

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: Morality-Myth in the Antinovel

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In his seven novels to date, from *Player Piano* to *Breakfast of Champions*,¹ Vonnegut has contributed to the creation of a mythology of our times.² In much the same way as Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* captured the mood of the lost generation, and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* the bitterness of the thirties depression, Vonnegut has expressed the authentic spirit of the nuclear age generation. World-weary, pessimistic, cynical, and flippant, Vonnegut is tolerant of human behavior to the point of being overindulgent, sadly convinced that human beings cannot be otherwise than the monsters that they are, and yet paradoxically given to both satire and sermon as though driven on by a hope beyond hopelessness that he may yet turn man from his stupidity and evil.

It is the aim of this article to examine the morality myth that Vonnegut has created and at the same time to characterize features of the antinovel with which he expresses this myth. By means of this analysis I hope to demonstrate that Vonnegut's popularity is not to be ascribed to a mere fad, but that in content and form he has represented an important aspect of the outlook of our age.

Aesthetically, Vonnegut's early works owe much to science fiction and the canons of Pop Art,³ but his art transcends their hackneyed conventions and should be regarded as serious and original literature. Fiedler contends that we should regard Vonnegut's novels as Pop Art because they focus on fantasy, myth, plot, and entertainment rather than on characterization and demanding symbolism. Fiedler goes on to say that Vonnegut has "written books that are thin and wide, rather than deep and narrow, books which open out into fantasy and magic by means of linear narration rather than deep analysis; and so, happen on wisdom, fall into it through grace, rather than pursue it doggedly or seek to earn it by hard work."⁴ It is perhaps dubious whether Vonnegut's responses to the problems he raises are inspired by grace, but otherwise this is an accurate description of his fictional manner. Fantasy, magic, and mystic wisdom are very much in vogue with today's nuclear age generation, perhaps because they feel they need miracles in order to survive.

Vonnegut's writings mirror the feelings of today's younger generation in many ways: they are apathetic and flippant, and yet morally righteous, very cynical about the world around them and yet very idealistic for themselves, very cool in appearance and yet very sentimental in truth, antiintellectual, self-indulgent, and confidently opinionated. Apart from these factors, Vonnegut may be popular for three main reasons: his novels feature the put down, the dropout, and the tune in. In standard English, Vonnegut's talent is topical satire and his witty attacks on the older generation's conventions are gratifying to his younger readers. Vonnegut encourages easy empathy by favoring among his characters the *antiheroic misfit who is at odds with normal social behavior* and who therefore cultivates a compensatory fantasy to which he attunes the vibrations of his passive soul.

Vonnegut's "uncloaked artifice,"⁵ his lack of pretentiousness, his breezy manner of toying with a story's credibility until it becomes improbable and thereby mirrors the absurdity of the universe, his cheeky spoofing of the

traditional art of the novel, and his courageous insight into mankind's plight and the individual's quest for salvation—these are some other aspects of his fiction which recommend it to our serious consideration.

Vonnegut relates his stories in a tone that proclaims that he is just another ordinary, middle-aged, middle-class Joe and that he feels just as helpless as most people do about the hopeless mess the world is in. He asks us to face up to the fact that we are the insignificant victims of a tasteless, cosmic joke. He goes on to explain the nature of his sick joke in *Breakfast of Champions* when he speculates that God's lack of omnipotence is due to the fact that he is a programmed robot. Here indeed is a mythology that is appropriate to our technocratic age. For Vonnegut our destiny is being ground out by a small, remote computer in some far flung galaxy that has been accidentally mis-programmed. Our destiny is such a trivial part of the computer's overall duties that no one has noticed the error and no one will until it is too late and man has devoured himself on this tiny patch of mud we call earth. Vonnegut proposes that the only dignified answers to this malevolent, sphinx-like cosmos are Stoic calm, negation of the lust for power, dismissing time and death as illusions, and the giving of kindness to whoever needs it. But he is not very happy with man's rate of progress towards these ethical goals and so he uses his novels to hurry humanity along the right path.

