in the olden times, with their souls yet explored? The following is a true story from the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression" (ST 2).

We meet Malachi Constant, "the richest American and notorious rakehell" (5). Malachi is, at the onset of the novel, clearly an example of someone who looks outward: "hallucinations, usually drug-induced, were almost all that could surprise and entertain Constant any more" (14). When Constant, confronted by the "moderate greatness" of Rumford, looks within: he "ransacked his memory like a thief going through another man's billfold. Constant found his memory stuffed with rumbled, over-exposed snapshots of all the women he had had, with

preposterous credential testifying to his ownership of even more preposterous enterprises, with testimonials that attribute to him virtues and strengths that only three billion dollars could have” (16). Vonnegut suggests to readers that Malachi’s success and triumphs are “nothing of value...All that remained to Constant were the husks of his memory---unstitched, flaccid flaps” (17). For all his outward fortunes, there is clearly some essential element missing from Malachi’s human experience, something of value.

Thus we are led to consider the folly of looking outwardly for happiness, of putting off the internal voyage. Malachi, after having his mind erased, becomes the existential hero of the novel by rejecting control and searching out love, and by finally arriving at a tentative and sentimental purpose for human beings. We are told that “everything Constant did he did in style—aggressively, loudly, childishly, wastefully—making himself and mankind look bad” (17). Malachi, according to Thomas Marvin, is a “reflection of the corrupt fashions of the times” (49). He is at first glance a champion of outwardness himself. He searches for happiness by using women as discardable playthings and owns “houses in Hollywood...Tahiti, Paris, Bermuda, Rome, New York, and Capetown” (31). Malachi is left in the position that McElroy finds us all, in his examination of *Existentialism and Modern Literature*.

McElroy wrote his book only four years after *Sirens of Titan* was published, and is thus an appropriate tool for examining the existential crisis of man looking outward. Malachi attempts to overcome his feelings of solitude and apparently, based on the narrator’s description, “aims to think, feel, imagine, and

act exactly like all others of his culture or class;” Because of this sort of herd conformity, “neither his ideas, his desires, his emotions, nor his personality are properly his own” (McElroy 12). Malachi merely acts in the style of his age and as suggested in the opening pages of the novel, he is simply trying to play the part of the gentlemen that he was not “as best he could” (ST 10).

As protagonist, readers are not entirely unsympathetic to Malachi; we learn that he had a loveless childhood, and, as suggested above, is disillusioned by the outward success of his particular culture. When Rumfoord tells Malachi that his upcoming adventures will lead him to Mars, and that he will be married to Rumfoord’s wife Bea: “not married exactly, but bred by the Marians—like farm animals,” and that he will have a son named Chrono, whose good luck piece will be of profound importance, he originally resists. He sells his stock in the company that owns the ship he supposedly will use on his adventures. After having a fifty-six day party at which he gives away oil wells, he returns to work to learn that bad investments have left him bankrupt.

It is certainly no mistake that Malachi is told he will be flung through the galaxy on a ship called *The Whale* and that his codename when entering the Rumfoord estate to witness the materialization of Rumfoord is Jonah Rowley. Malachi is like the biblical Jonah. He first attempts to resist the call by Rumfoord to be the prophet of a new religion on earth. Finding himself bankrupt, however, he is despondent and resigned to his fate. When two Martians arrive to recruit him for their army, he is ready to go. Here Malachi begins his existential journey,

where he first strives “to lose his identity by submerging his own God given individuality in the featureless mass of anonymous humanity” (McElroy 13).

His experience on Mars will be yet another example of the folly of looking outward for meaning. The particularly science fiction element of mind-control and secret Martian outposts also work to draw our attention to the modern world and its concerns. The Martian military shows “how the fascism of unthinking military command can obliterate individuality” (25). Chapter four begins with a simulated snare drum cadence: “Rented a tent, a tent, a tent” (*ST* 95). The entire epigraph continues with variations of the cadence for five lines, and is repeated four times throughout the chapter. There is in fact no actual Martian snare drum; instead the cadence is transmitted to radio antennas in each soldier’s head. The army, standing in formation and shivering from the cold, attempts “being as much like iron as they could be” (95). Malachi is ordered “to march up to the man at the stake in a military manner and strangle him until he was dead” (101). He will later learn that he strangled his only friend on Mars, Stony Stevenson.

When soldiers are first brought to Mars their mind is erased and they learn the most important rule of all was to “Always obey a direct order without a moment’s hesitation” (100). Malachi, however, throughout his years on Mars continually must have his memory erased. Boaz tells Malachi, ““Holy smokes...you were remembering so much you weren’t worth a nickel as a soldier”” (113). After the murder of Stony, Malachi again tries to remember things, but is painfully shocked by his antenna. The soldiers look at Malachi “as though he had done something as militarily stupid as...cleaning a loaded weapon,

as sneezing on patrol...as refusing a direct order or sleeping though reveille...as keeping a book or a live hand grenade in his footlocker, as asking who had started the Army anyway and why” (112). The Martian Army can thus symbolize a surrender of free-thought and a questioning and critical attitude towards existence. Here Vonnegut also begins the challenge to totalitarian control which resonates most fully in the mission of Niles Rumfoord. Free thought is apparently the “beginning of wisdom” in the world, free thought which is challenged in an exaggerated fashion by the army of Mars. Malachi comes to challenge the soul killing control of the Martian army by seeking out the letter he has compiled and hidden away, and in so doing he accepts that “only by using his own powers can he give meaning to his life” (McElroy 14).

Malachi at first assumes the letter has been left by Stony. By reading it he “wolfed down a philosophy...and mixed in were gossip, history, astronomy, biology, theology, geography, psychology, medicine—and even a short story” (*ST* 105). In the letter readers find out that Rumfoord is in control of the army, and that even the generals are radio controlled, with certain “real commanders,” like Boaz being dispersed throughout the ranks of the army. He also finds out that his best friend Stony discovered that “the big attack on Mars will be suicide for sure” (128). Most importantly, Malachi writes “you know why you keep going? You keep on going because you have a mate and a child...like everybody else on Mars, Bea and Chrono have learned to get along all alone. They don’t miss you. They never think of you. But you have to prove to them that they need you in the biggest way possible” (131). Thus, Malachi creates his own meaning by his

symbolic looking in, finding out only by letter's end that he had written it himself. The rest of his journey will consist of his mission to reunite with his family.

But first Malachi and Boaz, after escaping Mars, are stranded deep within the caves of Mercury, which is in Vonnegut's universe, are inhabited by "cave dwellers" called harmoniums: "a more gracious creature would be hard to imagine" says the Child's encyclopedia. "Mercury sings: The song is a slow one. Mercury will hold a single note in the song for as long as an Earthling millennium" (187). The Harmoniums feed off the sound radiating from the planet. Vonnegut creates idealized planet in complete harmony, perhaps symbolically between good and evil. In *Slaughter-house five*, Vonnegut's father points out to him that there are no real villains in his stories, but Vonnegut reminds him that there are no real heroes either (10). Instead his characters seemingly live in "a morally ambiguous world where an action that seems to be good may have terrible consequences," as we will see with Rumfoord, "and the worst people have some redeeming traits; absolute good or evil is impossible" (Marvin 53). Mercury's harmony contrasts the morally ambiguous world that Vonnegut creates, a world in which many truths intertwine.

It is also here on Mercury that we have a turning inward on a small scale, in the character Boaz. As one of the real commanders, he amuses himself by organizing radio-controlled brawls amongst his troops. However, he does show compassion and concern for his new friend Malachi, in part because he knows that on earth he was rich and famous: "Boaz used three magical words that seemed to describe the maximum happiness a person could achieve on Earth:

Hollywood Night Clubs. He had never seen Hollywood, had never seen a night club” (120).

He wants Malachi to help him to realize his dreams which have a “pathetic formlessness” according to our narrator (120). His actions are despicable, and his dreams pathetic and formless, informed by the world he lives in, but he is not entirely villainous. His desires for both power and fame are seemingly disregarded in the caves of Mercury where Boaz separates from Malachi and “befriends” the Harmoniums by letting them feed on his pulse. He befriends them in part because Rumfoord has been secretly arranging the Harmoniums into encouraging and helpful messages to help Malachi and Boaz escape. His love for the harmoniums is thus, at best, ill advised.

When Malachi attempts to dissuade Boaz’s love he insists “don’t truth me and I won’t truth you....Boaz had invented the plea, and its meaning was this: [Malachi] was to stop telling Boaz truths about the harmoniums, because Boaz loved the harmoniums, and because Boaz was nice enough not to bring up truths that would make [Malachi] unhappy” (ST 206). The truth which Boaz presumably hides is the fact that Malachi killed Stony, something he has yet to find out. Here we have an example of the comforting lie. With truth malleable and constructed, Vonnegut suggests, we might as well create truths which make us happy. Boaz’s turn inward leads him to isolation, as he chooses to stay behind on Mercury with his Harmoniums and his comforting lie: ““I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I’m doing good, and them I’m doing good for know I’m doing it, and they love me...as best they can. I found me a

home...and when I die down here someday...I'm going to be able to say to myself, 'Boaz—you made millions of lives worth living. Ain't nobody spread more joy. You ain't got an enemy in the universe'" (217). The scene is quite sentimental, and in its own way, touching. Boaz's turn inward has led him to consider the ways in which he has harmed those around him, and in a desperate and irrational way, he attempts to do some good. By poking fun at Boaz's attempts to take Malachi's advice to "love whoever is around to be loved" in such an irrational way, Vonnegut may indeed appear to contradict himself. More importantly, Boaz's foolish humanitarianism highlights Vonnegut's continuous undermining of his own apparent moral position. Just as in the fictional religion of Bokonism, Vonnegut persistently shows all belief systems to be based on lies; Boaz's misguided self-sacrifice highlights Vonnegut's postmodern position.

