

The Man from Tralfamadore

What Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Has to Offer Us Modern Folk

Luka R. Subin

PSII Student, Grade 11

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Everyone's favorite chain-smoking, POW, Hoosier author, Kurt Vonnegut, left an indelible mark on the literary world because of his never-before-seen literary antics and strikingly original voice. Yet his work is not as renowned as the other greats such as H.G. Wells and Ernest Hemingway, even when accounting for only the anglosphere. This is nothing less than an injustice, and one that must be righted immediately.

George Orwell opened an essay of literary criticism by saying: "Dickens is one of those writers well worth stealing."¹ I would wager that the same is doubly as true about Vonnegut. He was perhaps one of the first successful writing engineers, which is to say that he used language in order to construct new ways of expression without doing what James Joyce and his ilk did in generating a great wealth of literature that could never be penetrated by anyone less than the literary equivalent of Einstein. And he achieved this by realizing that if a word is well-placed, a sentence well-constructed, turn of phrases implemented exactly right, the true depth of meaning will almost naturally make itself present to the reader—and, most importantly, the writer.

How can a claim like that be made so categorically about a man long dead whom I have never met? Simple, this is a man who said, "[u]se the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel that time has been wasted."²

The uniqueness of his prose comes in part because of style but also because of the narratives themselves. And although it would be easier to analyze these components separately, completely detached not only from one another but the world, that would be the equivalent of trying to understand $E = mc^2$ without all its components. Of course, each piece is comprehensible by itself, —we can understand the concepts of energy, mass, speed of light in a vacuum, and what it means to mathematically square a formula—but it is only together that this equation holds any weight; that it has any implications on the world around us.

One night, I remember wondering which writer(s) had the greatest influence on Vonnegut, for it is not easily deducible simply by reading his work. So I used my phone—what a lovely thing technology can be! —to search up such a question, only to find that Vonnegut, among many other writers, especially admired Orwell, due in part to his prose that flowed like water through a sieve. Very recently I happened to come by a great many of Orwell's works. Everything at once was elucidated. At first, it was difficult not to notice that Vonnegut's use of short poems and lyricism reflected almost perfectly, even down to formatting, Orwell's.

Take this short poem that Orwell wrote at what was possibly one of the most chaotic points in European history, and which he inserted into his essay *Why I Write*:

¹ George Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda*, George Packer (New York: Marnier Books, 2008), 1.

² New York Writers' Intensive, "8 Rules for Writing," 2021.

A happy vicar I might have been,
Two hundred years ago,
To preach upon eternal doom
And watch my walnuts grow;

But born, alas, in an evil time,
I missed that pleasant heaven,
For the hair has grown on my upper lip
And the clergy are all clean-shaven.

And later still the times were good,
We were so easy to please,
We rocked our troubled thoughts to sleep
On the bosoms of trees.

All ignorant we dared to own
The joys we now dissemble;
The greenfinch on the apple bough
Could make my enemies tremble.

But girls' bellies and apricots,
Roach in a shaded stream,
Horses, ducks in flight at dawn,
All these are a dream.

It is forbidden to dream again;
We maim our joys or hide them;
Horses are made of chromium steel
And little fat men shall ride them.

I am the worm who never turned,
The eunuch without a harem;
Between the priest and the commissar
I walk like Eugene Aram;

And the commissar is telling my fortune
While the radio plays,
But the priest has promised an Austin Seven,
For Duggie always pays.

I dreamed I dwelt in marble halls,
And woke to find it true;
I wasn't born for an age like this;
Was smith? Was John? Were you?³

Woo! That was long, but I promise not without purpose! Now look at this poem from Vonnegut's *Welcome to the Monkey House*:

*I did not sow, I did not spin
And thanks to pills I did not sin.
I loved the crowds, the stink, the noise.
And when I peed, I peed turquoise.*

*I ate beneath a roof of orange;
Swung with progress like a door hinge.
'Neath purple roof I've come today
To piss my azure life away.*

*Virgin hostess, death's recruiter,
Life is cute, but you are cuter.
Mourn my pecker, purple daughter—
All it passed was sky-blue water.⁴*

The cadence and rhythm of each are unmistakably similar, and the turn of phrases are, if not siblings, cousins. Admittedly, Kurt Vonnegut's is zanier, a bit flippant, and, at least when taken at face value, less personal. Nevertheless, it still speaks to the same underlying emotion: to the futility of life, in a sense. The most important similarity between these poems in their original context is worth noting: they are both inserted into larger works of prose.

