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Vonnegut's Dresden Story:  
The Cathartic Struggle

Mary Janet Bailey Edwards

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Arts

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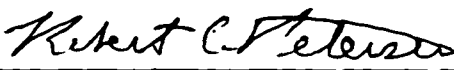


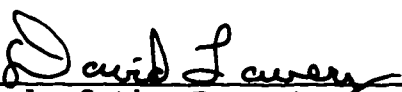
Vonnegut's Dresden Story:  
The Cathartic Struggle

APPROVED:

Graduate Committee:

  
Major Professor

  
Reader

  
Head of the Department of English

  
Dean of the Graduate School

## Abstract

### Vonnegut's Dresden Story: The Cathartic Struggle

This dissertation will reflect an analysis of a close reading of Kurt Vonnegut's first six novels: *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Mother Night* (1961), *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1964), and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) as a means of tracing specific and repeated themes, images, sounds, smells, patterns, colors, and events that relate to Vonnegut's experience as an American POW during World War II in Dresden, Germany. Vonnegut returned from war, planning to write a novel about what he had seen; it took him twenty-three years of struggle as a writer to accomplish the task.

Chapter one will establish the historical background of what happened in Dresden during Vonnegut's imprisonment. This is necessary, so that the Dresden images, when they appear in a novel, will be recognizable. Chapters two through seven will then trace these Dresden "markers" as they filter through Vonnegut's writing.

This dissertation will show that the specific writing techniques, themes, and characterizations needed for Vonnegut to voice his Dresden message were being honed in these first books, and that when they came to full bloom in 1969 with the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, they resulted in a cathartic experience for Vonnegut, who felt a sense of accomplishment and release when he was finally able deliver his Dresden message.

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## Chapter 1

### Vonnegut's Dresden Experience: The Historical Background

Dresden, Germany died in the last days of World War II. The Allied Air Forces of America and England destroyed this beautiful German treasure city in a top secret operation named *Thunderclap* during a two day co-ordinated bombing raid which occurred on the evening of the 13th and continued into the daylight hours of the 14th of February 1945. Shortly after this late war atrocity, the discovery of the German Death Camps captured the world's attention, followed by the dramatic events of Hitler's suicide. On May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allies; and three months later the Atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, quickly bringing World War II to an end. Soon, the Iron Curtain dropped, marking the beginning of the Cold War and locking Dresden into the East German sector. As a result, the Dresden nightmare was hidden from and largely ignored by most of the world. America and England spoke little of it, the Communist world propagandized it, and the post-World War II population, in general, forgot about it.

An American POW, Private Kurt Vonnegut, was there. He survived the firestorm and as a POW was used to carry corpses to the mass graves. He then spent the next twenty-three years trying to write about the Dresden nightmare, but he did not succeed until the 1969 publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut brushes away the effect of

being a POW, saying that his newspaper training caused him to handle the Dresden experience in a unique way. "Before I was a soldier I was a journalist, and that's what I was in Dresden--a voyeur of strangers' miseries. I was outside" (*Fates* 30). Outside the experience or not, most Vonnegut critics agree that the Dresden influence is important. Kathryn Hume notes that "Fire permeates Vonnegut's picture of the cosmos, but Dresden fire, not ethereal" ("Heraclitean" 224). David Goldsmith surmises that "rarely has a single incident so dominated the work of a writer. The guilt Vonnegut feels about Dresden stuck to him like a Lord Jim complex" (ix). Jess Ritter feels that because of the Dresden experience, "Vonnegut's battered heroes either refuse to contribute to human suffering or mitigate it" (37). Barbara Tepa Lupack states that "the bombardment touched Vonnegut's soul and burned itself indelibly into his memory, eventually finding its way into most of his major fiction" (101). Jerome Klinkowitz agrees, insisting that:

the matter of Dresden furnished the world picture for *Player Piano*, the psychological barrier for *The Sirens of Titan*, the backdrop for *Mother Night*, the informing principle for *Cat's Cradle*, the climax for *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and finally the essence for *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

("Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." 16)

A deeper, historical look into the actual events of Dresden not only supports this critical consensus, it reveals that although Vonnegut could not write his Dresden story for

those twenty-three years, specific and repeated details of his Dresden experience were actually being encoded into each of the novels leading up to the 1969 publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Understanding what really happened in Dresden Germany in February 1945 might be a significant key to uncovering Kurt Vonnegut's encoding.