Before turning toward the ending of the novel, we should discuss Niles Rumfoord and the ways in which he adds to the strength of Vonnegut's philosophy. With all his powers to see through all time and read minds, Niles Rumfoord: aristocrat, space adventurer, dictator of a Martian army, and founder of a new world religion, may at first glance appear to be the intellectual or philosophic champion of the novel. Instead, his vanity and callousness undermine his benevolent mission to bring about world peace. Most importantly, he lacks the all important ingredient of Vonnegut's ethic: love.

For his first meeting with Malachi, Rumfoord chooses a small "museum of mortal remains, of endoskeletons and exoskeletons---of shells, coral, bone, cartilage, and chiton" (*ST* 19). These artifacts suggest Rumfoord's inability to

appreciate the importance of the human soul: “As a grown man, he plays with people in the same careless way that he once played with shells. The army he creates on Mars consists of the hollowed out shells of men, deprived of their memories, wills and identities” (Marvin 48). By novel’s end, Rumfoord will send tens of thousands of these soldiers to their deaths, with seemingly no remorse.

With Rumfoord’s charm and “almost singing” voice with “its magical power to make others do what he wants, he exudes a sense of superiority and confidence” (48). But his Church of God the Utterly Indifferent “mirrors his own indifference to the suffering of his fellow human beings” by disregarding humanity’s need for meaning: an indifferent God is not enough (48). His elaborately engineered invasion of the planet is based on a “Machiavellian callousness toward the individual” (48). The invader, sent out in waves all over the earth, are outgunned and killed gleefully by average citizens: “When American troops arrived at Boca Raton...there was nothing left to fight...Twenty three Martians had been hanged from lamp posts in the business districts...the total attacking force had been thirty-five... ‘Send us more Martians,’ said Ross L. McSwann, the mayor of Boca Raton. He later became a United States Senator” (ST 172). The scene is both gruesome and darkly funny. Rumfoord creates his new religion by allying all of earth against a common enemy. The guilt of the slaughter provides martyrs, and Rumfoord, with his powers, presents the citizens of earth with an empirical cosmology (Goldsmith 11). In another epigraph, Rumfoord’s religion is explained by the Reverend C. Horner Redwine:

O Lord Most High, Creator of the Cosmos, Spinner of Galaxies...Spitter of Fire and Rock, Trifler with Millennia---what could we do for Thee that

Thou couldst not do for Thyself one octillion time better? Nothing. What could we do or say that could possibly interest Thee. Nothing. Oh, Mankind, rejoice in the apathy of our creator, for it makes us free and truthful and dignified at last. No longer can a fool like Malachi Constant point to a ridiculous accident of good luck and say, 'Somebody up there likes me.' And no longer can a tyrant say, 'God wants this or that to happen, and anybody who doesn't help this or that to happen is against God...O Lord Most High, what a glorious weapon is Thy Apathy (218).

With the entire world united around the indifference of God, Malachi comes to serve a purpose in Rumfoord's grand design. When Malachi finally escapes Mercury after two years, he returns to earth he finds that the religion of Rumfoord as taken hold. Rumfoord promises his new converts miracles: the return of Malachi was prophesized by Rumfoord, and, when asks how he arrived back on earth Malachi speaks the words prophesied: "I was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all" (233).

Rumfoord, having performed his miracle, gives a sermon in which he decries Malachi: "We are *disgusted* by Malachi Constant because he used the fantastic fruits of his fantastic good luck to finance an unending demonstration that man is a pig... he did nothing unselfish or imaginative with his billions... We hate Malachi Constant...because he accepted the fantastic fruits of his fantastic good luck without a qualm, as though luck were the hand of God. To us of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, there is nothing more cruel, more dangerous, more blasphemous...than to believe that luck, good or bad, is the hand of God!" (257). Malachi, both prophet and devil, is vilified and his body burned in effigy. Vonnegut uses Rumfoord's religion at least in part to challenge

superstition, a reflection of his humanistic tendencies. It is also worth noting that Rumfoord's engineered attempt to create unanimity is not unlike the Tralfamadorian's attempts to arrive at some definitive purpose, a project which leads to their ultimate destruction.

Malachi is then sent to be exiled to Titan "so that the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent can have a drama of dignified self-sacrifice to remember and ponder through all time" (*ST* 259). It is at this point that Rumfoord tells Malachi that the man he had strangled was Stony Stevenson. He leaves the planet after being reunited with Bea and Chrono. He tells the crowd that he is leaving not because he is commanded to: "we will do it for ourselves—and we will be proving to ourselves and to anybody who wants to watch that we aren't afraid of anything. Our hearts won't be breaking when we leave this planet. It disgusts us at least as much as we, under your guidance, disgust it" (268). Malachi, the prophet of Rumfoord's religion, comes to reject it because of the heartless cruelty he was made to do in its name. He rejects totalitarian control; he rejects the cold religion Rumfoord has created which has merely one precept: an indifferent God.

David Goldsmith points out that it would seem that Vonnegut, through Rumfoord, is expounding "a cynical brand of Deism, simply manipulating his characters by means of Rumfoord's fantastic scheme, to prove his contentions. While this is true, if the allegory stopped there, it would not have the impact the author obviously intends" (12). Instead readers come to realize that Rumfoord himself is "the dupe of a higher power—a messenger from another galaxy—and that chain of unknowing does not stop even there, because the force that is pulling

Rumfoord's strings is being guided by and equally meaningless power from above!" (14).

Niles Rumfoord finds himself permanently materialized on Titan with the robot Salo, who had given Rumfoord the power source he needed to power his Martian invasion fleet. Salo is stranded on Titan, awaiting a replacement part for his ship, so that he can carry a message to another galaxy "eight million light-years beyond Titan" (ST 275). He can see through a telescope on earth: Stonehenge served as a message for Salo: "*Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed*" ...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 you way before you know it.*'" The narrator explains that

It is grotesque for anyone as primitive as an Earthling to explain how these swift communications were effected. Suffice to say, in such primitive company, that the Tralfamadorians were able to make certain impulses...echo through the vaulted architecture of the Universe with about three times the speed of light. And they were able to focus and modulate these impulses so as to influence creatures far, far away, and inspire them to serve Tralfamadorian ends (277).

By novel's end, Rumfoord finds out that he has been controlled by influence on Tralfamadore to get the replacement part (Chrono's good luck piece) to Titan so that Salo can send a message to some far off galaxy. Rumfoord's body becomes unstable and he is consumed by a cocoon of green light and disappears before he can learn the inane message Salo carries (greetings) "or to understand

the beauty of human compassion and love” (Davis 54). He is, the ultimate dupe of the novel, serving the ends of a far off planet. The resolution is quite absurd, but this is all the better, for in Vonnegut’s cosmology, our place in a “Universe composed of one-trillionth part matter to one decillion parts velvet futility” is nothing if not absurd; any pretense to knowledge of the universe is symbolically attacked with the humbling of Rumfoord (309).

As Marvin suggests: “all this madness is meant to prove that the search for meaning outside of oneself is hopeless, the novel becomes an entertaining satire on the many methods humans have devised to put off that internal quest,” even a man as powerful as Rumfoord is unable to create a true cosmology (44). The grand narrative he creates is ultimately spurious. As Joseph Sigman points out, in *The Sirens of Titan*, “the only truth is the relative truth of emotional need” (22). With the arrival of Salo’s replacement part, Malachi, Bea, and Chrono are “allowed to follow the logic of their own emotional needs and to create their own human meaning in the plan less cosmos” in which they find themselves (25). Bea writes a refutation of Rumfoord’s cosmology and Malachi lives the life of a simple farmer as the small family takes care of one another as best they can.

Goldsmith writes: “the universe of Kurt Vonnegut’s novels is a hostile and ridiculous one, in which a sense of humor and an eye for the absurd are necessary. The humanist in Vonnegut is often defeated by the pessimist in a continuous teleological tug-of-war” (1). Malachi grows to be an old man on Titan. Close to his death he tells Salo that he has realized “that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved” (320). Simple and

sentimental, certainly, but here we have the humanist Vonnegut winning out. Malachi offers the meaningful element that Rumfoord's new religion was missing: love. This "exhortation to love other people...is the only ethic the novel suggests" (Goldsmith 3).

This message is, however, mixed with other elements which give a clue to Vonnegut's ethic. Salo, "after watching human being for two hundred thousand Earthling years", has "become as skittish and sentimental as the silliest earthling schoolgirl" (ST 305). He spends his time building statues of human beings, often ridiculous ones like "The Statue of a nude woman playing a slide trombone. It was entitled enigmatically, *Evelyn and Her Magic Violin*" (299). Salo thus accomplishes in a ridiculous fashion what Rumfoord's religion couldn't, he celebrates humanity, however humbled humanity might be. Salo's mind, growing old, "buzzes and pops like the mind of an Earthling—fizzes and overheats with thoughts of love, honor, dignity, rights, accomplishment, integrity, independence" (306). The machines of Tralfamadore, by controlling human affairs, humbles us, but Salo, the machine who wishes to become more human, celebrates humanity as he ponders the abstractions which give humanity meaning. But Salo also chides humanity for behaving "at all time as though there were a big eye in the sky—as though that big eye were ravenous for entertainment" (281). This is a rather cynical way of commenting on humanity's desire to behave as God desires rather than looking within for meaning and perhaps salvation.

Todd Davis claims that "the education of Malachi Constant is...Vonnegut's attempt to educate humanity. Such an education works against

humanity's fixation with meaning and order in a universe that Vonnegut conceives of as random and purposeless" (49). Davis argues that part of what makes the novel so entertaining is precisely this "tension between his acerbically witty humbling of humanity and his insistence that to love and serve humanity is our highest calling" (51). This humbling of humanity, whether through Boaz or Salo's statues, highlights Vonnegut postmodern position. That is to say, the grounds on which Vonnegut's moral imperative is based is not on any assurance that humanity is innately valuable or that love and kindness is a rational or empirical basis of such a morality. This moral imperative instead arises individually (and in some cases irrationally). Malachi's trip across the universe is filled with "empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death" as the narrator suggests (*ST* 8). But we are also offered a moral tale in which we are rewarded by Malachi's turn inward, "the beginning of goodness and wisdom" (2).