Though this is a technique Orwell employed primarily in nonfiction, Vonnegut used it extensively across his works of fiction—particularly, but not

³ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume 1 An Age Like This 1920-1949*, Sonia Orwell, Ian Angus (England: Penguin Books, 1970), 27-28 .

⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Dial Press, 2010), 38.

limited to, in his later works. This is not, however, the extent of Orwell's influence on Vonnegut, at least from what I can discern.

If Orwell was a genius at generating good-quality philosophical thought, — as is evidenced in his many short essays—then Vonnegut's forte was blowing life into those sorts of ideas so that they extended beyond the limiting parameters of an essay.

It must be understood that essays are placid and rigid by nature. Rare masters of language, like Nietzsche, can make an essay dance, so to speak, but even he cannot entice it to walk.

For example, I recently read an essay by Orwell in which he proposed the idea of creating words like machinery parts to compensate for language's gross insufficiency. In retrospect, this reminds me of many of Vonnegut's books, *Cat's Cradle* being the most prominent, because of his experimentation with the creation of religions *as if they were a mere machine part* intended to glue society together. And that does make me wonder: what kind of story would Vonnegut have created, had he set his mind to the task, about a world where words were created like machine parts every time they were needed? Well, I don't know, but if I had to guess on the opening lines, they'd run something like this: "Before nobody could communicate properly. How could they when our language was full of such silly, archaic, and simple words such as 'fart,' 'guffaw,' and 'buttocks?' Now we have a word for everything, no matter how small, great words like 'fudinkle,' 'gfinkle,' and 'budinkle!' Those are used simply to describe the nuances of flatulence! And get this: if we don't have the word today, by the time you wake up in the morning, it'll exist and be printed in the latest edition of the dictionary."

A story moves forward, ever forward. And while it's in motion, just like a person or animal, it has a certain gait. Vonnegut postulated that the orthodox plot point graph that rises and falls is inaccurate. Why? Because every true story is a straight line—from birth to subsequent death. Of course, everyone has ups and downs, but if graphed it would still present linearly because nothing lasts forever, good or bad. His stories thus have a unique, hitherto unseen, progression that forces the reader to rethink the way a story is told. Sometimes, it even makes the reader reflect on the direction, pace, and progression of life in a more general, philosophical sense.

It is this wholly original theory put into practice, Orwell's stylistic influence, and Vonnegut's wonderfully zany brain that made him the man he was, and who we love.

To analyze his work, I have compiled a short list of some attributes I believe to be the most convincing of Vonnegut's work. We will thus take a short detour—oh, how I love my tangents! —to broadly analyze his work, before pivoting back for our grand finale, where we will strive to contextualize his work further, both historically and philosophically.

1) *Quirky literary devices.*

The two with stars by their names would be dead before sun went down. This convention of starring certain names will continue throughout my story, incidentally, alerting readers to the fact that some characters will shortly face the ultimate Darwinian test of strength and wiliness.⁵

Chilling suspense! This is a passage taken from *Galapagos*, a novel in which Vonnegut explore life from a Darwinian perspective and, additionally, questions the practicality and morality of the contemporary global economic structure. It is striking, even haunting, how lightheartedly he discusses and make jabs at subject matter that civilizations for millennia have exerted so much energy to try to either ignore, subvert, or altogether eradicate.

Vonnegut also wastes no time at implementing some wacky literary device, in this case *the star*. Its full impact is hard to express unless you read the book, but I will explain. If a character's death was fast approaching, he would write their name like this: *Bob. Then you have to wait with bated breath for the moment when your journey with that character comes to an end—once and for all.

This sort of playfulness is obviously not new and is rather endemic of his writing style. In *Jailbird* he capitalizes the first letter of every year (i.e., Nineteen-seventy-six instead of *nineteen-seventy-six*) as if they were proper nouns because, from the point of view of Walter F. Starbuck, the protagonist, those years were themselves fellow characters in his life, bearing both gifts and misfortunes. Personification is a powerful way of expressing ideas.

It must be made clear: what Vonnegut is doing with these stars, for example, is not stylistic—it is far beyond that; it is the breaking of rules (in this

⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Galapagos* (New York: Dial Press, 2009), 20.

case, of the “show don’t tell” maxim) in order to add a new philosophical dimension to the piece. Said simply, it is the putting of thought and meaning above all else. This, in turn, at least in my opinion, improves the rest of the piece as well.