Dresden is an old city, dating back to the 13th century. Because of its architecture, stretching on both banks of the Elbe, the richness of its art treasures, and its great cultural atmosphere, it has often been labeled the "German Florence" (Rick Atkinson 18). In addition to its great cultural treasures, Alexander McKee notes that Dresden was a center for refugees, prisoners of war, and hospitals. The Red Cross operated actively in Dresden; everyone viewed it as a safe city (78). Kurt Vonnegut also considered the city an insignificant military target, expressing the general attitude of everyone concerning Dresden:

The Germans purposely kept the city free of major war industries and arsenals and troop concentrations so that it might be a safe haven for the wounded and refugees. There were no air-raid shelters to speak of and few anti-aircraft guns. It was a famous world art treasure, like Paris or Vienna or Prague, and about as sinister as a wedding cake. (*Fates* 100)

Yet, the Allies did more than bomb Dresden; they used a new technique discovered during the process of the bombing campaign over Germany that used incendiaries to create a

fire storm. In the case of Dresden, they used this technique to perfection and caused one of the greatest, destructive tragedies of human history.

Since the Allied military considered the Dresden operation classified information, news reports at the time of the bombing were discouraged. The 14 February 1945 issue of *The New York Times* carried a twelve line article stating that the R.A.F. Bomber Command attacked western Germany on February 13th and that there had not been any loss of our aircraft ("Texts" L1). The next day, the *New York Times* carried a front page headline stating, "8,000 Planes Batter Nazis Close to 2 Fronts; Dresden Hit Thrice as Russians Move on It; Breslau Reported Ringed; New Gains in West"(1). An accompanying article by Gladwin Hill then groups Dresden in with ten cities bombed "in support of the Allied ground forces"("Ten Cities" 1). It is mentioned that Dresden was hit three times, but no mention of the heavy destruction or loss of human life is made. A follow up report by Hill about the massive air bombings appeared in the 16 February 1945 issue of *The New York Times*: "The great city of Dresden, now only fifty miles from the Russian front, received its fourth attack in less than forty-eight hours, jeopardizing the architectural if not the artistic treasures that made it the *German Florence*" ("Rail City" 1). The article suggests any horror stories about Dresden are mere propaganda:

The Germans pulled out all the stops on the sympathy propaganda, reporting that Dresden has been turned into a heap of ruins and that

irreplaceable art treasures have been transformed into smoking, pulverized rubble. However, a previous announcement referring to the "picture gallery that before the war housed the Sistine Madonna," indicated that, as in Britain and France, portable art objects had long since been removed to safety vaults. (6)

The same article then states that "200,000 residents had fled in panic" and suggests that between 20,000 and 35,000 are reported dead in the Dresden attack (6). This is one of the lowest mortality figures reported for the Dresden attack.

Some reports leaking out of Germany did create criticism of Bomber Command and the Air Chief Marshall Harris. However, a letter from General Eisenhower was printed in the 13 March 1945 issue of the *London Times* in which he thanks Sir Arthur for the efforts of the Bomber Command:

The effect on the war economy of Germany has obviously been tremendous, a fact that advancing troops are quick to appreciate and which unfailingly reminds them of the heroic work of their comrades in Bomber Command and in the United States Air Forces. ("Effectiveness" 2.)

On 7 March 1947, *The London Times* carried an article by Sir A. Sinclair, reviewing the history of the air war. Again, no specific mention is made of what happened in Dresden. Lewis was the Secretary of State for Air, and from that position, he again praises the close partnership and harmony that existed between the American forces and the R.A.F. in



achieving mastery of the air over Germany (8.4). The London focus was always on the positive effects of the bombing strategy; never did they report the horror.

One of the few negative reports that did appear was a very brief 27 line story, "Here Was Dresden," carried in the 12 March 1945 issue of *Newsweek*. They credit their story to a Nazi commentator who describes what happened in Dresden: "Not a single detached building remains intact or even capable of reconstruction.... The town area is devoid of human life. A great city has been wiped from the map of Europe" (33). The *Newsweek* article suggests that 1,000,000 people were in Dresden at the time, but how many of those died is not reported. No pictures of the destroyed city accompany the brief article, which is buried deep in the magazine. In all fairness, there was a world war going on. Obviously, the newspapers and magazines had to restrict what they reported to the public. As a result, the public did not know the truth about Dresden in 1945.