The apparent philosophy toys with is by no means complete with this examination of *The Sirens of Titan*. The novel is, as most scholars appear to agree, quite pessimistic. Humanity is as much humbled by Vonnegut's wit as it is celebrated. Vonnegut, in his arguments against looking to the world for meaning rather than looking in, becomes bleak in his outlook, as demonstrated by the history of Tralfamadore. His message against absolutism, suggesting that there are many truths out there is presented, comes from a Child's Encyclopedia, suggesting that at least that part of his message is so simple a child could understand it: and thus humanity is scolded for insisting that there is any one Truth to be had. Vonnegut also denies that the grand meta-narrative (the kind that

Rumfoord creates) can really unite humanity into one collective, or cannot perhaps, create such a world without demagoguery or totalitarianism, without collective guilt. As the novel suggests, we had better celebrate our abilities to think for ourselves, to be critical of the world we have created. Perhaps, as is suggested in *Cat's Cradle*, our only recourse is to create provisional truths which might give life meaning in a meaningless world, truths which address the needs of humanity.

III. *Cat's Cradle*: Destructive Truth and Comforting Lies

Cat's Cradle tests the proposition that a provisional, ever-changing set of beliefs can offer humanity a workable set of values, and a workable understanding of the human condition. We are all left searching for meaning, implies Bokonon, holy man of the Island of San Lorenzo. The nature of God or His design is unknowable, and thus we are left to create meaning for ourselves. Bokonon admits that his religion is a mere fabrication. The "scripture" known as the Books of Bokonon is added to constantly in an effort to improve the lives of the San Lorenzans. Vonnegut takes a clear swipe at art, implying that it is merely a comfort, like so much aspirin doled out at the drugstore, or the religion of Bokonism itself. Vonnegut's own moral position (or moral project, as Davis has it) is itself undermined through this position, consistent with his insistence that all of humanity's creations, whether art or religion, are based on lies rather than absolute truth. Thus even art is not an absolute good, but perhaps merely a comfort in an irreconcilably irrational world. As suggested in *The Sirens of Titan*, the universe is chaotic and indifferent to the woes of humankind, and thus we are left to make life on earth meaningful, even if the meaning we give is an admitted fabrication. In contrast to Bokonon's "religion," we have the representatives of science whose belief that science offers the best hope for a peaceful and happy world is effectively ridiculed, as the creation of the amoral scientist Felix Hoenikker, Ice-nine, will destroy virtually all life on earth by novel's end. Peter Freese explains: "To Vonnegut...all religions... are manmade myths or lies, but

they provide the sense making structures necessary for man's survival. And they are more necessary today than ever before because they serve as the essential antidote against the most dangerous 'religion' of all, the belief in unbridled technological progress with its alleged objectivity, which is nothing but amorality, and its built-in tendency toward ultimate self-destruction" (101). Instead of self-destruction, Bokanon's religion offers humanity the "comforting lie" that humanity is sacred and that we ought to love all people equally, an antidote to the apparent inhumanity of science.

Since *Cat's Cradle* contains many secondary characters and many plot shifts, a brief summary will be helpful. The novel begins with John, who tells us to call him Jonah; he is researching the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima for a book which he never completes called *The Day the World Ended*. Felix Hoenikker, a creator of the atomic bomb, is dead before the action of the novel begins, so Jonah searches out his three surviving children: Newton, Angela, and Franklin. Newton (Newt) is the only one that Jonah can track down, and he receives a letter from Newt in which he explains that he remembers the day vividly, as it was the only day his father had ever played with him: Felix played the game cat's cradle.

Jonah makes no further headway on his book until another writing assignment brings him to The General Forge and Foundry Company, where Felix worked as a researcher. It is there that Jonah meets Asa Breed, Felix's supervisor, and Jonah is able to learn more about Felix and his research. Asa tells Jonah that Felix had been approached by a general who wanted Felix to design a substance

or small machine which could freeze mud; Marines were tired of the mud.

Hoemaker makes an off the cuff remark that he could create a molecule which could “teach” water molecules to freeze and stay frozen to a temperature of one-hundred and fifty degrees. Asa insists that such a substance does not exist, but Jonah lets readers know that the substance, called Ice-nine, does exist.

Around a year later, and as a matter of chance, Jonah is sent to the tiny Caribbean Island of San Lorenzo for another writing assignment. He is supposed to write a story on former industrialist Julian Castle, who decided to build a hospital called The House of Hope and Mercy on San Lorenzo. On the plane ride to San Lorenzo, Jonah meets Newt and Angela, who are going to San Lorenzo to attend their brother Frank’s wedding to the beautiful Mona Monzanno, daughter of the dictator of the Island, “Papa” Monzanno. The marriage is disappointing news for Jonah, who claims that he fell in love with a picture of Mona in *The New York Times*. Jonah also meets H. Lowe Crosby, a bicycle manufacturer and his wife Hazel, as well as the new ambassador to the island Horlick Minton and his wife Claire.

Jonah got a hold of a copy of a history of San Lorenzo written by Phillip Castle, son of Julian and owner of the only hotel on the Island, Casa Mona. We learn that on the island there is a holy man named Bokonon who has created a religion in hopes of creating a utopia. His religion fails to improve the economic situation of the impoverished Islanders, but the religion, which was outlawed by Earl McCabe, friend to Bokonon and first dictator of the island, “improved the lives of the people by making them actors in a cosmic drama and giving their

lives meaning” (Marvin 81). Eventually we come to find that Hoenikker had given pieces of the deadly Ice-nine to his three children before his death.

Frank is named successor to “Papa” Monzanno because he can provide the substance and make the country strong. Frank contacts Jonah in hopes that he will marry Mona and take over as President, and Jonah agrees. “Papa” Monzanno is dying of cancer and decides to kill himself with the substance. The day of “Papa’s” death coincides with a celebration for the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy, a group of men from San Lorenzo who were sent to fight in World War II whose ship was sunk by a German U-Boat soon after leaving the harbor. The celebration includes an air show; a plane catches fire and plummets into the Monzanno residence, and “Papa’s” body is flung into the ocean. All water on earth is frozen and tornadoes fill the skies. Jonah and Mona find refuge in an air-raid shelter. When Jonah and Mona find a scene of mass-suicide, she decides that she wants to die as well, and places a piece of the cold blue substance Ice-nine on her tongue and dies. Jonah finds refuge with Frank, Newt and the Crosbys in the ruins of Frank’s house. Jonah decides that he will also kill himself, but first he wants to climb Mount McCabe, the tallest mountain on the Island and plant a flag there, but he cannot come up with an appropriate symbol. He then meets Bokonon who is thinking of a way to end his holy scriptures: the Books of Bokonon. He tells Jonah how he will end his scriptures:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of

myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who (191).

The entire novel is in fact a retrospective written by Jonah after Ice-nine is released; he survives like the “Swiss Family Robinson” on the frozen remains of animals which are conveniently preserved until they are ready to be eaten. Jonah has thus also written for us a history of human stupidity: the history of how the substance Ice-nine would end the world. Sprinkled in his history of how the world ends, we also learn many of the tenets of Bokonism, little by little.

It is within this dark and apocalyptic tale that Vonnegut again takes up the theme of humanity’s search for meaning. He offers us a seemingly absurd answer: make up your own. Vonnegut’s “spurious holy man” Bokonon insists that his religion is a mere fabrication, but that it nevertheless improves the lives of the people of San Lorenzo. The copyright page, unlike *The Sirens of Titan*, reads:

Nothing in this book is true. ‘Live by the foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.

*Harmless untruths—the Books of Bokonon, 1.5.

By including a quote from the Books of Bokonon in his disclaimer, Vonnegut again blurs the lines between fiction and fact. He continues to point out for his readers that the institutions and beliefs in which we place trust are mere fabrications of language themselves. Science is again attacked and shown to be ultimately destructive, as in the legend of Tralfamadore.

In this novel, however, Vonnegut takes a swipe at science on a smaller more local scale when Jonah visits the General Forge and Foundry Company. Asa Breed is the spokespersons for science in the novel. He claims that ““new

knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become” (CC 36). Since Breed admires the creator of the atomic bomb and Ice-nine, it is clear that Vonnegut is questioning from early on in the novel whether new knowledge is inherently valuable or an absolute good. Since new scientific knowledge had led to the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is clear that Vonnegut takes exception to this particular narrative.

When Jonah first meets Breed, Breed tells him that the property on which the General Forge and Foundry Company stands used to be the stockade for the town. He recounts how in 1782, George Minor Moakely was hanged for killing 26 people and that he sang a little tune while on the scaffold to be hanged: “‘Think of it!’ said Breed. ‘Twenty-six people he had on his conscience.’” Jonah simply responds that “‘the mind reels.’” (28). When we consider that Felix Hoenikker will be responsible for destroying all life on earth, Breed’s condemnation of a murderer and Jonah’s response are darkly funny and point to Breed’s apparent lack of a sense of moral responsibility when it comes to Hoenikker’s creations. According to Todd Davis, “Hoenikker represents Vonnegut’s greatest fear: a man who had a mind so brilliant that he can find the means to destroy the world, but who has no conception of right or wrong” (64).

In his arguments for the moral culpability of scientists, the ethicist David Koepsell uses the fictional Ice-nine as a catalyst for his discussion concluding that “scientists should reassess their moral culpability when researching fields whose impact may be catastrophic” rather than merely putting the blame on governments which irresponsibly use the creation of scientists (133). It is clear from his article

that Koepsell believes that the amoral Hoenikker is representative of any scientist who knowingly creates something destructive or dangerous to mankind without considering the implications of his creation. As a cynical barfly who Jonah meets in his travels puts it, “anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another” (CC 27). This language may indeed be hyperbolic, but it is clear that Vonnegut too is pushing his readers to consider the moral responsibility of science and scientists.