Each of Vonnegut's novels is a moral fable in which a hero quests for goodness and then withdraws in contempt or sorrow from an unenlightened world. In *Player Piano* the individual is crushed by an impersonal technocracy of machine addicts. In *Sirens of Titan* primitive union with nature and simple pastoral dignity are chosen as forms of escape from fascist authoritarianism. In *Mother Night* the uncompromising striving for absolute honesty with oneself is sullied by both Nazi and American fanaticism and hatred. In *Cat's Cradle* a gentle religion of benevolent lies and permissive love fails to save man from an Armageddon caused by scientific technology, capitalistic exploitation, and nationalist wars. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* Vonnegut slyly asks whether universal compassion can be exerted effectively against greed. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* mystic serenity and fatalism are represented as the last refuge from the corruption of human nature and the evil of war.

Vonnegut often represents evil through the moods of the grotesque and the absurd, partly as an expression of his existential attitude that sees the universe as nontranscendent and indifferent to man's posturings. His attitude towards the doers of evil is sometimes gently satirical and sometimes compassionate. In fact, some critics have complained that he does not get angry enough.⁶ Vonnegut proudly states that there are no villains at all in his novels. There are no villains because either his evildoers are sure that what they are doing is right and necessary, or else they are portrayed as enslaved by malicious forces. These evildoers often believe that they are more sinned against than sinning, or that their evil means are justified by their allegedly good ends. Thus many of them are fanatical utopians or "agent-victims"⁷ like Rumfoord and Boaz in *The Sirens of Titan*. Others are smug fools like the scientists in *Cat's Cradle*, or well-meaning dolts like the top managers in *Player Piano*, or slaves to their own sick body chemistry like Dwayne Hoover in *Breakfast of Champions*. They may not be portrayed as villains, but they cause an extraordinary amount of suffering.

Vonnegut represents good through such antiheroic, conscience-stricken characters as Paul Proteus in *Player Piano*, Unk in *The Sirens of Titan*, Howard Campbell in *Mother Night*, Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*,

and Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Innocent, hapless, and helpless, they are never far from a nervous breakdown. They are holier, humbler, sadder, crazier, and wiser than the rest of humanity. Their honest bewilderment is caused by their quest to find their true moral identities. In the course of this quest they often undergo considerable transformations that put them at odds with the rest of the world. From here on they are isolated prophets and quasi-saints trying to walk a dangerous tightrope stretched taunt between bitter protest against the meaninglessness of the universe on the one side and serene but passive fatalism on the other. Some of them become Christ figures⁸ who suffer in their compassion for humanity and who are cynically misused by their fellow creatures. They have long since abandoned the shallow sanity of egoism and not caring about others.

The world in which these idealists suffer so bitterly is shaped by Vonnegut's inventive fantasy with the dual purpose of entertaining and reinforcing his didactic intention. Unrestricted by conventional considerations of realism and credibility, Vonnegut's fantasy soars to such beautiful or weirdly fascinating creations as the harmoniums on Mercury, the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, Bokonism, ice-nine, and the stories of Chrono joining the noble bluebirds of Titan and the Tralfamadorian machine Salo winning a human soul. Samuels, however, claims that Vonnegut's fantasy is "uninventive" and repetitive because he is "frugally husbanding" what little he has been able to imagine. Samuels also charges that Vonnegut's fantasy goes beyond the possible and because of this his "satire is reduced to the futile mockery of invented targets."⁹ But Samuels fails to appreciate that Vonnegut is evolving a new mythology and that embellishments and reevaluations of myths that he has already sketched out are a legitimate procedure which give his novels the unity of a cycle. Furthermore, when Vonnegut's fantasy soars beyond the viewpoint of pedestrian realism, this is no reason to censure him. His writings are attractive precisely because he helps us to escape from plodding empiricism to intuition.¹⁰ His utopianism is the reverse side of his pessimism and even his wildest fantasies contain either satires or sermons that are didactically relevant to our human condition now.¹¹ The invention of the chronosynclastic infundibulum, for example, gives Vonnegut the narrative perspective of eternity and from this viewpoint he can more readily ridicule worldly vanity. The vicious military dictatorship of Mars invites parallels with some of today's fascist societies, whereas the utopian vision of simple dignity and eccentric individualism on Titan is a reminder of a way in which we do not live on earth. The harmoniums on Mercury who humbly give their lives to beauty express satiric contrast to the aesthetic and moral ugliness of human beings who use each other in their pursuit of prestige and power. Vonnegut's fantasy about the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is a way of deriding religious dogmatism.