There were many forces that drove the Dresden bombing. Allan A. Michie published a book entitled *The Air Offensive Against Germany* in January 1943. Michie discusses the radio broadcasts made by the so-called "Free British" Nazi radio stations. These stations were manned by English-speaking propagandists who posed as patriotic British citizens whose sole concern was to save Britain from defeat at the hands of the Germans. Michie reports that on April 5, 1942, one of them said: "The bombing of Germany, a mere pinprick to the enemy, is solely for propaganda in the hope of making the

British people forget the tragic losses in the Far East and the gloom due to the course taken by the Battle of the Atlantic and the fighting in Russia" (35). These broadcasts repeatedly urged the R.A.F. to fight needed battles in the East instead of bombing German cities. These broadcasts may have helped fuel the fire at Bomber Command, driving them to prove their might to the Germans who constantly belittled their efforts in these broadcasts.

Another driving force that selected Dresden as a target was as the desire to impress the Russians at the upcoming Yalta Conference, scheduled for early February 1945. McKee reveals that Churchill had been sensitive for years to Stalin's increasing influence over world events and had on 26 January demanded action from his own bomber forces against Berlin and other East German cities as well. He was told by Harris that because of weather and seasonal reasons, nothing could be done before 4 February. By then the Americans had preempted the German capital, Berlin. For whatever reason, Dresden was not bombed until 13 February, and by then the Yalta Conference had been over for two days (109). McKee emphasizes the fact that "there was no longer any bargaining or prestige mileage to be got out of burning the Saxon capital" (110). His only conclusion as to why Dresden was still bombed was that perhaps the Prime Minister simply forgot to cancel the raid! "He may have become immersed at once in the fascinating business of redrawing the map of Europe with Roosevelt and Stalin, in which they jointly legalized the handover of 120 million Europeans to the Soviet Empire" (110). For whatever reason, the weather

kept Dresden from being bombed in time for the Yalta Conference, but as soon as the weather cleared on the 13th, the mission proceeded.

Anthony Verrier, in his 1968 book *The Bomber Offensive*, suggests that there were other reasons that Dresden was picked for the attack. "Dresden was an unbombed city, and it was an old city; like Lubeck, like Rostock, like Hamburg, it would burn" (311). The fact that it was unbombed meant that there were no broken places to stop the fire. The target was perfect for a well-coordinated bombing. But McKee indicates that the target area was not just the old city itself but the large population of refugees who had flooded the city (118). The thinking was that the refugees would add significantly to the general confusion and help send a psychological message to the Germans.

Although the refugees may have been the target, the Bomber Groups were given other information. David Irving reports that Bomber Group Number 3 was told that they were attacking German Army Headquarters now located at Dresden. Bomber Group Number 1 was told that the target was an important railroad center. Bomber Group Number 6 was told that they were attacking an important industrial area which produced electric motors, precision instruments, chemicals, munitions, and poisonous gas. Very few of the airmen were warned of the presence of several hundred thousand refugees in the city or of the prisoner-of-war camps containing 26,620 prisoners of war (137). They believed that they were striking important military targets.

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McKee states that the only guns left in Dresden were for use against low-flying aircraft. These were manned by school boys (80). Irving notes that sirens did not sound in most districts because power supplies had failed, so the second raid took people totally by surprise. After the first attack, the roads were filled with long columns of lorries, their headlights full on, crawling towards the city with relief supplies and fire brigades. Irving suggests that the second component of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris's double-blow was aimed at the annihilation of these forces which came from surrounding cities to put out the first fire (142). They were obliterated in the ensuing firestorm.

The results of the bombing were beyond what was expected. Irving says that over sixteen hundred acres of the city was destroyed in one night, compared to six hundred acres destroyed in London during the entire war. One British prisoner of war notes in his diary that Dresden burned for seven days and eight nights before the fire burned itself out (157). But Dresden was a failure in that it did not bring about immediate surrender or obliterate the German will to fight; in fact, Verrier reports that the main railway station in Dresden was hardly damaged (302). Trains were soon running again.