Hoenikker is often described as being child-like and completely absentminded. On the day he was to leave for Sweden to accept the Nobel Prize, he leaves his wife a tip after she serves him breakfast. Breed also tells Jonah of a day when Hoenikker left his car in the middle of a busy intersection. The police “found Felix’s car in the middle of everything, its motor running, a cigar burning in the ash tray, fresh flowers in the vases” (29). Hoenikker’s wife eventually comes to retrieve the car, but, being unused to driving she crashes and breaks her pelvis, the injury which leads to her death while giving birth to Newton Hoenikker. Thus, we have a symbolic way in which Hoenikker’s inability to consider the consequences of his actions lead to irrevocable harm.

In Newt’s letter to Jonah, he remembers the day that Hoenikker tested the atomic bomb: “After it 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 he said ‘What is sin?’” (13). In a chapter entitled “What God Is,” a secretary remembers a conversation with Hoenikker: “he bet I couldn’t tell him anything that was absolutely true. So I said to him, ‘God is love...He

said, ‘What is God? What is Love?’” (44). Hoenikker suggests that language is necessarily given value by the individual; God is inevitably a comfort of a sort, one which helps people to give life meaning; but Hoenikker rejects the sense-making structures of God, love, and sin, and his rejection of such beliefs leads to humanity’s destruction. The secretary, speaking of Hoenikker says, “I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person” (44). Vonnegut suggests that it is the lies we tell ourselves which give life meaning, that we need something more than mere facts to comfort us. Even if such concepts like love, sin, or God are mere abstractions, they may indeed provide the sense-making structures which make life tolerable or meaningful. Much later in the novel, after Ice-nine is released, Jonah explains the Krebs cycle to Mona: “Man breathes in oxygen and breaths out carbon dioxide,” he explains, as Mona struggles to understand the destruction around her; “Thank you,” she humorously replies (80).

Marvin Breed, brother to Asa, shares his opinion with Jonah about Hoenikker: “Sometimes I wonder if he wasn’t born dead. I never met a man who was less interested in the living. Sometimes I think that’s the trouble with the world: too many people in high places who are stone-cold-dead” (53). Breed speaks of Hoenikker’s child-like innocence and his single-minded attempts to solve any problem put before him (like how Marines might avoid mud). As Marvin tells us, “I know all about how harmless and gentle and dreamy he was supposed to be, how he’d never hurt a fly, how he didn’t care about money and power and fancy clothes and automobiles and things, how he wasn’t like the rest

of us...how he was so innocent he was practically a Jesus—except for the Son of God part” (52). But Vonnegut warns that we are responsible for our actions in the real world, actions which can lead to harm or good Vonnegut suggests a need for a spiritual life, even if it is ultimately constructed and perhaps ultimately foolish and absurd.

In contrast to Breed’s and Hoenikker’s claims to truth, we have the holy man Bokonon who offers “comforting lies” to the people of San Lorenzo. Bokonon washes ashore on San Lorenzo as a matter of chance with his friend Earl McCabe. Bokonon and McCabe overthrow the government without much trouble (as the Island is economically useless and no one resists). They base their new society on Bokonon’s theory of “Dynamic tension”; he believed “that good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension high at all times” (74). This belief sounds similar to certain religions like Christianity and Taoism, but the concept turns out to be based on “Charles Atlas, a mail-order muscle-builder” who believes that muscles could be built “by simply pitting one set of muscles against another” (74). Bokonon explains his theory in one of his Calypsos, the poems which make up the Books of Bokonon:

Papa Monzanno, he’s so very bad,
But without bad “Papa” I would be so sad;
Because without “Papa’s” badness,
Tell me, if you would,
How could wicked old Bokonon
Ever, ever look good? (74)

His language here mirrors that of the 2nd Tao: “Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness. All can know good as good only because

there is evil.” The Christian tradition also considers good and evil, sometimes personified as God and the Devil. But Bokonon’s belief is good and evil is simply a fiction, as he himself admits in another Calypso:

I wanted all things
To seem to make some sense
So we all could be happy, yes,
Instead of tense.
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise.

Despite this absurdity, Vonnegut suggests that the creation of comforting lies may help us to cope with the equally absurd cosmic situation we are in, to create stories which make us “brave and kind and healthy and happy.” Most scholarship, even in the case of Todd Davis’ treatment, tends to focus on the ways in which Vonnegut parodies religion. However, if we take a closer look at Bokonism we will see that it is more prescriptive and serious than at first glance. Peter Freese appears to agree: Vonnegut “evokes the imminent end of mankind only to alert his readers to the necessity of preventing it through their conversion to a more human ‘religion’” (111). Vonnegut indeed suggests that we are all Bokonists of a kind: as we see when Phillip Castle, son of philanthropist Julian and owner of the only hotel on San Lorenzo, insists that Jonah will find out he too is a Bokonist, which he does, by novel’s end.

We come to learn about the tenets of Bokonism little by little, but taken as a whole, these comforting lies create a rich belief system. Jonah insists that “anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either” (14). According to Jonah, “We Bokonists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a karass” (12). Consider the concept of the karass in combination with another Bokonist term, the granfalloon: a granfalloon is a “false karass, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done...examples of granfalloons are the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows---and any nation, anytime, anywhere” (67). The concept of the granfalloon is given to us because Hazel Crosby, after finding out that Jonah is a fellow Hoosier, insists that he call her “Mom:” she tells all Hoosiers she meets to do the same. Thus we get some rather ridiculous examples of a granfalloon and of Jonah being pushed in the direction of Bokonism, but the belief can certainly be interpreted to be humanist in character. The concept of the granfalloon, like the karass, suggest that we are all in this together, that the borders and ideologies into which we have separated ourselves are somehow spurious; they are constructions of humanity which often prove harmful, as when we learn that the first discoverers of San Lorenzo hunted the locals for “entertainment and heresy” (89). Ambassador Minton questions nationalism and war when he gives his speech at the celebration for the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy: “Perhaps, when we remember wars, we

should take off our clothes and paint ourselves blue and go on all fours all day long and grunt like pigs. That would surely be more appropriate than noble oratory and shows of flags and well-oiled guns...this wreath I bring is a gift from the people of one country to the people of another. Never mind which countries. Think of people...think of what a paradise this world would be if men were kind and wise” (171). Thus, through the fictional religion of Bokonon, Vonnegut questions the narrative of nationalism, and leaves us pondering the destructive nature of such a narrative.

Bokonon writes, “Man created the checkerboard; God created the karass...by that he means that a karass ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries...in his fifty third Calypso, Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

Oh, a sleeping drunkard
Up in Central Park,
And a lion-hunter
In the jungle dark,
And a Chinese dentist
And a British queen—
All fit together
In the same machine.
Nice, nice, very nice;
Nice, nice, very nice;
So many different people
In the same device.

We have created a checkerboard for ourselves, Bokonon suggests, complex belief systems, creeds, nations, and all the rest whereas “God’s teams” ignores all such

separation; we are all in this together, all apart of the same machine: the world. Consider Bokonon's twist on a well known passage from the Gospel spoken by Jesus: "the words were a paraphrase of the suggestion by Jesus: 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.' Bokonon's paraphrase was this: 'Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what's really going on'" (74).

And, like the people standing outside of Rumfoord's house, waiting for a miracle, and some sense of meaning or purpose, it is humanity's job in Bokonon's worldview, to come up for a purpose for life on earth. After God creates the earth he looks "upon it in His cosmic loneliness" so he creates man out of mud: "god leaned close as man as mud sat up, looked around and spoke. Man blinked. 'What is the purpose of all this?' he asked politely. 'Everything must have a purpose?' asked God. 'Certainly,' said man. 'Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,' said God. And He went away'" (177). We are left in a similar dilemma as *The Sirens of Titan* with an essentially Deist cosmology, God gets the universe and humanity going and we are left to create meaning and purpose for our lives. In many ways this cosmology is rather bleak, but it is also empowering, giving us ultimate control of our destinies. Humanity is left to think of a purpose for itself, like Vonnegut argues in *The Sirens of Titan*; Bokonon argues that it is simply human nature to consider life's meaning and purpose:

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"
Tiger got to sleep,

Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

Our destiny is rather bleak in Vonnegut's novels. Ice-nine was created to freeze mud for the Marines, so symbolically it would seem that Vonnegut is warning that we, armed with newer and better ways, will destroy ourselves. The creation story also falls under the same chapter, called "The Iron Maiden and The Oubliette" in which Jonah references those torture devices. This juxtaposition illustrates ways in which our creations can be used for ill or good. Readers are led to consider all the inventive ways in which humanity has been cruel, and consider if that is really our purpose, or if such actions can give life meaning.

With the admonition by Bokonon that his religion is a fabrication, it may seem that nothing is sacred; however, we learn from Frank Hoenikker that at least one thing is sacred to Bokonists. Jonah and Frank find themselves gazing at Mount McCabe, the tallest mountain on San Lorenzo. Jonah asks Frank if the mountain is sacred. Frank responds that it may have been once, but not since Bokonism became the preferred religion of the Island. Jonah asks, "What is sacred to Bokonists?" and Frank responds "Not even God, as near as I can tell...just one thing...man, that's all, just man" (143). Certainly this very simple tenet, that humanity is sacred, reflects Vonnegut's humanism. Such a belief is contrasted with the amorality of Hoenikker and the pseudo-religious way in which Breed places his trust in science as truth. Just the simple belief that humanity is sacred would surely prevent a man from creating a substance that can destroy all of all life on earth. Though the concept of the karass and man's sacredness may

indeed sound like a totalizing truth, these concepts can better be understood as part of the moral norm which Vonnegut suggests may prevent our self-destruction.

