THE VONNEGUT CONTENTION:
TECHNOLOGY AT THE COST OF HUMANNESS

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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The Vonnegut Contention:
Technology at the Cost of Humanness

Thesis: It is true that progress in technology has extended and promoted man's leisure; however, it has cost him part of his humanity. His personal identity and individuality have been threatened to the point that he has to search frantically for new meaning and purpose that will restore a sense of humanness.

I. Introduction

A. Everyday living cannot be conducted without the aid of technological achievements.

B. As a result, man finds himself with spare time but has nothing to do because he no longer participates in "human" activities which have meaning and purpose for him.

II. Kurt Vonnegut's feelings concerning technology

A. He does not contend that technology, in the initial sense, is evil.

B. Vonnegut does contend that man has allowed technology to dominate him.

C. Vonnegut is not sure that man is aware that science is dominating his life, so he devotes the majority of his writing to it.

III. Vonnegut writes in a style that can be applied by the reader.

A. The settings are constructed to relate to the reader.
   1. Universal application
   2. Universal knowledge

B. The characters of Vonnegut's stories, for the most part, are real.
   1. The middle class
   2. The celebrities
C. Through these, Vonnegut is able to relate to the reader with hopes of revealing him to himself.

IV. Vonnegut reveals his premise in a variety of ways, but also shows ways man searches, and fails, to find a satisfactory purpose or meaning in life.

A. Man tries to find meaning through material wealth.
   1. Money, property, land
   2. Fame and popularity

B. Man searches for meaning and purpose in physical pleasure and extraneous affairs.
   1. Sexual
   2. Alcohol, smoking, daydreaming, fantasizing, psychosomaticizing
   3. Any other acts which may seem out of character

C. Man turns to other people, as dependents on him, for purpose in life; there is no emotional connection—obligatory friendship.

V. Man never quite reaches a good solution so Vonnegut puts forth some suggestions.

A. Man should terminate his search for meaning in the exterior world; the answer to life is in man himself.

B. This discovery pivots around two key concepts—love and understanding.
   1. Love and understanding of self, first.
   2. Love and understanding of others.

C. One must help others to do the same so that a chain reaction will result.

D. Eventually technology will no longer enslave man, but will, rather, help him to interact more personally with his fellowmen.
VI. Conclusion

A. Vonnegut has made harsh statements against society and has accused it of becoming a slave to its own inventions.

B. He forces man to face this problem directly and recognize that these characters represent him, not just hypothetical persons.

C. Vonnegut believes that humanity is the center of the universe and that man should strive to regain the identity and individuality which makes him human by giving him meaning and purpose.
A fourth-generation German-American, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. was born November 11, 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana to Kurt Vonnegut, Sr., an architect and Edith Sophia (Lieber) Vonnegut. He was the youngest of three children, preceded by one sister and one brother.

Vonnegut's writing career can be traced to his school days at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis where he was editor of the daily newspaper, the Echo. But graduation temporarily detained him in his writing as he began to study biochemistry at Cornell University. Later he transferred to Carnegie Institute of Technology only to be inducted into the United States Army shortly after his arrival.

After the war, Vonnegut, switching from biochemistry to anthropology, studied at the University of Chicago for two years, without taking a degree. While studying, he worked as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau; later he accepted a job as public relations man for General Electric in Schenectady, New York, from 1947 - 1950. At this time Mr. Vonnegut became a full-time free lance writer, and for many years his chief source of income was short fiction for Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, Cosmopolitan, Ladies Home Journal, Galaxy, Fantasy and Science Fiction and other "slick" and science fiction magazines.
His experiences with General Electric inspired his first novel, *Player Piano* (Scribner, 1952), a devastating satire about a group of engineers who impose an oppressive automation on American life and about one prominent engineer who leads a revolution against the technological tyranny.

His second, *The Sirens of Titan*, originally published in 1959 and issued again in 1967, is Vonnegut's own favorite among his works, "the only book that was pleasant to write."\(^1\) It has proven to be his most successful work. In it, extraterrestrial forces arrange the whole course of human history to provide an intergalactic traveler with a spare part for his spacecraft.