Vonnegut reserves his especially virulent satire for a militarist-capitalist society which masquerades as a democratic and openly competitive civilization but which reduces its citizens to zombies and robots and sensation seeking crowds. In thus protesting against the dehumanization of man, Vonnegut seems to be following the satiric tradition of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. Unk's heroic struggle against being reduced to a machine in *The Sirens of Titan* and his quest for knowledge and art through suffering is very similar to Helmholtz Watson's groping for artistic expression after incorrect conditioning in *Brave New World*. The love match of Unk and Beatrice serves the same purpose of protesting against a robot society as the love of the Savage and Lenina in *Brave New World* and Winston and Julia in *1984*.

In Vonnegut's challenge to the status quo is phrased as satire, his tentative solutions, insofar as he is not pessimistically silent, are often phrased as sentimentality, Romantic escapism, or utopianism with a dash of ironic ambivalence. In his later novels Vonnegut is more often silent than sentimental; he seems to prefer the anticlimax of the open ending and we are left to dwell on his philosophizing on fatalism, futility, the insanity of man, and timelessness. *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* suggest that his pessimism may be throttling his fantasy and that his introspective musing has made great inroads on his determination to sustain an entertaining plot. *Breakfast of Champions* in particular is the work of an artist who has turned away decisively from novels of futuristic fantasy to antinovels of whimsy and despair. Vonnegut is well aware of what he is doing. "I am programmed at fifty to perform childishly,"¹² he says, and scrawls pictures of obese cows, dinosaurs, and billboards among his ever briefer paragraphs. Some of these pictures are relevant to the satire and funny, but many are self-indulgent nonsense. The author commits casual sabotage to the novel's form, strolling complacently through the work, toying with his omnipotent relationship with his characters. One has the impression that he is playing in this flippant fashion because he has become too self-conscious, and feeling trapped by the very myths he has created, he is increasingly inclined to question the aesthetic worth of his art.

Nevertheless *Breakfast of Champions* is still in part compelling reading. I think there are two reasons for this. Vonnegut has been able to convert his despair, episodically at any rate, into brief anecdotes and parables that are both funny and an integral part of his enquiry into the inexplicable ways of God and man. And secondly, his words are inspired by an uncompromising honesty about himself and what he has observed about life around him. There are no false illusions to solace his readers and make it easier for them to continue living. For this is not popular wish fulfillment fiction, this is a challenge to share his bitterness, and like him, to continue living if you can. Vonnegut has taken upon himself the conscience of the creator. In writing fiction he takes this to mean that we must abandon the old aesthetic of realistic fiction which pretends that it can bring order and meaning to life. In its stead Vonnegut has created the deliberately chaotic antinovel to mirror the lack of meaning which he perceives in the universe. Art has become for him a compulsive self-torment of aloneness and opposition, lightened only by moments of farce, black humor, and fantasy.

Vonnegut has all the self-assurance of the satirist about how human beings should behave, or to put it in modern context, how they must behave if they are to survive. He never forgets his detached satiric perspective on human misery, and is so insistent on making his point as universal as possible that he impatiently discards detailed realism and concentrates on such generalities of the human condition as the body chemistry of the human machine. For example, he ascribes the evil of German Nazism to the fact that "the Germans were full of bad chemicals."¹³ Because human beings have no control over their chemical composition according to Vonnegut, he feels indulgent sympathy with them even when they commit evil. His technique in fact is sadly to pardon the doer but to ridicule the inhumanity of his deed.