Vonnegut offers us lesser crimes than destroying the earth. Consider, for instance the industrialist H. Lowe Crosby on his way to San Lorenzo to build a bicycle factory: “H. Lowe Crosby was of the opinion that dictatorships were often very good things. He wasn’t a terrible person and he wasn’t a fool. It suited him to confront the world with a certain barn-yard clownishness...the major point at which his reason and his sense of humor left him was when he approached the question of what people were really supposed to do with their time on Earth. He believed firmly that they were meant to build bicycles for him” (68). This language mirrors that of the president in *The Sirens of Titan*. Crosby has found a meaning of life: to be producers and consumers. His nonchalant language when discussing the effectiveness of the Hook (the preferred method of execution on San Lorenzo) he is shown to be an unthinking dolt: “I don’t say it’s good...I don’t say it’s bad either...maybe the hook’s a little extreme for a democracy. Public hanging’s more like it” (68). The hook, however, is never used, but stands in the center of the capital city as a warning to practicing Bokonists (which is everyone on the Island, including “Papa” Monzanno). The hook is a creation to “keep the tension high at all times.”

Like Felix Hoenikker, we have another saintly figure, Julian Castle, who “wasted the first forty years of his life in an irresponsible search for pleasure, reminiscent of the early days of Malachi Constant in *The Sirens of Titan*” (Marvin

87). But we learn that Julian underwent an abrupt change and founded the free hospital on San Lorenzo, The House of Hope and Mercy. We are cued to be suspicious of saintly figures. When Jonah first meets Castle he talks out of the corner of his mouth “like a movie gangster” and points his cigar at people when he speaks (114). Though readers may have mixed feelings about the ‘saintly’ Castle, he does “underscore two of the novel’s major themes: personal responsibility and the search for meaning in life” (Marvin 87). When Jonah wonders if Castle was inspired by Albert Schweitzer he responds: “in case you run across Dr. Schweitzer in your travels, you might tell him that he is not my hero...but you can also tell him that, thanks to him, Jesus Christ is.” He doesn’t care whether Schweitzer knows this however, because, as he says “This is something between Jesus and me” (115).

Unfortunately Castle’s cynicism does not end there. He insists that he does not actually have faith in humanity or in Christ. First his faith is explained away: “People have to talk about something just to keep their voice boxes in working order, so they’ll have good voice boxes in case there’s ever anything really meaningful to say.” He insists that “Man is vile, and man makes nothing worth making, knows nothing worth knowing” (115). Castle is arguably a nihilist, he insists on the meaninglessness of humanity’s endeavors. Despite his nihilistic leanings, Castle decides to make meaning for himself by devoting his life to the people of San Lorenzo; the devotion he exhibits does not cease even as the world comes to an end, as he dies trying to reach his hospital to see if he can be of some help. Here Vonnegut characteristically contradicts himself by

suggesting that religion may indeed be an unnecessary while indeed staying true to his message that humankind is ultimately in control of the meaning we ascribe to actions of moral import, whether such meaning springs from nihilism or the inventions of religious belief.

Compare Castle with another nihilist, Sherman Krebbs, who sublets Jonah's apartment while Jonah visits the General Forge and Foundry Company. Krebbs "was an artist and 'Chairman of Poets and Painters for Immediate Nuclear War'" (58). Krebbs represents nihilism at its worst; he is so despairing that he hopes for the end of the world and so fed up with the modern world and consumerism that he, after destroying Jonah's apartment "wrote a poem, in what proved to be excrement on the yellow linoleum floor: I have a kitchen./But it is not a complete kitchen./I will not be truly gay/Until I have a Dispose-all" (59). Castle accepts the apparent meaningless of the world and decides to do good. Krebbs, on the other hand, simply rages against a world he finds meaningless

When Jonah discovers the mess in his apartment he decides that "nihilism was not for me." Jonah's discovery represents a *vin-dit*, a push toward Bokonism, a push toward creating comforting lies. Amidst the destruction of Ice-nine, Phillip Castle tells Jonah that he is "thinking of calling a general strike of all writers until mankind finally comes to its senses." (155). Jonah thinks that it would be like the firemen, police or college professors walking out and says "I don't think I'll support a strike like that. When a man becomes a writer, I think he takes on a sacred obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed" (156). But Jonah also admits to Phillips that he may be no better than the drug

salesman, doling out aspirin: “I’ll accept that, guilty as charged” (106). Art and literature can thus be seen as performing a role similar to that of Bokonism, creating fiction to benefit humankind or at the very least comfort us, like the aspirin bought from the drug salesmen, or the ritual of *Boko-maru*. *Boko-maru* is a spiritual ritual of Bokonism in which two people touch the soles of their feet together. Dr. Von Koenigswald of the House of Hope and Mercy agrees to perform the ritual with “Papa” Monzanno as part of the Bokonist last rites. Jonah wonders if it bothers him to do something so unscientific; the doctor responds: “I am a very bad scientist. I will do anything to make a human beings feel better, even if it’s unscientific” (148).

The namesake for the novel is in itself a symbol of the constructedness of our reality. Cat’s cradle is a game played with a piece of string, the game which Felix played with Newt when he was a child. Newt exclaims in aggravation when explaining the game to Jonah: “there’s no damn cat, and no damn cradle” (114). Frees explains: cat’s cradle “is this simple and ubiquitous game that provides the central symbol of man’s essential task. The universe he finds himself in is an arbitrary and ever-changing system of meaningless strings, which man, through an act of his creative imagination, has to define as meaningful” (100). Bokonon pays the ultimate price for his role in giving meaning to the lives of the San Lorenzans; he and McCabe “both became, for all practical purposes, insane” (CC 120).

Bokonon is left with very little hope for humankind. Like the literal children who are given the deadly Ice-nine, Bokonon finds us nearly all to be

“short-sighted children” (164). The Fourteenth of The Books of Bokonon is entitled, “What can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?” “It doesn’t take long to read The Fourteenth book. It consists of one word and a period... ‘Nothing’” (164). We are left to give life meaning and we are left with an apocalyptic vision of humanity’s ultimate stupidity. We are, just as Vonnegut suggests with the legend of Tralfamadore, headed for our ultimate destruction. Bokonon’s lesson is therefore quite bleak. “Busy, busy, busy” says Bokonon when he considers the complicated machinery of human life. Bokonon’s lesson is indeed more substantial than Rumfoord’s because it is based on love and compassion for others, “but they are basically as cynical and turn out to be as illusory as Rumfoord’s” (Goldsmith 3). The truth to which Vonnegut points us is ultimately terrible: we are alone, our belief systems are mere constructions and the world we have created is chaotic and cruel. This pessimism is constructive however, as Vonnegut “warns that even if there is no essential truth behind narratives, those narrative that we do choose to tell are crucial because they either contribute to our well-being or our destruction whether they are true or not”; Vonnegut’s pessimistic message serves as a warning to humankind (Davis 64).

This apocalyptic tale offers readers Vonnegut’s starkest warning that we may be headed toward our own destruction, but grappling with the meaninglessness of life can potentially be a positive endeavor. Jerome Klinkowitz argues that “Vonnegut in fact brings a message that is hopeful. If life seems without purpose, perhaps it is because we have tried (and failed) to impose a

purpose inappropriately. The quest for meaning can be self-defeating, especially when pursued with the rigidities of convention that in truth no longer apply. The radicalness of the author's own proposition seems so only because of the persistence of those conventions he so successfully interrogates," like the notion that science can be objective and religious doctrines are or should be dogmatic and immutable (2 Klinkowitz 16). For Vonnegut, all beliefs are founded on lies, on the constructions of our language; there can be no essential truth behind narratives, merely the flawed attempts to give life meaning, to proliferate the stories which may make us less destructive and cruel.

IV. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*: The Maddening Method of Love

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater is potentially Vonnegut's greatest satire, taking his unparalleled imagination and turning it on twentieth century America. Eliot Rosewater is a modern day Hamlet, vacillating between madness and sanity as he comes to terms with the guilt of accidentally murdering a fourteen year old boy during World War II and of inheriting a fortune he did nothing to deserve as so many around him are plagued by poverty and uselessness. Davis argues that through Eliot's struggle to create utopia, Vonnegut "establishes the one criterion for a postmodern humanism: humanity must be empowered; life must be nurtured. (74). Vonnegut continues to struggle with the same nagging question which characterizes all of his early fiction: What is the purpose of humanity? Vonnegut wrestles with this question as he turns his satiric eye to American culture and "its increasing mechanization and its disparaging treatment of the individual who is slowly made obsolete not only by machines, but also by the practices of fellow humans" (68). The comforting lie that Vonnegut hopes to instill in his readers is that hatred and cruelty "need not be parts of human nature," even as Vonnegut gives us ample evidence to the contrary (*Rosewater* 68). As Kilgore Trout, recognized stand-in for Vonnegut explains, "Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see" (269).

Eliot Rosewater is the clear protagonist of the story. However, Norman Mushari propels the story forward when he decides to investigate whether Eliot is

insane. Eliot is the newest heir to the Rosewater fortune, worth “\$87,472,033.61”; the sum was used to start a “charitable and cultural foundation...It was stashed into a foundation in order that tax-collectors and other predators not named Rosewater might be prevented from getting their hands on it” (*Rosewater* 1). Norman Mushari is a new lawyer at the firm of McCallister, Robjent, Reed and McGee, the same law firm that oversees the Rosewater fortune. He learns that if the heir of the fortune is declared insane, the fortune will be passed to the next living heir, in this case the middle-class insurance salesman from Rhode Island named Fred Rosewater. Mushari hopes to earn a handsome fee by overseeing the transfer of the funds to Fred.