Vonnegut's third novel, *Mother Night*, was published in 1961 and reissued in 1966. It is the story of one Howard W. Campbell, Jr. Campbell is an American intelligence agent in World War II whose virtuous messages home are coded through virulently anti-Semitic radio broadcasts he makes for the Nazis.

*Cat's Cradle* (1963), the novel which established Vonnegut's reputation, is his second best selling book. It has two dominant characters: Felix Hoenikker, an "innocent" physicist, one of the fathers of the atomic bomb, whose guileless pursuit of truth leads him to invent ice-nine, a molecule-locking catalyst that can - and finally does - turn all the liquid in the world into solid ice. In contrast there

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\(^1\) *Current Biography Yearbook*, ed. Charles Moritz et al. (New York, 1971), p. 430.
is Bokonon, a reprobate religious prophet who, as the world approaches its frozen doom, preaches a gospel of harmless untruths.

In his fifth novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), Vonnegut was facetious on the surface but deadly serious in exploring the problem of loving people who are unlovable. This is accomplished through the chief character Eliot P. Rosewater, a millionaire philanthropist who is trying to spread love in the world.

For years after his survival of the Dresden raid of World War II, Vonnegut tried again and again to translate the terrible experience into literary terms that would not constitute just another war book. This was finally accomplished in his sixth novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) which is described as "a novel in the telegraphic, schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where flying saucers come from." Its hero, Billy Pilgrim - whose life parallels Vonnegut's in many ways - becomes unstuck chronologically and is shunted kaleidoscopically back and forth in a timewarp where past, present, and future are contemporaneous.

Vonnegut's seventh novel, *Breakfast of Champions*, has just recently come off the press. This novel stars the author as narrator. Vonnegut seems to view man, including himself, as a gullible swallower and naive perpetrator of myths that both decrease the life expectancy of this dying

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planet and act as pillars to help us muddle through. The book does not ridicule or deny the importance of myths to man's psychological well-being. It, in fact, recognizes their power to shape the personalities and behavior of individuals.

Having completed this seventh successful novel, Vonnegut now declares that his writing career has come to a close, at least as far as novels are concerned. At the present he lives in Manhattan separated from his wife Jane Marie, their three children, Mark, Edith, and Nanette, and three adopted nephews, James, Steven, and Kurt Adams (the children of Vonnegut's deceased sister). He is a strapping man, six feet three inches tall and weighing 195 pounds, with shaggy brown hair, a furrowed brow, a drooping mustache, and green eyes. He confesses he smokes too much, and his recreations are swimming, sailing, chess, painting, carving wood, making welded sculpture, and playing the clarinet. From all this, plus the obvious evidence of a writing ability, one can conclude that Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is an extremely talented author who believes in "living life."³

³This biography is condensed from Current Biography Yearbook, ed. Charles Noritz et al. (New York, 1971), pp. 429-432.
door toward the office (probably via automobile.)

Having reached his place of employment, he finds himself thoroughly awake as he pushes a button to engage an elevator which takes him to the fifth floor. The work of the day proceeds leisurely without consequence: talking into the dictaphone, writing inter-office communications in the consistent handwriting of the IBM typewriter, and photocopying numerous papers on the handy Xerox machine. Even the adding machine gets a work-out as it is forced to wrack its brain to give instant answers.

As a result of all this, man finds himself with time to spare. But unfortunately time spent often seems like time wasted; human conversation and interaction have been replaced by more impersonal devices. Perhaps the entertainment for the night will be the radio or the new quadraphonic stereo system which was installed. If these do not satisfy, there is always the good old television set. But conversation or interaction with others will once more be neglected.

It is evident that progress in technology has extended and promoted man's leisure; however, it has cost him part of his humanity. His personal identity and individuality have been threatened to the point that he has to search frantically for new meaning and purpose that will restore a sense of humanness.

Just as the subject in the example above seems to have a routine, purposeless and anti-social life, so do a
majority of people in the United States. They are friendless, anti-social, nameless, and, worst of all, ignorant of the fact that they are in such a condition. Technology has become so much a part of these people that it controls them more than it assists them. Their 365 days a year, for approximately 65 years, become increasingly dependent on technological devices as their sense of humanness is slowly obscured by limited human interaction. Kurt Vonnegut, a writer who speaks for and to the '70's, recognizes this pitiful state of man and chooses it as a central theme for nine novels and a multitude of short stories.