The people on the ground who survived provide another view of the Dresden bombing. Alexander McKee spent many years after the war gathering information from eye witnesses. He visited Dresden in 1958 and again in 1980 to gather the stories of

survivors. One story is that of Margret Freyer who lived in the old city. She recalled that at the time an unusually large number of refugees filled the city: "Before the raid each restaurant, cafe, pub, and bar as well as the main station, was crammed full of people with suitcases, rucksacks and bundles. You literally fell over these people and their possessions" (144). Many of these refugees simply disappeared from the face of the earth during the bombing. Nobody knows who they were or what happened to them. They simply were gone after the war.

Another eye-witness account McKee gathered was that of an SS officer, Claus von Fehrentheil. He was in one of the many hospitals in Dresden.

After all, we understood we were in an open city, world-famous for its works of art, undefended, declared a "hospital-town." We patients had been reassured that even the smallest hospital had the distinctive red cross on a white background painted on its roof. With this order to attack Dresden, the Geneva Convention, recognized by all nations except England, had become a farce. (147)

The excuse offered later about the hospitals and schools that were leveled was that the smoke made it impossible to see them. Eva Beyer relates the aftermath of one bombed maternity hospital: "Several women lay there with their bellies burst open, probably by the blast, and one could see the babies for they were hanging half outside. Many of the babies were mutilated" (McKee 252). Time and again, the targets described are women, children, and the helpless.

Vago Muradian explains how a firestorm happens. The bombs have to be dropped in just the right order and in exact timing. The ruptured buildings and gas lines then fuel a blazing inferno that grows stronger and stronger. The column of fire sent upward becomes super-heated and draws cold air in at the bottom, creating strong winds which sap the oxygen from the ground level and replace it with deadly carbon monoxide gas. Those people outside are blown and burned to bits; those trapped inside are suffocated with the lack of oxygen and poisonous gas (2). This is why so many people died in Dresden. Many of the dead were merely sitting inside basements as if asleep when they were found. McKee includes another account of Margret Freyer who describes the effect of the poisonous air on the victims:

I see how one after the other; they simply seem to let themselves drop to the ground. I had a feeling that they were being shot, but my mind could not understand what was really happening. Today I know that these unfortunate people are the victims of lack of oxygen. They fainted and then burnt to cinders. (173)

The firestorm had simply taken all of the oxygen out of the air.

One of the earliest accounts released to the public was "Escape From Hell," published in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1947. It is purported to be an eyewitness account by a Swiss resident who passed through Dresden after the bombing. The anonymous Swiss writer offers a theory as

to why Dresden was really bombed:

Some said they knew that Dresden was next on the list, because the Russians were already so near; the English, contrary to their former resolution to spare Dresden, were now determined to bomb it so that its industrial establishments would not fall undamaged into Russian hands. (27)

With the rapid onset of the Cold War after the ending of World War II, this theory is very reasonable. The anonymous eyewitness estimates the number of dead to be approximately two hundred thousand, without exaggeration, because he had seen "hundreds of heaps of corpses all over town, each containing scores and even hundreds of bodies" (27). This observer notes that all schools, factories, and hospitals had been leveled.

The firestorm winds themselves were commented on by many. The unknown Swiss writer tells of the horror of the firestorm:

Clothes were literally torn from the bodies, which then rolled and slid from distances of over three hundred feet into the flames, as if drawn by huge magnets. The heat was so terrific that the lips sprang open; the hair was carbonized. Those not crushed by falling walls or roasted or suffocated in the cellars or slain by bombs, perished in these fire storms; after the second attack almost no one escaped from the inner town. (35)

Irving also comments on the intensity of the firestorm winds: "Giant trees were uprooted and snapped in half. Crowds of people fleeing for safety had suddenly been seized by the tornado and hurled along whole streets into the seat of the fires" (163). One ghastly story Irving collects is from a railway man who saw a woman with a baby buggy hurled down the street and sucked into the flame (163). Help was not to be had. One example Irving gives is a clear indication of what happened to the fire brigades that tried to stop the firestorm. The fire-brigade dispatched to Dresden by Bad Schandu, ten miles from Dresden, arrived to help, but not one of them returned home--nobody survived (175). No firemen from this group were ever seen again; they disappeared like so many others.

