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Destruction of Formal Barriers: Critical Reception of Kurt Vonnegut's Work

These days, things in our lives that were once easily classified, categorized, and defined are no longer so black and white. Sexuality is no longer defined by just gay or straight, religious beliefs can now become multidenominational, and the lines separating categories within the art world have been blurred. In literature, genre has evolved. The ways in which we determine genre have changed over the years, but it has never been as difficult as today. As fewer and fewer unifying characteristics exist among literatures, a question arises: what are the benefits of having such clear divisions of genres? What would happen if we were to stop setting such exact parameters for how to classify art? Critic Thomas Pavel responds to these questions by saying that "[g]enre is a crucial interpretive tool because it is a crucial artistic tool in the first place…Genre helps us figure out the nature of a literary work because the person who wrote it and the culture for which that person labored used genre as a guideline for literary creation" (202). Genre and the tools we use to classify literature are legacies for formation in the literary world. Art, literature, and we as human beings evolve and grow based on the experience and products of the past. Thus, to ignore genre or to cast it aside would be to succumb to forces that would hinder further expansion and growth of literature. However, if we decide to recognize genre as an important feature in critical studies, we must face the

daunting task of fitting different, unique, or otherwise form breaking works into confined parameters.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s volume of work fits into this rule-defying category. While one can recognize his work as a screenplay or a short story, an essay or a novel, within these characteristics lie the qualities that force one to question whether his work is fiction, memoir, or science fiction, whether it is silly, stupid, thoughtful or brilliant, or all of the above. For the sake of length, this paper will focus on a small selection of Vonnegut's novels as a group representative of his writing style. These novels include his first, *Player Piano,* his most well known, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.* Though these novels vary in their structure, plot development, and inspiration (*Slaughterhouse-Five* is undoubtedly inspired by events in Vonnegut's life, whereas *Player Piano* is based on a more observational study of the development of modern society), they are all connected by elements including conversational diction, metaphysical questioning, and even recurring characters.

Yet while continuity exists among his works, Vonnegut's style lacks definition. Speaking of one of Vonnegut's works, Leonard Mustazza writes in his article "The Machine Within: Mechanization, Human Discontent, and the Genre of Vonnegut's *Player Piano*" that "we have not found the right-shaped box yet" (99). We have not been able to categorize his work in a simple enough or clear enough manner as to place them in a box with works of other authors of the same category. He continues by saying that "[i]n fact, Vonnegut's artistic originality lies precisely in his deliberate avoidance of easy categorization, his refusal to write derivative formula fiction, and nowhere in his work is this originality of vision better displayed than in his first novel, *Player Piano*" (99). At

first glance, *Player Piano* may not seem like such original fiction. Following traditional narrative plot structure, Vonnegut introduces the protagonist, Paul Proteus, as "the most important, brilliant person in Ilium, the manager of the Ilium Works, though only thirty-five. He was tall, thin, nervous, and dark, with the gentle good looks of his long face distorted by dark-rimmed glasses. He didn't feel important or brilliant at the moment, nor had he for some time" (1). Upon introducing the character, Vonnegut foreshadows conflict by revealing that this principal player in the novel is dissatisfied with his life while others rely on and believe in him. This characteristic leads into the rising action, which is Paul's recognizing his discontent with his job and society and looking for ways out. Further in the novel, Vonnegut reveals that

> Doctor Paul Proteus was a man with a secret. Most of the time it was an exhilarating secret, and he extracted momentary highs of joy from it while dealing with fellow members of the system in the course of his job. At the beginning and close of each item of business he thought, 'To hell with you.' It was to hell with them, to hell with everything…Outwardly, as a manager, he was unchanged; but inwardly he was burlesquing smaller, less free souls who would have taken the job seriously (137).