I will not ramble on about all of Vonnegut’s literary devices and antics partly because it would take me a lifetime and because, well, it is simply not the same to read them second hand. At any rate, what he teaches us with these wacky, sometimes bordering on inane, literary ploys is quite reducible: you have to read between the lines in this world comprised of a zillion shades of gray. Ignorance is oftentimes simply the crime of not caring for the nuances of truth.

2) *The synthesis of satire and tragedy.*

Sidney Offit, a fellow American writer and friend of Vonnegut, wrote a foreword to a collection of his short stories published posthumously, *Look at the Birdie*. In it, he wrote, “[f]ew writers in the history of literature have achieved such a fusion of human comedy with the tragedies of human folly in their fiction—and, I suspect, fewer still have had the grace to so candidly acknowledge them in their presentation of self.”⁶

You would be hard-pressed to find words more honest, poignant, enlightening of Vonnegut’s writing personage than these. Vonnegut, in the preface to *Jailbird*, wrote something that serves to corroborate Offit’s observation:

I received a letter this morning (November 16, 1978) from a young stranger named John Figler, of Crown Point, Indiana...

John Figler is a law-abiding high-school student. He says in his letter that he has read almost everything of mine and is now prepared to state the single idea that lies at the core of my life’s work so far. The words are his: “Love may fail, but courtesy will prevail.”

This seems true to me—and complete. So I am now in the abashed condition, five days after my fifty-sixth birthday, of realizing that I needn’t have bothered to write several books. A seven-word telegram would have done the job.

⁶ Sidney Offit, Foreword to *Look at the Birdie* (New York: Dial Press, 2010), VII.

Seriously.

But young Figler’s insights reached me too late. I had nearly finished another book—this one.⁷ *

Every word is poignant, suffused with emotion, as if a dark rain cloud hung over you—but, alas, the rain does not pour. Rather it dribbles down, slowly but surely soaking you, and you cannot help but smile, perhaps even giggle, because in the distance, through the thicket, you see it glimmering, the silver lining everyone has talked so damn much about.

This style of writing is no doubt a synthesis of comedy and tragedy. In certain pieces one or the other might be more prominent—as is tragedy in this excerpt—but none are completely void of either. This is something that so few writers have done well, and it would not be complete conjecture to say that Vonnegut was the first.

I have my own insight on what lays at the core of his work: you are powerless, so why not laugh?

3) *Kilgore Trout*.

If you are an honest-to-god Vonnegut fan, you have probably been scratching your head, wondering, “Where the hell is Kilgore Trout?”

Well, here he is!

If you don’t know of Kilgore Trout, your reaction is likely pretty similar, except instead your eyebrows are raised and you’re thinking, “*Who* the hell is Kilgore Trout? And what kind of a name is that, exactly?”

Well, I’ll answer that!

Kilgore Trout is one of Vonnegut’s most ubiquitous characters. You will find him in such disparate works as *Breakfast of Champions*, *Slaughterhouse-five*, *Jailbird*, etc. Trout is perhaps the most consistent element of Vonnegut’s writing—that and, of course, their completely berserk, off-the-rail plots.

Trout is an older man with all the features of one, but what really constitutes his character is that he is a forgotten, nobody, sci-fi writer. And get this... He

⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, Foreword to *Jailbird* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), IX-X.

writes the most absurd stories that, more than anything, resemble fables, containing important morals, packaged in a wrapping of irony, comedy, tragedy, and snide social commentary...

Remind you of anyone?

The salience of Kilgore Trout in his novels is unquestionable. It has been postulated that Kilgore Trout is Vonnegut's literary stunt-double; that is to say, he is a representation of how Vonnegut felt the world perceived him, and also how he perceived the world. I am inclined to buy into this interpretation.

In *Jailbird*, we learn that Kilgore Trout's real name is Dr. Bob Fender, that Kilgore Trout is merely one of two pen names, and that he is now in jail for treason. In fact, Kilgore Trout or, I suppose, Dr. Bob Fender is such an important character in Vonnegut's work, that on the very first page of the preface to *Jailbird*, Vonnegut wrote: "Yes—Kilgore Trout is back again. He could not make it on the outside. That is no disgrace. A lot of people can't make it on the outside."⁸

Before Vonnegut, no writer's work was so entirely personal as to contain a character that, on a profound level, represents the writer—and then make said character into somewhat of an outside observer. Vonnegut is personally present in every piece—heart, mind, body, and all.