Eliot’s sanity is called into question because, after first running the charitable organization in a more conventional way, he decides to move the foundation to Rosewater, Indiana where he attempts to take Malachi Constant’s advice to “love whoever is around to be loved” to “its logical conclusion” by attempting to help the poor of Rosewater (Goldsmith 24). Eliot’s project is a mixture of socialism and early conceptions of Christian love, as he explains to his father, “nobody can work with the poor and not fall over Karl Marx from time to time—or just fall over the Bible, as far as that goes...I think it’s a heartless government that will let one baby be born owning a big piece of the country...and let another baby be born without owning anything” (121). As we have learned from *The Sirens of Titan*, however, Vonnegut is potentially suspicious of a world narrative of peace and cooperation. As Brian McCammack points out the novel

places its “emphasis on the individual” and “private sphere aspects of social humanitarianism rather than mass, public sphere manifestations” (162).

In Eliot we have another Jonah figure. When Eliot leaves Rosewater to finalize the divorce with his wife Sylvia, many citizens express concern that Eliot will leave them and return to his life of luxury. Eliot comforts them: ““If I were to somehow wind up in New York, and start living the highest of all possible lives again...the minute I got near any navigable body of water, a bolt of lightning would knock me into the water, a whale would swallow me up...and it would swim down the canal to this city, and spit me out”” (212). Though Eliot is surely affected by religious and socialist ideology, he makes it clear that he has no religion: his ethic, like Malachi’s, is a simple one. When asked to baptize a newborn child of Rosewater, Eliot decides this is what he’ll say: “Hello Babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies—: God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (129). Eliot apparently finds no other duty higher than kindness and love. It is also clear that Vonnegut is leading readers to question any other “rules” that we have created for ourselves, such as when Eliot’s ancestor insists that “business is business” and “a deal’s a deal” to justify his cruel behavior (humorously citing the Bible as his source for that piece of wisdom) (139). Of course Eliot takes his commitment of kindness and loving the unwanted to a level which may indeed cause readers to question the limits of their compassion. However, readers are not merely led to question the sanity of Eliot’s actions; we are also cued to consider

the sanity of, and question, the free enterprise system of post-industrial America and those who represent it. To judge Eliot insane is tantamount to accepting the alienating and often cruel free enterprise system; ultimately, Eliot's particular brand of altruism functions as a catalyst for challenging the free enterprise system and the metadiscourses which support it.

As satirist, Vonnegut offers readers archetypal characters like money-hungry lawyers to conservative senators. The characterization of Mushari might lead us to question his reactions to Eliot's behavior. He is initially hired to add some needed "viciousness" to the firm; he lives up to this characterization by plotting the "violent overthrow of the Rosewater Foundation" (4). He is unpopular with his co-workers, who whistle "Pop Goes the Weasel" as he passes them by. As a "boy shyster" with "an enormous ass, which was luminous when bare," Mushari is described as both physically and morally repugnant (3). As a child, Mushari hung posters in his room of the infamous Senator Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn, two men who prosecuted "communists" during the Red scare.

In law school, his favorite professor was Leonard Leech, who advises young Mushari that to get ahead in law "just as a good airplane pilot should always be looking for places to land, so should a lawyer be looking for situations where large amount of money were about to change hands" (4). If, like Fred Rosewater, the recipient is unused to wealth and has "shapeless feelings of guilt...a lawyer can often take as much as half the bundle, and still receive the recipient's blubbering thanks" (5). Given the professor's advice, the name Leech conjures the image of the homophonic bloodsucker.

The “vicious” and conniving Mushari considers himself a “brave little David about to slay Goliath” believing that “God himself wanted little David to win, for confidential document after document proved that Eliot was crazy as a loon” (6). (This religious language is reminiscent of Malachi’s claim that “somebody up there likes me,” a claim which becomes an object of ridicule). In order to get his hands on evidence to prosecute Eliot, Mushari goes so far as to convince Sylvia, who is in the process of divorcing Eliot, to turn over any letters Eliot wrote to her as it “was customary in friendly, civilized divorce actions” for her to do so (13). Thus we certainly are led to doubt the righteousness of Mushari’s plans which are predicated on “viciousness” and manipulation.

We get our first glimpse of Eliot’s views of his family’s fortune when Mushari gets his hands on a letter that Eliot wrote to the next heir to the fortune upon Eliot’s death. The letter explains that the “Rosewater pile was accumulated in the beginning by a humorless, constipated Christian farm boy turned speculator and briber during and after the Civil War. The farm boy was Noah Rosewater” (7). Noah hires “a village idiot to fight in his place” and turns to war profiteering by converting the small, bankrupt saw factory he inherited to produce swords and bayonets: “Noah priced his merchandise in scale with the national tragedy. And he made this discovery: Government objection to the price or quality of his wares could be vaporized with bribes that were pitifully small” (7). Eliot explains that the continent was so vast and the

population so thin that no thief, no matter how fast he stole, could more than mildly inconvenience anyone... Thus did a handful of rapacious

citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America. Thus was the savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate and unnecessary and humorless American class system created. Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage. And they saw that praise was reserved henceforth for those who devised means of getting paid enormously for committing crimes against which no laws had been passed. Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun. (9).

From the letter we also learn of Samuel Rosewater, son of Noah, who turned to politics and bought up newspapers, becoming a “king-maker” leading his party to nominate men who “would whirl like dervishes, bawl fluent Babylonian, and order the militia to fire into crowds whenever a poor man seemed on the point of suggesting that he and a Rosewater were equal in the eyes of the law” (10). Samuel “begat” Lister Ames Rosewater who marries Eunice, Eliot’s mother who had, before dying in a sailing accident, “very sincere anxieties about the condition of the poor” (11). Lister and Eunice “begat” Eliot, who, by his own account, became “a drunkard, a Utopian dreamer, a tinhorn saint, an aimless fool” His advice to the inheritor of his vast fortune: “Be generous. Be kind...be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor” (12). The “begat” language is reminiscent of the Old Testament, perhaps suggesting that this story of bribery and war profiteering is a part of the American myth, the narrative on which our principals have been founded, or according to Eliot, distorted.

Reading this letter causes Norman Mushari’s heart to beat “like a burglar alarm;” for Mushari the letter serves as a piece of “solid evidence” that Eliot is

insane. Thomas Marvin argues that by focusing our attention on Mushari's investigation rather than employing a straight forward account of Eliot's life, Vonnegut creates an effective narrative frame of the novel: "This technique invites readers to compare Mushari's reactions to their own and challenges them to come to their own judgments about the novel's characters and events" (98). Arguably this technique allows Vonnegut to remain more distant and thus less preachy and sentimental. More importantly, this technique creates a sense of subjectivity; even as Mushari is considered "vicious" by his co-workers, the narrator makes no such claims. Mushari judges the letter to be written by a madman because it contradicts the widely accepted narrative that American fortunes are built with nothing less than sweat and ingenuity: "But to a reader with any knowledge of American history, Eliot's indictment of the unfairness of American capitalism and the cruelty of the American class system rings true" (Marvin 101). Instead of judging Eliot insane, readers might be tempted to consider the sanity of the system that he berates, a system that rewards political corruption and bribery, while other critics insist that Eliot's language is hyperbolic and not credible (McMahon 34).

Eliot's senator father is quick to judge Eliot, but he insists that Eliot's alcoholism is that the root of his unhinged behavior. Lister Ames Rosewater represents conservative ideology; he is a social Darwinist and an old fashion moralizer. The highlight of the Senator's career is "The Rosewater Law" which he considers a "masterpiece because it actually defined obscenity...Obscenity is any picture or phonograph record or any written matter calling attention to

reproductive organs, bodily discharges, or bodily hair” (95). It would appear that a shampoo commercial might be considered obscenity under this conservative law. Early in the novel, we are also given excerpts from a speech a senator gives in which he compares post-war America with ancient Rome in the time of Augustus Caesar. He claims that America, like ancient Rome “is a paradise for gangsters, perverts, and the lazy working man” (28). It was apparently the “soft-headed liberals” who brought Rome into a period of moral and economic decay, with children turned against their parents “by the liberals, by the purveyors of synthetic sunshine and moonshine...who loved everybody, including the barbarians” (29). This was the scene Augustus came home to, “after defeating two sex maniacs” Antony and Cleopatra (29). The Golden Age of Rome was brought about because morals were turned into law.

The Senator suggests that instead of turning morals into law, we ought to “return to a true free enterprise system, which has the sink-or-swim justice of Caesar Augustus built into it...we must be hard, for we must become again a nation of swimmers, with the sinkers quietly disposing of themselves” (31). The Senator describes the kind of far right wing rhetoric which we find still prevalent today, perhaps more prevalent. As Marvin points out, “the hypocrisy behind the rhetoric is obvious to attentive readers. The senator inherited his fortune, so he never had to ‘sink or swim.’” (102). This hypocrisy is even more salient when we remember that the Rosewater fortune was “founded on massive government giveaways facilitated by bribes” (102). Thus Vonnegut effectively satirizes the

kind of rhetoric which Eliot rails against, rhetoric which leads to cruelty and alienation.

Midway through the novel our attention turns to the town of Pisquontuit (“pronounced ‘Pawn-it’ by those who loved it, and ‘piss-on-it’ by those who didn’t”) where we meet Eliot’s closest living relative, Fred Rosewater. The town can be understood as a microcosm of Post-industrial America and the class system as “the village...was populated by two hundred very wealthy families and by a thousand ordinary families whose breadwinners served, in one way and another, the rich” (134). Fred is a life insurance salesman and “represents the desperation of the American middle class. He is trapped in a job that gives him neither dignity nor satisfaction” (Marvin 102). His wife Caroline incessantly harangues Fred for not earning enough money to allow her to socialize with the upper class of Pisquontuit while she keeps the family on the verge of bankruptcy trying to support a lifestyle that she cannot afford. Fred is humorously stricken with scabbed and scarred shins; his “shins were victims of his wife’s interior decorating scheme, which called for an almost schizophrenic use of little tables, dozens of them” (159). Fred’s desperation leads him to constantly consider suicide; he finally chooses to go through with it, only to have Mushari make a timely entrance to tell Fred “about a relatively cheap and simple court action” to make the Rosewater fortune his own.