The rising action manifests itself as Paul's inner secret becomes more and more apparent to those around him. He eventually quits his job and joins forces with a rebel group that calls itself the "Ghost Shirt Society." The climax occurs while Paul is being questioned in the court about his loyalty to the mechanized society of which he was once a leader. In the middle of questioning, the Ghost Shirts lead a rebellion, destroying the machines, buildings and establishments that have taken over their jobs and their freedom. As the falling actions begin and the battle plays itself out, the denouement can be recognized by

the rebel characters' return to the ways which once inspired their revolution: among the wreckage of the battle against machines,

> Paul and Finnerty left the car to examine the mystery, and saw that the center of attention was an Orange-O machine. Orange-O, Paul recalled, was something of a *cause célèbre,* for no one in the whole country, apparently, could stomach the stuff…But now the excretor of the blended wood pulp, dye, water, and orange-type flavoring was as popular as a nymphomaniac at an American Legion convention.
> "O.K., now let's try anotha' nickel in her an' see how she does…"
> "*Clunkle"* went the coin, and then a whir, and a gurgle.
> The crowd was overjoyed. (337-8).

Such is the nature of the conclusion. Progress is unstoppable and irreversible.

But is this the only conclusion to a novel that follows all the rules? Mustazza writes again about Vonnegut's originality and deference of the rules. When questioning the genre and structure of this novel, he observes that "[t]hrough roughly the first half of *Player Piano*, Vonnegut writes—quite deliberately—a standard and ostensibly derivative dystopian novel, the very sort his unsympathetic critics recognize" (101). If one continues to read the novel as following the traditionally structured narrative formula as presented above, she should classify the novel as dystopian, like Huxley's and Orwell's works. However,

> having established that connection with like works, having in effect set up the unwary reader, Vonnegut wryly overturns the reader's expectations in the remainder of the novel. Beginning with Paul's own disillusionment with the pastoral Eden he has tried to construct, Vonnegut leads his

> protagonist (and the reader) down the darker paths of the human psyche (101).

Rather than concluding the novel simply with the understanding of unyielding progress, Vonnegut dives even deeper into questions about human behavior and merit. This "exploration of such ignoble human motivations and insecurities places him squarely in the company of moral writers, and, in this sense, *Player Piano* is not a standard dystopian novel at all, but something new, that neat generic boxes cannot accommodate" (101). According to Mustazza, Vonnegut's writing belongs to a group perhaps deemed "moral novels." Is that group defined enough for modern criticism, or is it perhaps too specific?

Critics often cite Vonnegut's work as part of the science fiction genre. While the science fiction elements may appear limited or nonexistent in *Player Piano* (and we will explore the definitions of science fiction literature in the next section), certainly the time travel and aliens in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the lethal, destructive element Ice-9 in *Cat's Cradle*, and the travel and life throughout the universe in *Sirens of Titan* reflect science fiction. Josh Simpson, in his article "'This Promising of Great Secrets': Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* or 'Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World': Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy," claims that Vonnegut's work, while containing messages and elements that correspond with the science fiction category, is actually something different. He "claim[s] that far from being a science fiction writer, Kurt Vonnegut is a writer whose works, when read closely, ultimately warn against the dangerous ideas that exist within science fiction. At the center of his canon resides the notion that science fiction is capable of filling

humanity with false promises for utopian societies that do not and, perhaps more important, cannot exist" (262). In this case, authors who flourish in the science fiction genre often glorify the future and suggest false positives about what life could be like. Simpson acknowledges, as Mustazza does, that Vonnegut is writing something different. Both critics recognize that Vonnegut writes a world more realistically than those in the genres to which he supposedly belongs. This world, because of its realities, is sad and dark. Does Vonnegut's use of science fiction in order to "warn against" science fiction permit his work to, again, become a genre of its own? Simpson writes that "[t]he novels, short stories, and plays that collectively form Kurt Vonnegut's literary canon are unique in that they can be read two ways—as autonomous texts that in and of themselves contain meaning and as parts of a larger whole" (261). Not only does this statement apply to the Vonnegut's novels in that they can stand alone, yet they make sense when read as a set, but it also applies to the sense that his work can stand alone without being categorized specifically as science fiction, but it can also belong to a larger family of texts by reflecting similar characteristics and patterns, though the ultimate goal and message of that literature may be different.

The goals and messages of the science fiction genre are, on their own, difficult to describe because a definition of the genre is necessary first. This definition, too, is difficult to obtain because of extreme variance among authors and critics. One writer, Philip A. Pecorino, cites in an essay many definitions of the term "science fiction." The first, by H. Bruce Franklin, divides fiction into four categories:

> 1. Realistic fiction—a description of present reality by the production of a counterfeit of that reality

> 2. Historical fiction—a description of present reality by the production of a counterfeit of that reality's history
> 3. Science fiction—a description of present reality in terms of a credible, hypothetical invention, past, present, or, most usually, future, extrapolated from that reality
> 4. Fantasy—a description of the present reality in terms of impossible alternatives to that reality (5).