Doesn't that speak volumes?

4) *Breakfast of Champions*.

Yes, you read that correctly. *Breakfast of Champions*. The entire book.

It took four years to write, received bad reviews from critics and, as Vonnegut neared the end of his life, he assigned it a low grade as well.* Despite this, I am an adamant defender of this book. It is (currently) my favorite novel of all time and, in my opinion, the greatest of Vonnegut's works.

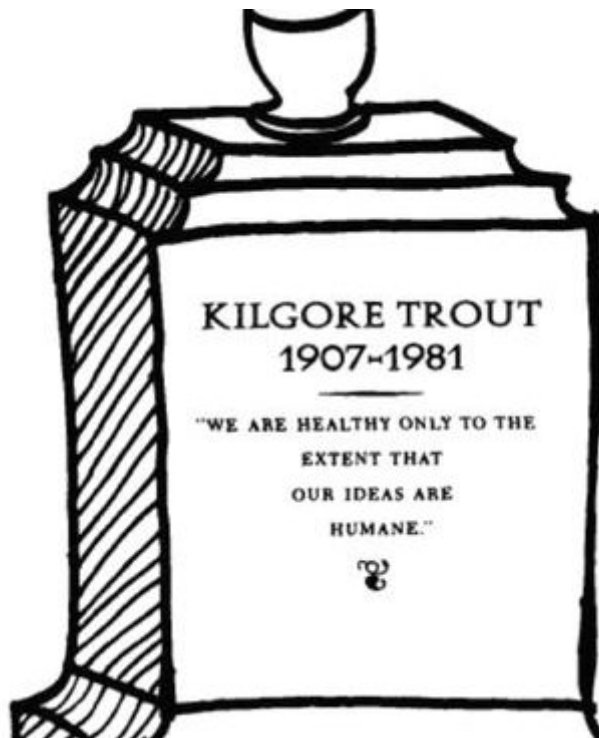
It weaves together the stories of a multitude of characters into a grander narrative. Kilgore Trout is perhaps at his most prominent in this book, and the second main character, Dwayne Hoover, a rich car dealership owner from the

⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, "Foreword to *Jailbird*," IX.

* If you want a more in-depth analysis of this book and its peculiarities, I suggest reading this article: <https://astrofella.wordpress.com/2019/01/21/breakfast-of-champions-kurt-vonnegut/>.

fictional town of Midland, goes insane. This is the closest contemporary literature gets to an understanding of the manifold implications and facets of human nature.

But what's most striking is how Vonnegut uses illustrations—his own, by the way—to add to the narrative. Several times he talks about certain characters epitaphs. This is Kilgore Trout's, for example:



(By Kurt Vonnegut, pg. 16 of *Breakfast of Champions*.)⁹

Though that was not the epitaph Trout wanted. It was only after his death that Mr. Trout was recognized as a great artist, scientist, and a pioneer in mental-health research for "...his theories disguised as science-fiction."¹⁰

(How can't one see the resemblance between Mr. Trout and Mr. Vonnegut?)

And it was they, you see, who erected his gravestone and wrote the epitaph, which is itself a quote from one of Trout's innumerable books. What Trout wanted is no doubt more profound and one of those things for which words are insufficient. Luckily, Vonnegut was so kind as to provide a depiction:

⁹ Sourced from Goodreads: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/597234028>.

¹⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* (New York: Dial Press, 2011), 15.



(By Kurt Vonnegut, pg. 38 of *Breakfast of Champions*.)¹¹

More fitting, don't you think?

One of my teachers told me that what he enjoyed and admired most about Vonnegut's writing is the profoundly human voice that he conveys—and nowhere is this voice stronger than in *Breakfast of Champions*.

Moreover, this gravestone is a prime example of the entire theme around which the book revolves: a full-out, unapologetic critique of humanity in all its facets, veiled in metaphors and analogies.

Here is an interesting snapshot:

“This *has* to be the asshole of the Universe,” said Rabo Karbekian, the minimal painter.

Beatrice Keedsler, the Gothic novelist, had grown up in midland city. “I was petrified to come home after all these years,” she said to Karbekian.

“Americans are always scared of coming home,” said Karbekian, “with good reason, may I say.”