Before any further elaboration, it is important to state that Vonnegut does not contend that technology, in the initial sense, is evil. On the contrary, Vonnegut, being an American, is probably as proud of technology as any other American citizen. Without it, he might still be handwriting his first novel; to be sure, without the aid of the modern printing press his popularity would be greatly curtailed. And, of course, what writer does not constantly have a percolator of coffee to help him think. What Vonnegut does contend is that man has allowed technology to dominate him. He uses technological conveniences in order to save a minute here or an hour there, but the benefit of economized time is negated by his lack of social rapport. This is the danger which Vonnegut finds in technology -- the evil which lurks behind its beneficial services.
Vonnegut is not sure that man is aware of this evil. Or if he is, it is a danger which is presently perceived only in his subconscious mind. Because of this sentiment, Kurt Vonnegut has devoted the majority of his writing to helping man perceive this ominous peril which surrounds him.

Kurt Vonnegut's earliest novel *Player Piano* addresses itself directly to this problem. It attacks the science of automation through which man produces machines which replace his pride, his usefulness, and his meaning.¹ The story relates the search of Dr. Paul Proteus, a brilliant man of thirty-five who is manager of the great Ilium Works, for some particular meaning in life: something which will restore the humanity which technology has destroyed. He seeks refuge from his automated office job through association with the townsfolk of Ilium. He drinks, smokes, eats, converses, jokes, argues, and becomes involved with them because it seems a more human activity than pushing buttons all day long, or watching computer lights blink. The outcome of Proteus's search is exactly as Vonnegut would have it. Proteus joins with these common people in their inevitable revolt against the Works and once again restores purpose and meaning not only to his life, but also to the lives of many others.

Likewise, support of Vonnegut's thesis can also be found in his later novels. *Cat's Cradle* is a rebellion

against that segment of science which produces better methods by which man can annihilate himself. In this story Vonnegut portrays a scientist who has discovered a new element which causes water to freeze instantaneously. Realizing the danger of such a force, Dr. Felix Hoenikker isolates himself on the island of San Lorenzo in hopes that the world will never discover him or his destructive weapon, ice-nine. As fate would have it, his secret is found out through the death of Dr. Frank Hoenikker -- his son entrusted with the secret upon Felix's death -- who swallows a vial of ice-nine just before dying. Upon burial of his body in the ocean, the water immediately turns to ice; all other connected water likewise freezes as it is contaminated with particles of ice-nine from Hoenikker's corpse. The result is a severed life-line to man's existence and the eventual destruction of the world and humanity.

In *Sirens of Titan* the epitome of science is revealed as Unk tours the universe in his ultra-modern spaceship conversing with mechanical robots which seem to have more feeling and purpose than Unk. And of course, the antenna which is planted in Unk's brain in order to "desensitize" his actions is descriptive of many over-mechanized Americans. They no longer care about other persons or the feelings of others. If it is necessary to hurt a friend in order to

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.}, \text{ pp. 21-22+.}\]
gain for oneself, then friendship must not stand in the way. Emotional feelings and ties must be abolished so that they, like Unk, become insensitive to their own actions.

Welcome to the Monkey House, a collection of short stories, also gives its readers fragments of evidence about the loss of identity and individualism. "Harrison Bergeron" relates a tale where all persons in a society are given handicaps in order to achieve equality. Beauty must be concealed with masks; strength must be oppressed by weights attached to the body; intelligence is obstructed by a sharp jolt in the brain each time ideas begin to form. All these characteristics which make men unique and different from each other are stripped away and replaced by uniformity. Individualism is denied, conformity imposed.

"Epicac," another short composition from this book, is a love story. Although the love is assumed to be between man and woman, one finds that this particular man cannot woo the young lady without the aid of the computer Epicac. The young man masks his true individuality by allowing Epicac to write love poetry for him which he uses to snare his lover. The love, then, has developed between computer and woman since the man has contributed very little. The implication is rather obvious. Vonnegut is criticizing man for using technology to accomplish an act which man alone can do -- make love. Man has incorporated science into an emotion which makes him unique among all animals, thus
stripping himself of a quality which gives him identity and individuality among beasts and men.