From these definitions, one can conclude that Vonnegut's works, *Player Piano* specifically, actually do fit into the science fiction. It describes reality as a credible society in which machines have taken over most human jobs and living beings have become entirely dependent upon them. This is a hypothetical representation of society because we recognize machines taking over human jobs, but by no means are machines the majority. Pecorino also sites Isaac Asimov, a science fiction writer, who "has noted that there are three types of science fiction: 1) adventure oriented, 2) technology oriented, and 3) socially oriented" (6). Pecorino elaborates on the three types and explains that "[i]t is in the third, the socially oriented types that the real cultural and philosophical importance of science fiction emerges. These science fiction works focus on the implications of technological progress for society in general rather than on technological advances, gadgets, or theories" (6). Again, *Player Piano* clearly fits into the suggested definition of science fiction.

Carl Howard Freedman begins his book *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* with definitions of both critical theory and science fiction. Of science fiction, he writes that "[i]t is symptomatic of the complexity of science fiction as a generic category that critical discussion of it tends to devote considerable attention to the problem of definition—much

more so than is the case with such superficially analogous genres as mystery fiction or romance, and perhaps even more than with such larger categories as epic and the novel itself. No definitional consensus exists" (13). Freedman recognizes that science fiction is a multifaceted literary category. It is such because it raises important questions, accurate societal observations, but it does so in a manner that is not always based on logic or that which is possible in the natural world. Some may find relating to texts that form their arguments from imagination and not fact difficult if not impossible. Because of this disconnect between important scholarly issues and its less scholarly means of production, the classification of literature lacks clarity. In order to place some sort of border around this genre, Freedman continues in this section by recognizing that "[f]or the general public…, the name science fiction has always suggested the pulp tradition" (14). *Star Wars, Star Trek,* and other similar series belong to this category. But Freedman takes care to thoroughly explain how more critically prestigious literature could be considered science fiction:

> The term [science fiction] can be taken to include…such world-class epic poets as Dante and Milton …The point is not simply that, by the contemporary standards of rationality, Dante offers plausible scientific speculation as to the geography of hell in relation to that of earth (and purgatory), and that Milton does the same with regard to the substance of which angels are supposed to be made. On this level, indeed, one might even argue that Dante and Milton, in the active interest they took in the scientific developments of their own times and places, are considerably more akin to Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke than to Wordsworth and T.S. Eliot (15).

With these two facets of science fiction—pulp fiction and new definitions of classics of science fiction—we come closer to defining the genre. Pecorino, too, addresses this ability to apply recent science fiction studies to older classics. He claims that "*Republic* is the oldest example of science fiction known for Plato speculated in exactly the same way as many science fiction writers do today. He investigated trends that were active in his day and speculated on what would happen if they continued, were altered, or were reversed" (11). Is any work that questions the function of a society and offers solutions, possible or impossible, then, considered science fiction? Where is the inevitable literary line drawn to separate utopian literature from fantasy, or speculative literature from science fiction? Clearly, from the linkage of classics to the science fiction genre, it becomes apparent how elastic the boundaries surrounding genre have become.

In order to delineate among these types of texts, here is a proposed definition which combines the definitions encountered so far: science fiction is an interpretation of the realities and beliefs of the author's present society in an exaggerated, fantastical, or skeptical way that questions and explores the unknown in the universe. Under this umbrella, utopian, dystopian, speculative and even the pulp adventurous science fiction novels are all members of the same family. Kurt Vonnegut's work is no exception to this rule.

Now that the content of science fiction has been recognized through association to such works as *Republic* and *Paradise Lost*, accurately in terms of science fiction or not, and through addressing the real mysteries of the world in which we live, one must examine the writing, the actual text for its merit, for its art. Pecorino writes that

> For the most part, science fiction has been regarded as poor literature. With certain exceptions, this is true; most science fiction *is* stylistically primitive, that is the syntax and writing style are not as developed as those of other forms of fiction. The sentence structure is simplistic, usually composed of many declarative sentences piled on top of each other. Science fiction authors usually do not display any great virtuosity with such literary techniques as symbolism, allegory, or metaphor…The emphasis is on the plot, the action, for science fiction writers are more concerned with the ideas embodied in their stories than the manner in which they present them (8).