“They *used* to have good reason,” said Beatrice, “but not anymore. The past has been rendered harmless. I would tell any wandering American now, ‘Of course you can go home again, and as often as you please. It’s just a motel.’”

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¹¹ Sourced from *Quotes Gram*: <https://quotesgram.com/breakfast-of-champions-quotes-book/>.

¹² Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, 201.

Wow!

The passage criticizes, among other things, the notion that the past can be “rendered harmless,” of humankind’s tendency to move forward without thought of yesteryear. And, perhaps even more importantly, he illustrates the true baselessness of nationalism and the shortness of life, at least on a cosmic scale, by calling the nation “a motel.”

What was that? Another one! Your wish is my command:

A wide-open beaver was a photograph of a woman not wearing underpants, and with her legs far apart, so that the mouth of her vagina could be seen... When Dwayne was a boy, when Kilgore Trout was a boy, when I was a boy, and even when we became middle-aged men and older, it was the duty of the police and the courts to keep representations of such ordinary apertures from being examined and discussed by persons not engaged in the practice of medicine. It was somehow decided that wide-open beavers, which were ten thousand times as common as real beavers, should be the most massively defended secret under law.¹³

To Vonnegut nothing’s sacred. There is only vexatious cant.

I’ve read many people comparing this book to postmodern schools of thought, and, though there is merit in such an analysis, it is not quite accurate. Tiny inaccuracies can of course cause great misunderstandings. It’s a bit like how if you swing a hammer and miss the nail even by fewer than ten centimeters, you can wind up smashing your fingers to a pulp.

Postmodernism, at its simplest, is a supreme doubt of any narratives—whether they be grand or meta. And this book, which feels to its reader like ennui glazed over with emotion, does attack almost every *cultural* narrative of Western society—America in particular—of the past century or so. But it not only feeds into, but indeed expands, the very real *human* narrative of tragedy and irony, which has existed since the first human appeared over two-hundred-thousand years ago. Kurt Vonnegut is thus not a post-modernist writer; he is a *human* one.

Alas, I have already said too much. If you want to know more, you should read the book; there is no substitute for first-hand experience. While rereading

¹³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*, 22-24.

sections of this book for the purposes of this essay, one question has come to my mind: how can one best summarize such a book?

Well, I think I know. It's a bit like hearing the greatest revelation of your life in passing by eavesdropping on a rather worse-for-wear homeless man mumbling to himself. Jarring and out-of-place as it may be, it's exactly what you needed to hear—exactly at the right time.

5) *Professionally flagrant prose.*

When reading the works of Kafka, Tolstoy, or Dostoevsky, one cannot help but recognize their genius; however, *en tout cas*, it is difficult not to notice the properness of the language. It is a matter of course that even contemptible characters, carrying out acts of great injustice, should do it in such a way that everyone may huddle together and concur: “At least he worked hard to achieve his evil deeds. Is there nothing to be said for that?”

This conclusion is not inherently wrong. It may in fact be entirely accurate. It is, after all, the opposite of reductionism—but at any rate it reflects the common person's perception of injustice so sorrily as to be almost laughable. When people have been truly wronged, as these writers seem to be claiming, they thirst for *blood*. They don't want platitudes or moralizations, no matter how well-formulated or correct.

This is not to say Vonnegut's work reflects the attitude of the common person perfectly either—there is far too much detachment and reflection to do so. In his prose, however, one does not find any pretentiousness, any daft notion of perfection, nor a hint of classism. People are people to Vonnegut.

Moving forward, let us remember the words of Friedrich Nietzsche: “The more abstract the truth you wish to teach, the more you need to seduce the senses.” When reading the works of most other writers from the early twentieth century and prior, one can almost not help but envisage a man clothed in the finest suit—even if the writer keeps insisting, “No, no, no! He's homeless!” This man has the finest red tie you think you've ever seen; oh, how its glossy fabric almost shines under the early morning sun as if it were made of titanium! And he's stood upright, so upright in fact that it would not surprise you in the least if someone were to inform you that he had never sat down before in his life. This fine gentleman, or so he appears, stands in front of a young couple, lecturing them about this and that,

finger in the air, armed with such classic zingers as “Who do you think you are?” and “You youth should learn some respect for your elders!”.