These works, though somewhat symbolic, show in one way or another how technology becomes the ruler and how humans give up their individuality and identity to become servants to it. This is precisely the concept Vonnegut hopes to reveal to mankind; his goal is for man to comprehend and prevent such an actuality.

Having set for himself such a massive goal, it is difficult for Vonnegut's novels and short stories to succeed. Yet each succeeds in its own way; each work is carefully manipulated in a way that it is meaningful to the reader. Each story is a fiction, but Vonnegut incorporates "realistic-fictional" situations in all. By this I mean that the particular actions which are contained in the plots are constructions of Vonnegut's ever industrious imagination; however, they are constructed so that they are representative of an infinite number of incidents familiar to the reader -- some action the reader has either witnessed or been involved with. Such an incident could be unique to particular readers, or it could be a national movement which is known to all. To further explain this technique of Vonnegut's, let us take specific examples from his works.

**Player Piano**, Vonnegut's first novel, centers its action around a small town: a town which has come into existence because of a large factory located there. Most of its citizens used to be employees in this factory, and
those that were not, came because the factory workers needed them in order to maintain the life of the town. These included such people as grocery store owners, car dealers, shoe and clothing store managers, policemen, and of course bartenders. The whole town was practically self-sufficient -- at least as much as one could expect for a town this size. The residents of this community were friends and neighbors to each other, but not without their neighborly feuds. And everybody's business was everybody else's business, too.⁴ Sound familiar? Without limiting the reader to locations or place-names, Vonnegut has created a town which could be almost any small town across the nation. Vonnegut does assign this particular community the name of Ilium, and he places it in New York. But these, I believe, are only for the sake of convenience to himself in writing and to the reader in keeping track of the characters' movements. Without stating "Ilium, New York" the same story could have occurred -- perhaps in a location "closer to home" for the reader.

Another of Vonnegut's "realistic-fictional" settings, "The Hyannis Port Story," describes the summer home of the Kennedy family, Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. He describes the kinds of people who inhabit this "exotic" region of the country. Although the topography is not detailed, the reader is given some idea of the environment as Vonnegut

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refers to "the Presidential Motor Inn, the First Family Waffle Shop, the PT-109 Cocktail Lounge, and a miniature golf course called the New Frontier."^4 With nothing other than this description, Mr. Vonnegut continues his story without ever having to stop and insert explanatory paragraphs. Why? More explanation is not required for the public. Every reader knows who the Kennedys are and can probably describe their home in Hyannis Port. Thus, any further explanation of the setting would be both trivial and senseless.

Using these two examples, one can begin to analyze what Kurt Vonnegut is doing. In choosing locations which are universally known or designing those that are representative of familiar places, Vonnegut can involve his reader in a situation which is applicable to him -- one which will hopefully let the reader "play" the roles of some of the vital characters.

At this point it is essential to present another technique which Vonnegut employs, the use and development of characters, so that these too are adaptable to the reader. One such example is the use of the middle class society which "is a constant point of reference in Vonnegut's commentary on life."^5 He describes the "average" man who owns a "postwar colonial home with discount-store furniture,


and who worries about payments on his second-hand car."

Such an example is the character Herbert Foster in the short story "The Foster Portfolio," which is found in Welcome to the Monkey House. Mr. Foster is nobody of any importance; he's just another citizen in a small, anonymous, American town. He works as a clerk in a wholesale house during the day, while evenings find him at Volunteer Fire Department meetings, church functions, or movies. Although nothing about Mr. Foster seems to be extraordinary, Vonnegut centers an entire short story around him.

Numerous other examples are disclosed in Vonnegut's novels. In Mother Night and Slaughterhouse Five one finds war veterans reliving their past and narrating their present and possible future. Neither of these characters is renowned for heroic deeds. In fact, Campbell, of Mother Night, has been totally rejected by his country because of his secret undercover connections with the Nazi party, while Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse Five has become unstuck in time and, thus, seems to many to be mentally unbalanced. Nothing distinguishes these men from any others; they are simply GI's returned to civilian life. Yet Vonnegut sees something special enough in them to center a complete novel around each.