If this lack of stylistic excellence is, in fact, true of science fiction, than is the content alone enough to make it a genre desirable for critical interest, interpretation, and reception? Is science fiction worth studying?

A good place to start when attempting to answer this question is in identifying universally studied, critically acclaimed and canonized literature. Alastair Fowler observes in "Genre and the Literary Canon" that there actually exist many canons: "[t]he official canon is institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism. But each individual has also his personal canon, works he happens to know and value" (98). Can works from the official canon also exist in one's personal canon? Are works from one's personal canon consistent with those in the official canon? Fowler explains, too, that "the idea of canon certainly implies a collection of works enjoying an exclusive completeness (at least for a time)" (98). Because the author recognizes the current, official canon as exhibiting "coherence" and consistency, one can assume that science fiction will not receive an invitation into this exclusive club. However, while canonical texts are definite examples of the kinds of literature expected for one to study, they fail to represent the

only texts worthy of such notice. Fowler states that "[t]he novelistic mode worked its way…to the highest position of the generic hierarchy…Within 'the novel,' of course, different strata exist, rightly or wrongly. Thus there is a relatively firm distinction between the probable novelistic kinds and various others, particularly formulaic genres such as thrillers, westerns, and fantasy" (109). The author continues by saying "[t]his may not be acknowledged openly as a hierarchical distinction. But libraries and bookshops segregate the serious and unserious genres more or less strictly. Science fiction was until quite recently sold together with pornography" (109). Having realized that the novel has become part of the canon, it has become necessary to further define what can be included in such a specific group of texts. Obviously, science fiction would not have been considered for the canon if book sellers assume that the reading demographic of the genre consists of people that would choose to read pornography rather than Shakespeare. Simpson addresses the relationship between pornography and science fiction: "Pornography, understood as images representing the complete carnal gratification of the flesh, presents the reader with a distorted view of reality, as do science fiction novels. Both science fiction and pornography, Vonnegut suggests, present the reader with blissful images of a world that cannot be reached or achieved in reality" (264). This type of literature proves particularly useful to a reader. She can understand that the world presented to her in the text is not actually the world she lives in. It may be better, maybe worse, but if it allows her to look at her present reality in a different way, to question the way things work and the purpose of such societies and lives, then the literature has achieved what all great literature should achieve. To this effect, science fiction should be a part of the official canon.

Aside from canonical studies, simply the concept of genre and novel is under scrutiny. Hayden White writes that "genre is one of those things whose manifestation *demands* both recognition of *what* it is (pure or hybrid) and also acceptance of its *value*—positive or negative, as the case may be" (598). Science fiction combines utopian novels, period novels, and elements of other literary works, thus proving the genre a hybrid. Too, the simple fact that one must argue credibility for science fiction, its value, to the current critical circle, is negative. In this essay, White elaborates on critic Fredric Jameson's ideas about genre. One of which states that "genre is a sublimated form of a class fantasy in which class conflicts themselves achieve an 'imaginary' resolution by means of narrativization. Thus, genre, genericization, and genre-fiction are interpreted as crucial elements of ideology, providing imaginary matrices…on which real social conflicts can be given possible resolution in ways conformable to class aspirations and ideals" (603). With science fiction as a genre, and the understanding that genre evolves from social conflicts among and within classes, it is clearly a reaction to one's society and it speaks for its people. It has become its own canon, a regional or representational canon on a level closer to the inhabitants of the world described in the literature. And this type of representational writing must also be worth studying.