Vonnegut’s prose is quite different. There is still a man wearing a suit, but there is no tie, and the buttons of his blazer are undone. The top button on his dress shirt is likewise undone, and the collar is jutting out like the ring of a circular UFO around his neck. He’s sitting down, cigar in hand, on one of those petit metal tables on the patio of every Parisian café. His hair is a bit messy, but not embarrassingly so, and his right shoe has several scuffs on it, but nobody takes notice of such a small detail.

I even know his order. He would order an Americano with one cream. What else would a man like that drink—an espresso? And, to get more precise, when ordering he’d order in poor French.

“Bonnjjjjurr,” he says to the waitress, “jay vuh an americayn avec du crehm.”

“Bien sûr, monsieur,” she says politely, followed by a promise to get him his order *tout de suite*. And, so, she disappears into the café and has a good laugh about the man’s poor French with her colleagues, and the man, too, hearing their laughter from outside, decides to join in. His French is objectively bad, and though you can say a lot about him, he is not ignorant.

The sensations arising from these scenes are different, but not polar opposites. The latter, which is the feeling exuded by Vonnegutian prose, is comic, but a sort of sadness also lies at the bottom of it. After all, how did a man dressed in a fine suit wind up slovenly in a Parisian café? Something must have happened. This style of prose is such the antithesis of pedanticism that it forces its readers to *become pedantic*, in turn enticing them to greater understanding and realization. Why? Because as stated earlier, there is no substitute for first-hand experience, not even when it comes to philosophy.

6) Chapter 5 of *Slaughterhouse-five*, or, more specifically, pages 111-112.

This is the most specific and final element that will be examined.

Vonnegut was a veritable genius at subtly inserting a great realization right in the middle of a work, so that the reader must pay attention lest he miss something of great importance. This is a habit of his that nobody seems to notice, let alone

talk about, though it is one of the cornerstones of his work. There is no better an example than the pages 111-112 of *Slaughterhouse-five*.

This is his most popular book, and so you have probably read it. But in the event you haven't, there is only really one term you need to understand: *unstuck in time*. Billy Pilgrim, a young boy in WWII, finds himself being freed from the fetters of time, and subsequently goes on an adventure throughout time and space. We see him as a POW, as an old man, and even right before his death.

Somewhere along the way he learns of the Tralfamadorians, a species of alien that is by nature *unstuck from time*. Aboard the ship and on his way to the Tralfamadorian zoo to become an exhibit, Billy requests some reading material. So, they give him a book. It is good, but not enough, so he asks for some more, whereupon his Tralfamadorian captors inform him that all they have are Tralfamadorian books, and that he can never hope to understand them. Nonetheless, he remained adamant, and they send him some of their literature...

Billy couldn't read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could at least see how the books were laid out—in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars.

Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams.

"Exactly," said the voice.

"They *are* telegrams?"

"There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't a particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at once."¹⁴

This excerpt, which is almost exactly at the midway point of the book, explains the entire meaning behind the novel. It is essentially a series of snapshots of Billy Pilgrim's life, and there is no end to *the story*, only to *the book*, for time cannot end. The whole book is written in short nuggets of language, separated, get this, by three points. Three!

¹⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-five* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 111-112.

This is a style of writing that we see in most of Vonnegut's novels, with few exceptions from his earlier days. *Breakfast of Champions*, *Galapagos*, and to some extent, *Siren of Titans* all follow this pattern. And Kurt Vonnegut, in all his literary genius, hid the entire reason for this stylistic choice right under our noses, on pages 111-112 of *Slaughterhouse-five*! Quite respectfully: that sneaky bastard!

He is the man from Tralfamadore. And his work is the closest thing humanity has to Tralfamadorian literature.

In the twentieth century, literature underwent a schism of the level few fields of art have ever experienced. The greatest difference between writers used to be genre and style, but with the rise of the modernists came an entirely new field, possessing an altogether different ontology, that would grow to affect every aspect of the study—and art—of literature. Although the movement began much earlier, it gradually progressed until it reached an apotheosis with James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and the like. These were the pioneers of grammar and language, adjusting and recreating it as they saw fit. When trying to be precise, I prefer to call these writers *grammatical* modernists, because I do not feel that they were truly ingenious or unique in terms of the themes and ideas behind their writing.

That is not to disparage their work. Even Einstein was only a theoretical physicist.

For every movement, however, there is a countermovement. Orwell was the first, and, of course, the unknowing progenitor of what would become the principal opposition to modernism. This camp shares in common certain conservative principals of the old writers, such as the insistence on “law and order,” in a sense, when it comes to the use of language—but it should not be confused with them.