Caroline Rosewater is a friend to the affluent Amanita Buntline. A member of the servant class of Pisquontuit is the maid of the Buntlines, Selena Deal. She was raised in an orphanage founded by Castor Buntline, an ancestor of

Stewart, Amanita's husband. Selena is sent to be the Buntline's maid per the charter of the orphanage: "that each year, an intelligent, clean female orphan enter domestic service in a Buntline home" (188). Before each Sunday supper the orphans were required to recite this oath:

I do solemnly swear that I will respect the sacred private property of others, and that I will be content with whatever station in life God Almighty may assign me to. I will be grateful to those who employ me...I understand that I have not been placed on Earth to be happy. I am here to be tested. If I am to pass the test, I must be always unselfish...always truthful...and always respectful to those to whom God has, in His Wisdom, placed above me. If I pass the test I will go to joy everlasting in Heaven when I die. If I fail, I shall roast in hell while the Devil laughs and Jesus weeps (189).

Just as Senator Rosewater conflates morality with the free enterprise system, so to does Castor Buntline conflate the class system and private property with divine Will. The orphans are persuaded to be content with their role in life as if it had been ordained by God. The oath serves as a satiric attack on such ideology and highlight Eliot's much different take on Christianity, as he chooses to share his wealth and love the discarded Americans of the servant class.

Selena is sent to the Buntline home "in order to learn about the better things in life and perhaps to be inspired to climb a few rungs of the ladder of culture and social grace" (188). Selena finds herself fed up with her service after a month and she writes a letter to the head of the orphanage to complain. In the letter we learn of an afternoon in which Amanita Buntline was listening to Beethoven, which was unlike any Beethoven Selena had ever heard, as it turns out

the “poor woman” had her records “playing at 78 revolution per minute instead of 33, and she couldn’t tell the difference...I must have gotten that look in my eyes, because she got very mad, and she made me go out and clean up the chauffeur’s lavatory in the back of the garage” (192). Commenting on this scene, Leonard Leff argues that

The phonograph speakers placed throughout the Buntline house represent an absurd attempt to extend the richness of Beethoven into Amanita’s otherwise empty life, but the records, played at Keystone Cops speed, succeed only in parodying her own grotesque cultural concepts. Through its misuse in the hands of the wealthy, art becomes as non-human and cold as Newt Hoenikker’s black painting in *Cat’s Cradle*...the involvement of the rich in the arts is often a source of irony (33).

Selena does not enjoy the social grace of her employers, but instead endures a life of service to a woman who considers herself superior; with Selena’s recognition of Amanita musical ignorance, this feeling of superiority is ridiculed. Selena’s primary complaint isn’t “how ignorant they are, or how much they drink. It’s the way they have of thinking that everything nice in the world is a gift to the poor people from them or their ancestors” (194). On her first afternoon at the Buntline home Selena is called out to the porch by Mrs. Buntline to enjoy a sunset. Unable to think of anything to say, Selena thanks Amanita who responds ““You’re entirely welcome.”” Selena has since “thanked her for the ocean, the moon, the stars in the sky, and the United States Constitution” (194).

Stewart Buntline was once an idealist like Eliot. He and Eliot are represented by the same law firm. After being orphaned at sixteen “Old McAllister” looked after Stewart. McAllister regularly sends Stewart pamphlets “about creeping socialism,” as “some twenty years before, Stewart had come into his office, a wild-eyed young man, had announced that the free enterprise system was wrong, and that he wanted to give all his money to the poor” (166). But Stewart is dissuaded by McCallister who has been through this “same silly argument:” one of his primary duties is the “prevention of saintliness” on the part of his clients. Stewart is, according to McCallister, like so many young students after their first year at “some great university” after having “his Christian nose rubbed, often for the very first time, in the Sermon on the Mount” (169). Vonnegut points out that for many, these feelings of idealism and “saintliness” end, as Stewart Buntline retires to a life of apathy, while his wife retires to a life of self-interest and conspicuous consumption, spending her time shopping for decorated toilet paper roll covers with the money McCallister calls “liquid Utopia” (171). But as Leff points out, Stewart’s utopia amount to a “paradise of sloth...he is a celibate and an automaton, apparently completely emasculated as well as depersonalized by his money” (32).

Vonnegut parodies this loss of idealism by suggesting that it is in fact a clinical problem which plagues many. Eliot’s wife Sylvia, after first going along with Eliot’s experiment, has a nervous breakdown. The psychiatrist that treats Sylvia coins a new term for her disease: “*Samaritrophobia... hysterical indifference to the trouble of those less fortunate than oneself*” (51). Sylvia’s

“condition” is treated with chemotherapy and electric shock, the psychiatrist finally succeeding: as he explains: “I had calmed a deep woman by making her shallow. I had blocked the underground rivers that connected her to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans and made her content with being a splash pool...some cure!” (53).

The doctor concludes that Sylvia’s condition is quite normal: “virtually as common among healthy Americans as noses, say” (54). This language is indeed hyperbolic, but Sylvia’s affliction is similar to Stewart’s. Vonnegut suggests with Stewart and Sylvia that the system which we have created, the free enterprise system, separates us from our fellow human beings and suppresses our conscience. Thomas Marvin reads *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* as “a satiric shock treatment for our crazy modern world” (107). Sylvia has a second breakdown in which she acquires a third “distinctly new personality” which includes “a feeling of worthlessness, of shame at being revolted by the poor and by Eliot’s personal hygiene, and a suicidal wish to ignore her revulsion, to get back to Rosewater, to very soon die in a good cause” (67). She explains to Eliot’s father that his behavior toward the poor of Rosewater is brought about by a secret, “the secret is that they’re human” (68). Eliot enacts his idealistic vision of kindness and love, while others, it would seem, ignore their impulse to help their fellow human beings.

Mushari learns from Eliot and Sylvia’s psychiatrist that all Eliot wants to discuss is American History. Eliot even dreams about Samuel Gompers, Mark Twain, and Alexander Hamilton. When asked if his “tyrant of a father ever

appears in his dreams” he responds “No, but Thorsten Veblen often does” (34). Samuel Gompers founded the American Federation of Labor and Thorsten Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class* combining theories of economics and sociology. We learn from the psychiatrist that Eliot has some knowledge of labor unions and the plight of the working class. The psychiatrist later tells Mushari that Eliot spends his time with the psychiatrist pointing out “well-known facts from history, almost all of them related to the oppression of oddballs or the poor” (96). According to the psychiatrist Eliot certainly has his “wires crossed” as he is bringing his “sexual energies” to creating Utopia. The psychiatrist deems Eliot untreatable and resigns. Eliot is merely amused by the doctor’s reactions claiming to his wife that “it’s a cure he doesn’t understand, so he refuses to admit it’s a cure.” (34). Eliot’s cure is to bring his idealistic vision to reality, rather than ignoring this impulse.

When Eliot first inherits the Rosewater fortune, he takes his duties seriously in a conventional way. He settles in an office in downtown New York. He gives money to various charities and buys art for museums. However, his feelings about art soon change when he meets the writer Arthur Garvey Ulm. Eliot gives Arthur “a tremendous check” and tells Arthur to “go tell the truth, by God” (87). Though Arthur insists that he attempts to show that “Money is shit” in his book; his novel turns out to be obscene, and Eliot suggests, “Irrelevant” (92). During the time spent in New York, Eliot would occasionally disappear. He hitchhikes from town to town carousing with volunteer firefighters and trading away his possessions.

After five years in New York he decides to relocate the Rosewater Foundation headquarters to Rosewater, Indiana. Sylvia pleads for Eliot to come home to New York, but he explains “I *am* home...I’m going to *care* about these people...I’m going to love these discarded Americans...*That* is going to be my work of art” (44). After five years of snubbing the middle class and hosting dinners for the “morons, perverts, starvelings and the unemployed” Sylvia suffers her first nervous breakdown and moves to Europe. Eliot moves the foundation’s headquarters to a fly ridden office above a diner where he “begins dispensing comfort, advice, over the counter medications, small amounts of money, and unconditional love” (Marvin 99). Written in gold lettering on each window of his office were these words:

Rosewater Foundation

How Can We Help

You?

Eliot also leaves messages in phone booths telling people not to kill themselves but to call his foundation and he even gives out stock to newborns. Diana Moon Glampers, “a sixty-eight-year-old virgin who, by almost anybody’s standards, was too dumb to live” is one of the few “discarded Americans” that we learn much about (72). She calls Eliot often on the black phone which Eliot answers day or night. Diana calls because she is frightened by a storm; she insists to Eliot that the electricity is after her, and Eliot’s “anger was sincere” as he exclaims “that electricity makes me so mad, the way it torments you all the time.

It isn't fair” (75). Diana's fears are admittedly irrational, but, like Von Koenigswald's administration of *Boko-maru*, Eliot offers comfort which may indeed be merely a comforting lie, and according to Trout, a love which is uncritical (264). True to his preceding novels, Vonnegut refuses to idealize humanity and our struggles, showing us time and again to instead be in need of comforting lies.

Eliot also devotes himself to the volunteer fire department of the town, installing a World War II air raid siren atop his office. The root of Eliot's desire to help the poor is not merely the “shapeless feelings of guilt” which McCallister argues come with any inheritance. We are certainly drawn to consider the extent to which Eliot's experiences in World War II leads to his Utopian experiment. Eliot led an attack on a “clarinet factory in Bavaria”; he storms the smoke filled building where he found himself “face-to face with a helmeted German in a gas mask...Eliot, like the good soldier he was, jammed his knee into the man's groin, drove his bayonet into his throat, withdrew the bayonet, smashed the man's jaw with the butt of his rifle” (83). Eliot kills three men, who, once the smoke clears, Eliot finds out are really firemen. The boy Eliot bayoneted “didn't look more than fourteen...Eliot seemed reasonably well for about ten minutes after that. And then he calmly lay down in front of a moving truck,” but he is pulled away by his fellow soldiers (84). It is at an army hospital in Paris that Eliot is introduced to Sylvia's father who decides Eliot is “the sanest American he had ever met.” He introduces Eliot to Sylvia and others: “I want you all to meet the only American who has so far noticed the Second World War” (85). It is here that Eliot first

concludes that art has failed him, which Sylvia's father admits, "'is a very fair thing for a man who has bayoneted a fourteen-year-old boy in the line of duty to say'" (85).