Another perfect example of Vonnegut's middle-class target is found in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. Even though

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6 Ibid., p. 21.
7 Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House, p. 60.
Mr. Rosewater plays an important role in this novel, the citizens of Rosewater, Indiana play an even more important part. Without them the novel would not contain a plot, because Rosewater would have no one to assist. Thus, Vonnegut has once more exalted the humble middle class.

Although the middle class does play the important role in Vonnegut's writings, he does not neglect the members of the upper class. Practically every story or novel written contains some upper class figure. Some of these are named outright while others' names are disguised by some slight alteration of the letters. Complete changes in name also occur, but Vonnegut always seems to interject some action which gives them away immediately. In this respect God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater stands out among all others. Eliot Rosewater can represent many universally known figures with enormous finances. Perhaps Vonnegut is attacking the Goldwaters; perhaps the Rockefellers. Whoever it is, his portrayal is accurate with large sums of money being controlled by one particular member of the family, discrepancies as to how the money is to be used, and thousands seeking to benefit from donations. Likewise, Vonnegut discusses President Kennedy and his family in order to relate to his audience.8 And Malachi Constant is representative of America's Howard Hughes with all his wealth and social phobia.9

8 Ibid., p. 138.
In other works Vonnegut has not been as precise about his character representations. _Player Piano_ contains Dr. Proteus, _Mother Night_ has Reverand Lasher, and _Cat's Cradle_ includes Major General Franklin Hoenikker. All these play rather important roles in their respective novels, yet who they actually represent is not known. Possibly Vonnegut has stereotyped these characters, but it is more probable that he left it to the reader to supply his own character likenesses.

Here again one can refer to applicableness. These kinds of characters interest the middle class people—the persons who will read Vonnegut's literature. They can easily see their friends and families as well as themselves in such situations, for Vonnegut's characters smoke, drink, fornicate, daydream, fantasize or psychosomaticize just as they do. And they can associate other characters with universally-known figures.

Thus, through setting and character choice Kurt Vonnegut has unfolded an analogy for all of mankind. _Mr._ Vonnegut has created a fictional situation which envelops the reader in a sort of reality as he subconsciously relates these fictional situations to his own. Hopefully, this will cause some speculation within the reader and action to prevent the downfall of the individual.

So far, one has only seen how Kurt Vonnegut is able to relate to his audience through settings and characters. Yet this is not as trivial a matter as it may seem. Since
it is Vonnegut's goal to disclose man's technological dependency, it is of utmost importance that each reader is able to see himself in the situations presented throughout Vonnegut's works. If the reader cannot associate with these settings and characters, he is likely to classify the situations irrelevant and shrug them off as light entertainment. Association with the reader, however, not only gains his attention and interest, but also generates his concern for his own well-being. It is this sense of concern that is the key to whatever else Vonnegut writes. When this concern is established, then Vonnegut may proceed to state his premise. But he must constantly strive to keep his reader involved and enveloped in the action and at the same time explicate his purposes as fully as is necessary.

Vonnegut states his premise over and over again throughout all his writing: man is no longer human because he is too industrialized and technologized. But in each instance his characters convey different approaches in trying to restore their individuality and identity. Having considered many of these approaches, I have been able to place them in three major categories: man's search for meaning in material wealth, man's search of his physical emotions for purpose, and man's search for other people or for other people to give back his meaning of life.

The first of these categories is probably the most common, not only in Vonnegut's writings, but also in works
of other authors of this period. Material wealth always seems to substitute for some character action. In Vonnegut's case, however, man yearns to find what makes him human: what particular behavior it is that makes him unique among all men. Having been a servant of technology, it seems only natural for him to feel that through money, land, or property he can become unique. But, alas, others have conjectured a similar fantasy and there remains no uniqueness in it. With this term "material wealth" it is necessary to state that I have included fame and popularity as well as money and the like. Thus, a man need not be a millionaire to own material wealth. Here, Vonnegut's short story "Miss Temptation" will serve as an example. The story revolves around a small-town girl who is a "bit-part actress in the summer theatre." From Vonnegut's physical description one depicts a sluttish coquette who annually plagues the men of the town with her presence. However, in the final analysis, which comes at the end of the story, she is merely trying to gain fame and popularity for herself. Nothing else has ever been intended -- only an attainment of material wealth to make her unique.