After putting all of these pieces together, we have one last question to try to answer. If Vonnegut's work does belong to the science fiction genre, and if indeed science fiction is a genre deserving of thought and criticism, is Vonnegut's work, then, also deserving of such consideration? While at first the answer may seem clear, the syllogism fails to address the response to Vonnegut's work which is sometimes passionately negative. He explains in his autobiographical collection of speeches and

letters, *Palm Sunday*, that "[his] novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* was actually burned in a furnace by a school janitor in Drake, North Dakota on instructions from the school committee there, and the school board made public statements about the unwholesomeness of the book. Even by the standards of Queen Victoria, the only offensive line in the entire novel is this: 'Get out of the road, you dumb motherfucker'" (4). While the exact reason for such extreme practices as book burning remains unclear (Vonnegut wrote a letter to the school committee but never received a response back), one can speculate that the curse word is not the only reason for such destruction. Why should our students and young, impressionable learners fill their minds with impossible situations of time travel, with novel ideas such as opposing war, with an ability to learn about one person's experience fighting in a war and grasping what a destructive effect war can have on human life? Vonnegut, in the letter to Drake, North Dakota, writes that "'What troubles me most about my lovely country is that its children are seldom taught that American freedom will vanish if, when they grow up, and in the exercise of their duties as citizens, they insist that our courts and policemen and prisons be guided by divine or natural law" (10). He continues by claiming that "no one really understands nature or God. It is my willingness to lay this groundwork, and not sex or violence, which has got my poor book in such trouble" (11). If our schools continue to ban books that promote questioning one's society for the sake of her future of freedom, what will remain to protect her? Since Vonnegut's novels *do* raise such questions, should we not look into them further, search for *more* meaning through academic study? Vonnegut's writing style, voice, and content prevent immediate acceptance of this claim.

John May recognizes Vonnegut as a novelist of black humor. His article entitled "Vonnegut's Humor and the Limits of Hope" provides examples of such humor. May cites a character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* who displays a frighteningly passionate fondness for death: "Death ranges from the routine to the bizarre in circumstance. About the only variety in war, though, beyond its magnitude, is the eternal spring of man's imagination of new and more ingenious instruments for killing. Through Roland Weary, the maniacal leader of the group…Billy is instructed in the richness of man's past imagination" (29). May then lists torture devices utilized throughout the past. This type of dark humor offers a perspective on war and on life that is difficult to confront. Our fellow humans created such devices as triangular blades and blood gutters that were meant to not only murder, but also torture fellow man. Roland Weary's obsession with these torturous devices desensitizes him to death, like what certain television programs and video games have done to modern society. Vonnegut's black humor makes critical observations about our world today and the destructive direction in which we are headed. May concludes his article by ensuring the reader that "[i]n each of his novels Vonnegut offers us some alternative, however slim, to the path of disaster that we seem consistently to prefer. There is hope, though, only if man respects the limits for truly humane contributions to his fellow man" (36). Vonnegut recognizes problems in our society and offers a simple solution in each of his novels, the basic message being that man should work harder to respect fellow man.

In a symposium on literature in 1970, Vonnegut and other authors participated in a panel in which a moderator posed questions about trends in recent literature. Robert Scholes had this to say: "What we have going on now in American fiction is a sense that

a behavioristic or sociological approach means taking over traditional forms which inhibit one from getting at deeper truths, truths which are not so amenable to historical understanding. This is why I think we have such a strong move in the direction of allegorical, the symbolic, the mythical, the fabulous, and so on" (Barth 202). *Player Piano* was published in 1952, before the discussion of this trend of literature, but it follows Scholes' observation, at least, because it lacks mythical and fabulous elements. But the novel certainly defies the idea that prior to this discussion literature failed to examine deep and complicated truths. *Player Piano* and others of Vonnegut's novels published before this symposium including *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, question the overall motivation of mankind. What is the purpose of life, especially when there exist so many tensions between fellow human beings? Because these novels were published decades ago, one must wonder if they are read the same way today. Barth addresses this same issue in the symposium discussion:

> So there must be some reason why any number of writers—and what interests me perhaps even more, any number of serious students of writing, my graduate students at Buffalo, for instance—while they don't resemble each other at all in the way they address themselves to the medium they're working in and the things that are on their mind, not a single one of them sounds like Tolstoy or Flaubert. They don't sound like each other, but they sure don't sound like the things that were going on in the nineteenth century unless…they're deliberately parodying it or imitating it for Ironic purposes. I said once in print that if somebody were to build the Chartres cathedral now, it would either be an embarrassment or a parody. That's simply because time, apparently, is real. (205).