(It is for that reason that I will hereafter refer to this style as “Orwellian.”)

The Orwellian revolution railed against ideas and systems, which manifested as an alteration in how narratives are formatted and presented. In the past, the rule was that stories were primarily about the characters, and any metaphysical or philosophical components were imparted to the reader via the minds of the characters. Orwell was one of the first mainstream writers to propose the opposite: that the idea, the philosophy, should take precedence.

Kurt Vonnegut was the second great Orwellian writer. And he truly pushed the limits of the style, creating alternate realities almost with the sole purpose of exploring ideas or criticizing societal presuppositions. The modernists are still stuck with having the focal point being a tangible thing, whereas Vonnegut can do whatever and go wherever. The beauty of Orwellian writing is that it is not fettered to one locality. It is also readable; you cannot discount that. Where James Joyce will create intricate, expansive sentences, Vonnegut will only give you one: but in many cases, it is more profound.

In fact, this reminds me of an interesting passage from Soren Kierkegaard's *Present Age*, in which he provides a parable of a grand-father clock. Kierkegaard knew of a family with a grandfather clock that broke—but it did not break at once. Rather, instead of striking as it should once at one o'clock, twice at two o'clock, and so forth, it struck once throughout the day. As Kierkegaard points out, this is still indeed a relationship, and there is a continuity which attaches the striking of the clock to something, but that something is no longer represented in the final product, and thus its meaning is nullified.

And you see, I fear that this is the way modern literature is headed.

The overconcentration on the *image*, on the *sensation*, as if the only reason to read is for the *narrative*, has become so prevalent in contemporary literature and literary criticism that one cannot avoid it. In the past, when a writer may have said, "The clouds were amassing overhead, and John knew that if he didn't get home soon, his clothes would be soaked and he'd be once more scolded by his mother," a contemporary writer would say something more along these lines: "The dark, heavy clouds were amassing overhead, bringing bad omens of a storm to come; John, like the tiny ant he was in comparison, scuttled homewards."

It is an attempt to remove the need of stating the consequences for the protagonist by amplifying the description and image of the scene; how could John *not* scuttle homewards—I mean, come on? But if you stop to think for one moment, you realize that much like the grandfather clock, there is an abstraction of the consequence, leading to a complete negation of any meaning. Why he is going home is not actually made clear; we are simply duped into thinking so. In more words one has managed to say the same amount, if not less, and it doesn't necessarily add to the story; it is as if the writer is trying to type out a movie, not a piece of literature.

We live in an age of abstraction. An almighty bureaucracy and an almost complete takeover of the *public* in the political sphere, an abstraction *par excellence* considering it doesn't really exist. Vonnegut, amid this storm, is a

refreshing breeze. His writing is truly the work of an individual, and a powerful one at that. It is my (humble) opinion that in this individual-vs-abstraction world, where meaning is being played with as a child's toy, Kurt Vonnegut and his carefully crafted, ingenious works of social criticism, tragedy, and comedy are well-worth everyone's time.

Afterword

“What can be said at all can be said clearly, and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.”