This same sort of thing can be found in Cat's Cradle if one considers Dr. Frank Hoenikker. He strives to make himself rich and famous, but unfortunately unpopular, in

10Vonnegut, Welcome to the Monkey House, p. 70.
11Ibid., pp. 81-83.
his discovery of ice-nine. Likewise, Norman Mushari, the lawyer in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, tries to gain favor with some distantly related Rosewaters in order to obtain a legal percentage of the Rosewater Foundation. The list of examples is endless if one considers all the aspects of material wealth. But whatever the example, Vonnegut is striving to prove one point -- that humanness can not be found in wealth.

Many of Vonnegut’s characters seem to have realized that material wealth is not the answer. Instead, they turn toward their emotions and physical pleasures for meaning in life. Several of them deviate to sexual diversions. Billy Pilgrim of *Slaughterhouse Five* is whisked away to the planet Tralfamadore where Vonnegut vividly describes his mating with Montanna Wildhack. Malachi Constant seeks a union with one, if not all three, of the beautiful Titian maidens as he tours space as Unk. Dr. Proteus’s wife searches for fulfillment from Mr. Shepherd (Proteus’s competitor) since she cannot gain it from her husband. Perhaps these are only fantasies, but they are fantasies

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12 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York, 1971).  
which have become realities for particular characters; these fantasies have helped particular characters discover a temporary reason for existence -- a temporary sense of humanness.

Just as these characters resort to physical sexual diversions, so do others depend on extraneous affairs, those actions which seem out of character for given persons. Once more one may refer to Dr. Paul Proteus for further explication. Being such an intellectual being, it seems rather odd that he should find satisfaction in mingling with the lower intellects of Ilium. However, frequently one finds him sitting in a run-down bar chatting with whoever might come along. Proteus makes no references to his social status, and he tries to temporarily strip himself of it by dressing in the fashion of his company. The same statement might be made about Eliot Rosewater. With all his wealth and fame, it is unrealistic for him to remain in a small town living in utter humility and associating with such a deprived society. But Rosewater, too, is frequently found attending volunteer fire department meetings or gossiping with the women on the street.

Certainly one can recognize what Vonnegut is asserting. These characters are seeking an answer through sex or other types of indulgence. They represent what many Americans are attempting to do: crawl out from under technology's iron hand and discover what it's like to be human.
The third category is probably as close as man has gotten to an honest answer. Having failed to find identity in the previous two means, man turns his attention to other people. He begins to look for other persons who will make him feel unique, or he looks in other people to find a meaning for life. Because Vonnegut's novels are more or less science-fiction, the persons his characters turn to are often inhuman by definition, but very human in actions. Examination of Boaz in *Sirens of Titan* will explain this observation. While Unk and Boaz are venturing through the universe, their rocket lands in a cavern-like area. This cavern is inhabited by parasitic creatures called harmoniums which thrive on the rhythmic vibrations of anything. Being attracted to Boaz's heartbeat, he believes they simply love him. In return he becomes their friend and furnishes them with all the rhythmic vibrations they could ever want from the tape recorder on the ship.\(^1\)\(^7\) Boaz believes he has found his purpose in life, to supply the harmoniums with music. So involved does he become that when departure time arrives he does not wish to leave.\(^1\)\(^8\) He earnestly believes the harmoniums are totally dependent on him even though they existed with extreme efficiency before he arrived. Nevertheless, Vonnegut makes his point: Boaz has found purpose in the harmoniums.


\(^{18}\)Ibid., p. 213.
Another clearcut example can be seen in Campbell as one considers his actions with Resi in *Mother Night*. Even after it has been revealed to him that his lover is an impostor, he continues to depend on Resi. He sees her as an excuse to continue life. She is someone to come home to; someone who needs a shoulder to cry on; and someone who urges him to live on. After her death, Campbell's actions move rather quickly, and few of them seem to be self-instigated. The rest of his life is spent being pushed and pulled from one place to another by the force of outside parties. Thus, Kurt Vonnegut has shown once more man's method of searching and perhaps finding, to some extent, a purpose for one's life in other people.