Eliot's behavior can thus be partially explained by his devastating experiences in World War II. His reaction is much different, and perhaps more laudable, than Billy Pilgrim's in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy's reaction is escapist, as he embraces the Tralfamadorian's conception of time: that everything that is always has been and always will be. Eliot instead reacts by trying to create an "impossibly hospitable world." Long before Eliot relocates to Rosewater, Indiana, he goes on one of his characteristic benders, this time stumbling into a science fiction writer's convention at which Eliot proclaims to the writers in attendance:

I love you sons of bitches... You're the only ones who'll talk about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years... You're the only ones... who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us.... You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be Heaven or Hell.

This speech can certainly be understood as a reflection of Kurt Vonnegut's brand of science fiction. His science fiction is, as has been previously suggested, used as a means of drawing our attention to the modern world and our folly. We have the

power to create better realities for ourselves; we are “determining” whether our space voyage will be heaven or hell.

Of course Eliot too finds himself agonizing over the world we have created as he attempts to make it more like heaven than hell. Eliot insists that they write a science fiction novel about the “silly ways that money gets passed around now, and then think up better ways” (24). Eliot decides to write a check for two hundred dollars to every person at the convention, exclaiming, ““There’s *fantasy* for you...It’s insane that I should be able to do such a thing, with money so important”” (23).

Eliot considers Kilgore Trout to be society’s greatest prophet, who has been reduced to working as a stock clerk in a trading stamp redemption center. Trout’s masterpiece, which Eliot drunkenly declares to be the only thing people ten thousand years from now will read and remember of our civilization, is called *2BRO2B*, which, “upon examination, turned out to be the famous question posed by Hamlet” (20). Eliot in fact compares himself to Hamlet, which Mushari learns by reading a letter Eliot writes to his wife Sylvia while on his cross country journey which begins “Dear Ophelia” and ends “Love Hamlet.” Eliot is certain that he has “a destiny far away from the shallow and preposterous posing that is our life in New York,” but “Hamlet has one big edge” on Eliot; Hamlet had a ghost to tell him what to do, while he “is operating without instructions” (36). Rachel McCoppin draws our attention to the connection: rather than trying to cure the injustice of his own family, Eliot turns to altruism, and potentially insanity, to

cure the ills of the society in which he lives; he is “preoccupied with accepting individual responsibility in order to help humanity on a personal level” (54).

After Mushari hears the recording of Eliot’s proclamation he searches out the novel by Trout. The only place he can find a copy is at “a smut-dealer’s hole in the wall” (21). What Trout has in common with pornography “wasn’t sex, but fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world” (21). As Jerome Klinkowitz points out, science fiction writers are able to use their imaginations to describe a better world, and understand the “transforming power” of their imaginations. The secret of these science fiction writers is the same as Vonnegut’s: “knowing that reality is not an absolute condition but only a human description changeable from describer to describer and completely relative according to culture” (Klinkowitz 71).

It is generally accepted that Kilgore Trout functions as a stand-in for Vonnegut, offering up Vonnegut’s opinions and commentary. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Trout is an unknown writer who wrestles with the same issues that Vonnegut wrestles with. *2BRO2B*, for instance, is a story about a futuristic time when all diseases are cured and all the work is done by machines. Because of a “serious overpopulation problem” people were encouraged to voluntarily commit suicide in “Ethical Suicide Parlors:” One customer went to one such parlor and asks a “death stewardess” if he would go to Heaven. He hopes to be able to ask God something he was “never able to find out down here...What in the hell are people for?” (22) Eliot finds himself struggling with the same question and tries to find ways to cherish human beings for being humans, even though those around him judge his behavior insane.

Trout's "favorite formula was to describe a perfectly hideous society, not unlike his own, and then, toward the end, to suggest ways in which it could be improved" (21). Vonnegut and Trout share the same formula, only in this case the "hideous society" being described is capitalist America. On his way to Indianapolis to settle his divorce, Eliot has a hallucination in which he sees Indianapolis engulfed in flames; Eliot is familiar with such a fire-storm as on the way to Indianapolis he read "over and over again, his features blank, his palm sweating" the "description of the fire-storm in Dresden," a German city that was bombed during World War II, killing 135,000 civilians (252). Vonnegut, a witness to its devastating destruction, returns to Dresden in his most well-known work *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After his hallucination Eliot blacks out and is confined to a sanitarium.

When Eliot regains consciousness he is being prepared for his sanity defense. Trout, along with Eliot's father, are on scene to prepare Eliot's defense. It is Trout, standing in for Vonnegut, who rationalizes all of Eliot's behavior. Trout explains to Eliot that what he "did in Rosewater County was far from insane...It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horrors will eventually be made world-wide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love people who have no use?"(264)

Trout argues that poverty is a mild disease compared to uselessness which "will kill strong and weak souls alike, and kill every time. We must find a cure" (265). Trout also explains that Eliot's devotions to volunteer fire departments is

also very sane, “for they are, when the alarm goes off, almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land...There we have people treasuring people as people. It’s extremely rare. So from this we must learn” (266). In order to avoid his trial, Eliot commits his greatest acts of altruism, as he accepts as his own 58 babies of Rosewater: “Let their names be Rosewater from this moment on. And tell them that their father loves them, no matter what they may turn out to be. And tell them...to be fruitful and multiply” (275). With these new “heirs” the suit against Eliot is moot.

In another of Trout’s stories, we learn that humans are unique in the universe because they have language, while every other forms of alien life uses “mental telepathy” and “with everybody constantly telling everybody everything, produced a sort of generalized indifference to all information. But language, with its slow, narrow meaning, made it possible to think about one thing at a time—to start thinking in terms of projects” (249). Our use of language is what allows us to change our environment and our ways of thinking about the world; as Trout suggests, Eliot’s “project” should serve as a lesson to all humankind. His “project” demonstrates Vonnegut’s preoccupation with telling stories that reveal the discourses and rhetoric which prevents such humanitarianism. We are offered no easy solutions to society’s problems, only the unhinged effort of Eliot to bring about a utopia in miniature and his challenge to the society around him.

V. Conclusion

Though Vonnegut is popularly known as a sciencefiction writer, he is nevertheless persistently concerned not with fantastic utopian societies of the future, but with the real problems which face the modern world. Throughout his long career, Kurt Vonnegut continuously warns humankind of our worst transgressions, from war and poverty to political corruption and the seemingly unabated destruction of our planet. He is sometimes understood as nihilist, and scholars like Peter J. Reed argue that Vonnegut's cynicism and nihilism constitute his main theme. However, Vonnegut is above all a moralizer, working to warn humankind of our worst follies before it is too late. Though we may indeed be on a cosmic ride through an indifferent universe, with any knowledge of God or purpose being ultimately unknowable and subjective, he insists that we be decent even in an indecent world.

In his early novels, Vonnegut was persistently concerned with one nagging question: what is the meaning of life in a meaningless universe? Though he often deals with meaninglessness rather cynically, he gives us one answer which may offer us some hope. He insists that we are in ultimate control of our destinies, that we should make meaning for ourselves that will make us kind, loving, and gentle, instead of destructive and cruel. As postmodern satirist, Vonnegut challenges the institutions and beliefs which alienate us or destroy our individuality through his inimitable humor and unique style. Postmodernism may indeed be construed as immoral or amoral, and the postmodern position can

certainly frustrate a natural desire for order and sanity. However, Vonnegut's particular brand of postmodern humanism works precisely because of its awareness of the constructedness of reality and the illusion of absolute truth. Meaning is not fixed; reality is not grounded in absolutes, there can merely be a constant struggle to create better truths on which to base our understanding of reality and our place in the universe.

Through the folly of Niles Rumfoord, Vonnegut suggests an incredulity toward a world narrative of peace and cooperation, instead favoring the proliferation of local and provisional truths like the one found on the tiny Island of San Lorenzo. Though Rumfoord's religion indeed encompasses Vonnegut's belief in an absurd universe, it fails to overcome its own cosmology and create a meaningful purpose for its followers; it lacks the one ethic which Vonnegut suggests in the novel: to love. Goodness and wisdom begins when we begin to look inward, when we begin to grapple with the apparent meaninglessness to come up with wisdom which might change the world.

Bokonism may indeed be based on lies. The religion's holy man makes no pretense to absolute truth; he can merely react to the very real problems of hopelessness he witnesses in his community. Eliot Rosewater follows a similar imperative; he can try, like Malachi Constant, to simply love whoever is around to be loved, even if this mission is madness to some, and drunken irresponsibility to others. Vonnegut certainly held that humanity is flawed, and true to this belief, he offers us only flawed Messiahs who grapple with the absurd world we have created. Vonnegut's incessant humbling of humanity can indeed make his satire

so stifling as to be nearly impenetrable, but we can be sure that this humbling serves as a part of his sermon as he preaches his message love.

Certainly Vonnegut's early novels are not clarifying or objective, but within them profound philosophic questions are being wrestled with, often with humor and pessimism. What is the meaning of life, asks Vonnegut. Certainly this is a question of some importance. His fantastic imagination and scathing satiric voice enliven this very basic question. We experience the puzzling out of some meaning despite the conceit that life may indeed have no fixed or innate purpose. Through the many perspectives of often archetypal characters, from money-hungry lawyers, to well-intentioned despots, to stumbling saviors, the philosophic position that Vonnegut posits can be examined from all sides. The various ethics which inform the actions of these characters are shown to be mutable and based on limited perspectives; they are exposed as comforting (or destructive) lies.

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