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

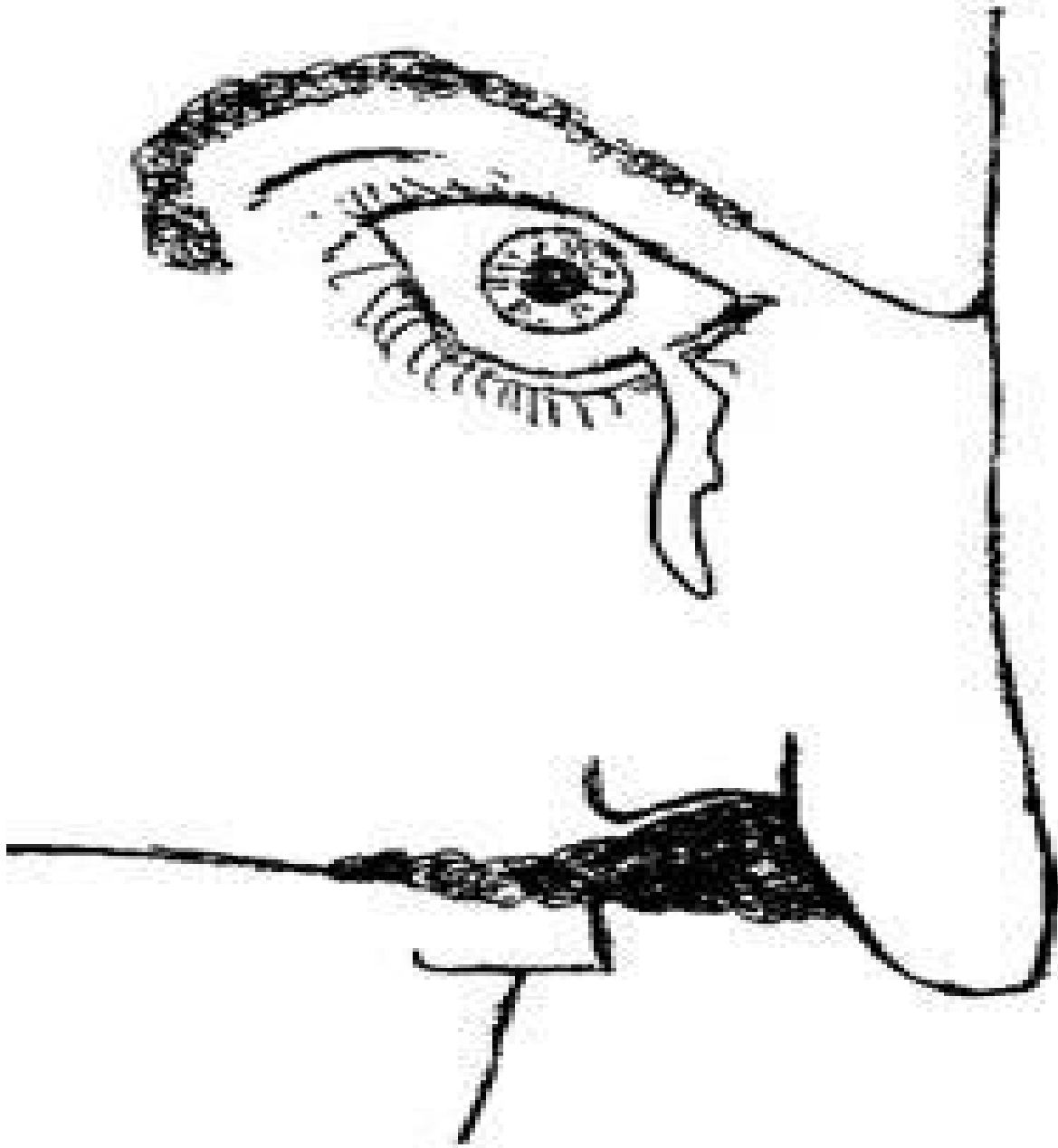
Since I first read that quote nearly a year ago, I have been unable to forget it, and I am reminded of it particularly when in the process of writing an essay like this one. It is difficult to summarize the importance of anybody’s corpus of work, especially when it is as vast as Kurt Vonnegut’s. In many portions of this essay, like a ghost haunting me, this quote appeared in my mind, causing me to entirely stop a certain train of thought, leaving it where it was. Sometimes more explanation is worse.

The decision to completely exclude Vonnegut’s life-story was also a conscious decision—and one formulated due in part to Wittgenstein’s insight. Vonnegut already provided such a clear look into his life through his work that I haven’t an inkling as to how I could add to it. He was, of course, no perfect man; everyone has his vice. Every source seemingly corroborates that Vonnegut had somewhat of a hard life. But his work speaks entirely for itself—and to have clouded it with the moral judgments, many of which are tainted by a contemporary outlook, of the man’s life would have been asinine. It would be completely irrelevant. However, I do believe that there is an illustration at the very end of *Breakfast of Champions* that manages to capture to some extent his life and work in a few strokes of a pen...

Oh! The apparition has returned. It says, “This essay has come to its natural conclusion. At this point you’re just speaking to hear the sound of your own voice.”

If you have read to this point, I hope that you go to your local bookstore, library, or open the Amazon browser on your computer and buy some of Vonnegut’s books today. You will stand to benefit tons and gain to lose not even an iota.

I almost forgot about the picture. Here it is, Vonnegut’s life and work (literally) illustrated:



(By Kurt Vonnegut, pg. 303, *Breakfast of Champions*)¹⁵

Am I the only one who sees the smirk?

¹⁵ Sourced from Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/4980.Breakfast_of_Champions.

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