This contrast in Vonnegut's works between sympathy and satire is part of an overall contrast which he uses to tell grim things in a funny way. In the style of a kindly old man in a peasant village telling a well-known fairy story to children, Vonnegut reinterprets solemn history. Such sacred cows as the national anthem and flag, the white man's burden, and free

enterprise are calmly and self-evidently revealed to be ridiculous pretensions and delusions. Particularly in *Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut shows us the horror and the absurdity of our everyday world. True, the outlook is not unique, but the style and mood are. The satire invites all of us who do not believe in the pomposity and glib euphemisms with which those in power mask their daily evil, to chortle happily at the vengeful wit of the master deflater. But once we have chortled with Vonnegut, we must also suffer with him, sharing his agony at the apparently inalterable cruelty of man and the senselessness of the universe. This is a high price to pay. But the honesty of Vonnegut's pessimism is more satisfying than forfeiting one's soul to the false myths and ideologies of our day.

NOTES

¹Vonnegut's novels appeared in the following chronological sequence, *Player Piano* (New York: Delacorte, 1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (New York: Delacorte, 1959), *Mother Night* (New York: Delacorte, 1961), *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Delacorte, 1963), *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (New York: Delacorte, 1965), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Delacorte, 1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (New York: Delacorte, 1973). Vonnegut has also published a collection of short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House* (London: Cape, 1969) and a play, *Happy Birthday, Wanda June* (London: Cape, 1971).

²Jess Ritter in "Teaching Kurt Vonnegut on the Firing Line" compares Vonnegut's "mythical modern universe" to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and goes on to say that students react to Vonnegut as "a myth-maker and fabulist rather than as a dramatic and narrative novelist." In *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (New York: Delacorte, 1973), p. 33.

³Samuels correctly says of Vonnegut that "he borrows the debased formulas of science fiction and comic books as a serious travesty of our present condition, whose silliness is also represented by one-dimensional grotesques impersonating people." See Samuels, "Age of Vonnegut," *The New Republic*, (June 12, 1971), p. 30.

⁴Leslie Fiedler, "The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut," *Esquire*, (September, 1970), pp. 195-196.

⁵Peter J. Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Writers for the Seventies* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Paperback, 1972), p. 133.

⁶Crichton claims that Vonnegut "becomes an offensive writer, because he will not choose sides, ascribing blame and penalty, identifying good guys and bad." See J. M. Crichton, "Sci Fi and Vonnegut," *The New Republic* (April 26, 1969), p. 35. Vonnegut does not create villains or scapegoats because he is convinced that the evil lies ineradicable and in varying degrees within us all. But he is quite definite in identifying the nature of the evil against which we must struggle.

⁷See Tony Tanner, "The Uncertain Messenger; A Study of the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," *The Critical Quarterly*, 2, No. 4 (1969), 297.

⁸See Fiedler, "The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut," p. 204, and Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, p. 185.

⁹Samuels, "Age of Vonnegut," p. 31.

¹⁰Speaking against rational, scientific enquiry Vonnegut says "but this intuition is all there is, you see. Life happens too fast for you ever to think about it. If you could just persuade people of this, but they insist on amassing information." As quoted in "The Masks of Vonnegut," *New York Times Magazine* (January 24, 1971), p. 28.

¹¹Tanner deplors Vonnegut's "using his fiction to issue short sermons on the state of contemporary America or the world." See "The Uncertain Messenger," p. 307. But why should there not be a revival of the sermon in modern form? When Vonnegut does preach, he avoids any suggestion of sounding smug or self-righteous, and varies his tone in an entertaining manner.

¹²*Breakfast of Champions* (London: Cape, 1973), p. 5.

¹³Vonnegut, "Preview of *Breakfast of Champions*," *Ramparts* (February, 1973), p. 45.