If Vonnegut's first novels were immediately classified as science fiction, does that classification hold true forty and fifty years later? The trend and evolution of writing that Barth mentions in the above quote also reflects the trends of interpreting writing. As times change, so do perspectives. The way we read Shakespeare in 2009 varies greatly from the way his works were read upon publication. Though not as much time has passed since *Player Piano* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* were published, much has changed about our society, which results in a change of the method of artistic interpretation. While science fiction may not have been a genre of literary worth when Vonnegut's work was initially classified as such, the changing attitudes and themes of literature have resulted in an opportunity to approach previously unapproachable literature. Ted Gioia writes that "sci-fi and fantasy never fit nicely into the genre pigeonhole. And given their focus on surprising and delighting readers—rather than following strict formulas of plot development and resolution—it was inevitable that "serious writers" would begin borrowing from these scorned writers who existed at the fringes of the literary world" (Gioia). Vonnegut both writes the enjoyable content of science fiction and emerges as a "serious writer."

Upon the initial classification of his works as belonging to the science fiction genre, Kurt Vonnegut had this to say: "Years ago I was working in Schenectady for General Electric, completely surrounded by machines and ideas for machines, so I wrote a novel about people and machines, and machines frequently got the best of it, as machines will" (*Wampeter, Foma and Granfaloons* 1). His intention was not to write an interpretation of the realities and beliefs of the author's present society in an exaggerated,

fantastical, or skeptical way that questions and explores the unknown in the universe—in other words, science fiction. Or was it? He writes that

> I learned from the reviewers that I was a science-fiction writer. I didn't know that. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled "science fiction" ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal. (1).

Whereas a definition of science fiction as a type of literature that primarily concerns itself with exploring the unknown in the universe appears to be a venerable type of literature, Vonnegut recognizes that critics, predisposed to negative judgment of the genre, will therefore only see his work through one lens, and not a desirable one at that.

Vonnegut's opinions about science fiction continue to appear in many of his novels through the character Kilgore Trout. Trout is a science fiction novelist whose works are found only in adult bookstores, quite congruous with Fowler's observation that science fiction was, until recently, only sold with pornography. Trout is an antisocial, unimportant author in mainstream literature, but he attracts attention from protagonists in Vonnegut's novels with certain types of mental instability. Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, is believed insane by lawyers attempting to gain control of his multi-million dollar inheritance because of his unquestioning benevolence. He looks at Trout as brave genius: To science fiction writers, he exclaims that "'I love you sons of bitches…You're all I read anymore. 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…You're the only ones with guts enough to *really* care about the future" (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 18). Trout, included in this group of "sons of bitches," is a prophet to Eliot. Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, shares a room in a mental hospital with Eliot Rosewater. In addition to sharing a room with Billy, Eliot also shares in his passion for Trout's work. In the friendly distribution of novels between Billy and Eliot, "Kilgore Trout became Billy's favorite living author, and science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read" (SHF 128). Both Billy and Eliot experienced traumatic events during war, and "[t]hey had both found life meaningless…So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help" (128). While the characters that are fond of science fiction may not be the most reliable or stable characters, they are certainly relatable because of their universal doubt and questioning. Thus, science fiction seems a positive outlet for learning about oneself and the meaning of life.

Peter J. Reed writes in his article "Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool: Kilgore Trout" that "Trout's stories typically contain elements of violence or apocalypse, and their science fiction dimensions often permit a distancing that reduces the everyday to the absurd" (71). The stories account for tragedies that took place in Vonnegut's life, such as witnessing the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany in World War Two and the deterioration of the United States and his own family during the Great Depression (71). Vonnegut uses Trout to describe such incidents: "Trout's bizarre tales show the wisdom to recognize the absurd in the operation of such a universe. They find the humor in the utter randomness of existence, the joke in both its unpredictability and its coincidences