It is obvious from all previous discussion that mankind is searching for an answer to whatever question life poses for him. And even though he comes within inches of one excellent solution, he never quite reaches it. Therefore, Kurt Vonnegut puts forth some suggestions for man to reflect upon. First Vonnegut recommends that humans terminate their search for meaning in the exterior world; man's answer to the meaning of life lies within himself.\footnote{Peter J. Reed, *Writers for the 70's: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (New York, 1972), p. 56.} It is not an answer which can be found by obtaining material wealth, physical pleasure, or obligatory friendship. Nor is it an answer within the outer realms of science.\footnote{Ibid., p. 58.} It is a response which can only be discovered within each individual.
This discovery pivots around two key concepts -- love and understanding. This love and understanding must not only be of one's neighbors but of one's self. Since the latter of the two is stressed as the more important, it is only logical that it should come foremost. Each individual must learn to know himself. He must know his likes and dislikes, his strong and weak points, and his outlook or philosophy of life. This in itself can prove to be a profound assignment as it is hard for one to admit his faults and frailties. Once this survey has been concluded one must learn to love and respect himself, for the way to understanding and meaning in life lies in the knowledge of ourselves.\(^{21}\)

After the latter segment of the premise is fulfilled, one may continue with the former: loving and understanding others. Since one has already accomplished self-analysis, it should become quite a simple task to analyze others. However, the examination must not terminate in the mind of the analyst. It is his duty to assist others in self-analysis. The result will hopefully be a chain reaction reaching to all corners of the nation. Finally, people will begin to throw off the chains of technology and commence to become human again. This is what Vonnegut has been advocating throughout all of his novels and short stories; "the emphasis falls not on the absurdity of existence, but upon the

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 219.
possibilities of giving life in an absurd universe some meaning, dignity, and human warmth.\textsuperscript{22} Life can be improved and be lent meaning, especially through love. And eventually, technology, with all its inferred power, will have little effect on the "human" part of the being. It will, rather, provide leisure time in which man may interact more personally with his fellowmen.

In conclusion, one must admit that Kurt Vonnegut has made some rather harsh statements against society. He has accused man of becoming a slave to his own inventions by consistently comparing the past with the mechanized future and the present. But, it is only through this kind of comparison that man is able to appraise his present situation. Yet, Vonnegut does not belittle what technology has done for man, but only ridicules what man may be in danger of doing for technology. Through this ridicule Vonnegut has reached out to society in order to recognize and face its problems. Though science fiction may not seem to be the ideal way of doing this, Vonnegut has discovered that it is one means through which people can face situations directly,\textsuperscript{23} for they can see, in others, their own faults without fear of embarrassment through public exposure. Once Vonnegut feels the reader has squarely confronted the problems, he begins the criticism. This criticism begins with characters but

\footnote{\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 74.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{23}W.E. McNelly, "Science Fiction, the Modern Mythology," \textit{America}, September 5, 1970, p. 125.}
constantly turns so that it eventually points directly at the reader who once more sees himself and his situation. Then Vonnegut urges him to act now before it is too late. Thus, the reader, hopefully, is able to conclude, "Hey! This character is me, and I have a problem which needs my attention now."

Kurt Vonnegut may not have the correct answers, but he is at least asking the right questions. He is "... permitting us to comprehend the tragic consequences of our misuse of science, science that should be a tool rather than a master, a servant rather than a dybbuk." Scientific knowledge cannot provide the answers to essentially human problems, but people all too often think it can; so they continue their endless search.

Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut's make-believe author, asserts these two points: (1) people need a sense of being for something, of some use or value; few find this, and (2) people need all the uncritical love they can get. People need a sense of humanness. This is not simply Trout speaking; it is Vonnegut philosophizing on his feeling toward humanity and life. Trout is Vonnegut declaring this premise over and
over again: life is really about "... looking for and finding, reasons to stay alive on a planet that's certainly crazy and frequently shitty, too..." Nevertheless, Vonnegut advocates that man alone can make it better by ignoring technology and turning to love and understanding.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., prophet of the '70's as many have called him, has recognized the present situation of society, and reveals his plea to mankind in an address to a graduating class at Bennington College:

I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all; that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrater of the grandest dreams of God Almighty... If you can believe that and make others believe it, human beings might [become human and] stop treating each other like garbage.

Thus, Kurt Vonnegut denounces man's dependence on science and technology and pleads with him to restore man's individuality and identity that man may possess a life containing meaning and purpose.

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Bibliography