that suggest the working of some irresistible pattern" (71). This kind of humor and these kinds of questions do come at a price, however. Simpson writes that "Vonnegut would argue that the fatal, damning flaw that resides at the heart of science fiction in general, and Kilgore Trout's novels in particular, is that, as a genre, it all too often seeks to find answers outside the universe, outside the human condition, and outside the realms of human kindness" (270). The attempts of science fiction authors to examine and ultimately theorize the purpose of life and the universe, and the reader's attempts to believe and apply them to their lives, is detrimental and dangerous. Cited in the same article, Vonnegut states that "'I think it is dangerous to believe that there are enormous new truths, dangerous to imagine that we can stand outside the universe. So I argue for the ordinariness of love, the familiarity of love.' Vonnegut is, above all" Simpson says, "a literary messenger of love" (270). Though an abstract concept in itself, love concerns itself with those living in this world in the present. It does not, as science fiction does, explore the unknown universe. Love is well known and experienced and understood by many.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater exemplifies and clearly exhibits Vonnegut's belief in the power of love and kindness over material wealth and possession. The lawyers try to seize Eliot Rosewater's fortune, using the fact that Eliot fathered no heirs as a foot in the door. Eliot, however "foils this by accepting paternity for every child in Rosewater county, thus dispersing his money in the most thorough way imaginable…[T]he joke is turned back upon the joker… By creating this parody of an absolute, Eliot turns it inside out and achieves his more humane purpose of getting the Rosewater millions out of the hands of people who would misuse them and into a form in which they might do some

good" (Klinkowitz 73). Vonnegut proves in this novel that, though science fiction may present a person, such as Eliot Rosewater, with idealistic hopes or consuming fantasies of a better world, the result can benefit others greatly. Though science fiction is not solely responsible for the success of Eliot Rosewater, it serves as a driving force and an inspiration for achieving a lifelong goal of helping other who justly need and deserve it. The same can be said for Vonnegut's works.

Regardless of the classification of a novel or the shelf on which it can be found in a bookstore, the question of whether or not it should be studied critically lies in its representation of universal human questions, doubts, theories, truths, and experiences. Davis writes that "Vonnegut's ideas concerning the nature of fiction are well-suited to the most contemporary discussions of literary texts. His recognition of the political work inevitably enacted by texts displays a remarkable thoughtfulness, one which portends the destruction of formal barriers later in his career" (45). Vonnegut recognizes that his novels are subject to scrutiny over time, but they also will gain power. They can and will inspire thought and questioning. The formal barriers that Vonnegut breaks down are the barriers that once prevented a college student from writing her senior thesis about presumably science fiction writing. They are the barriers that once limited "acceptable academic literature" to a solely classic canon, the barriers that attach definitions to works more complex than one classification.

Vonnegut, on writing, explains that authors must always keep their audience in mind: "Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify—whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing like nightingales" (PS 71). Unlike certain definitions of science fiction and fantasy writing,

Vonnegut deeply and consciously considers the ability of his audience to understand and expand on his writing. Of this necessary editing, he states "[t]hat is the bad news. The good news is that we Americans are governed under a unique Constitution, which allows us to write whatever we please without fear of punishment. So the most meaningful aspect of our styles, which is what we choose to write about, is unlimited" (71-2). Because of this right for writers, the literary world is exploding with ideas and styles, new and old, good and bad, some worth studying and some not. But when a work or a writer are disregarded to the literary critical circle because of genre or style alone, one must question the function of criticism.

Though separation of "good" and "bad" literature is necessary in such a prolific field, we cannot allow our standards of the past to overshadow the changing ideas of authors, readers, and our culture in the present. As literature changes and grows, so must our ability to reconsider and question it, here specifically, fiction. In the 1970 symposium on literature, Vonnegut states that "I think the wish of any novelist or playwright is to persuade people to share his dreams" (205). Cassill continues this thought by saying "I think the task of criticism is to make a connection between *the* dream and perception within a novel, and the same kind of dream and perception in the world outside" (206). Motives of an author may vary, leaving the important task of correlation between literature and life to criticism. Vonnegut's work has experienced this type of correlation. An author whose writing exhibits characteristics of science fiction, and therefore raises questions common to his readers, whose writing has an overall thesis of its own, that "most human behavior, no matter how ghastly or ludicrous or glorious or whatever, is innocent" (PS xiii), has proven his work not only worthy of critical literary consideration,

but has also created works that, through changing times and ideas and motives of society, will remain thought-provoking and inspirational. Vonnegut proves that it is possible for an author to experiment with style and content and still create important works. In a society in which the ability to classify literature and knowledge is becoming more and more difficult, Vonnegut provides hope that modern literature can still achieve great success and power.

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