The fire finally burned itself out. Irving states that the temperature of the fire in the inner city is estimated to have reached 1,000 plus C. (188). McKee's estimate is much higher--3,000 degrees C. in the center of the Altstadt (176). Some bodies were literally melted into a greenish liquid. Irving quotes the Director Vogt of the V.N.Z. (Bureau of Missing Persons) in Dresden as saying:

Sometimes the victims looked like ordinary people apparently peacefully sleeping; the faces of others were racked with pain, the bodies stripped almost naked by the tornado; there were wretched refugees from the East clad only in rags, and people from the Opera in all their finery; here the victim was a shapeless slab, there a layer of



ashes shoveled into a zinc tub. Across the city, along the streets wafted the unmistakable stench of decaying flesh. (189)

One of the most gruesome sights Irving relates about the heat intensity of the fire concerns the water tanks. Many people had fled the fire and jumped into the water tanks, thinking that they would be safe. The problem is the temperature rose so high that the water boiled and cooked these unfortunate victims. Those who jumped in could not get back out. When the tanks were cleaned out, they were full of bodies; the water had evaporated in the heat (191). Many of the bodies were shriveled up from being boiled.

The task of cleaning up all of the dead bodies fell to the British and American prisoners of war who were used in the salvage operations. Such demanding physical labor was very difficult for them because they had been weeks of living on few rations. McKee verifies that the prisoners were weak and dazed with hunger almost all of the time, and the desire for food was always there (82). Irving describes a situation where suddenly, in the cellars, they found intact food stores, but the prisoners were not allowed to touch any of the supplies. Irving states that their punishment for "looting" such food was swift and sure. One American from a camp in Dresden-Plauen was found with a tin of food in his uniform during a routine search; a young French-Canadian soldier was caught bringing some ham into the camp in Dresden-Ubigau. Both were shot by firing squads (183). Irving describes the unbearable situation the POWs found themselves in. Any soldier who could not stand

the strain of the work after long hours of removing the dead was executed. Their bodies would be loaded immediately onto the carts with the dead bodies and carted away (194). The weeks after the bombing were a nightmare for the living.

Among the survivors there were some American POWs. Kurt Vonnegut was among a group of prisoners housed and working in the southwest industrial area. He worked in a factory producing malt syrup for pregnant women. McKee tells of a bizarre incident that occurred in the factory just two days before Dresden died. Evidently, an extraordinary visitor arrived dressed in black cowboy boots covered with stars and swastikas. He wore an Abraham Lincoln insignia and a red arm band that had a blue swastika circled in white. His name was Howard W. Campbell, Jr., and he was recruiting for his own unit of the SS, which he had named the "Free American Corps." He attempted to recruit the prisoners to fight Bolshevism on the Russian front. They were promised plenty of food and patriotic honor for themselves. "He explained to his starving compatriots that the blue of his uniform was for the American sky, white for the race that pioneered the continent, red for the blood shed by patriots in the past" (McKee 83). McKee reveals that only one man spoke up in reply to this strange performance; that one man was a high school teacher who was really too old to fight. He called the SS officer a snake and made a speech about real American ideals. McKee also ironically comments that this teacher would die within the week, accused of looting; but right now he was causing a fight. This strange scene

was interrupted when the sirens began to wail and everyone had to run down to the meat locker (83). It was not a real attack, but in two days they would once again take refuge in that meat locker below while Dresden was destroyed. This POW group, which would survive the firestorm, would be used for clean-up and burial detail.

As the prisoners did their gruesome work, crowds of survivors gathered to watch. Clyde Smith, an imprisoned paratrooper, tells that some cursed at the prisoners, many spit on them, others blamed them because they were the enemy (McKee 255). Many stood in silence. The experience was horrific. McKee comments that "at first, the stench was not too bad. But then pools of evil, greenish liquid began to form and spread out from under the bodies; all the bodies in all the cellars all over the city" (256). Gigantic clouds of flies swarmed all over the city and masses of maggots grew everywhere (McKee 256). Vonnegut writes of his own experience:

I had no pride or satisfaction while carrying corpses from the cellars to the great funeral pyres while friends and relatives of the missing watched. They may have thought that it served me right to do such gruesome work at gunpoint, since it was my side in the war which had made it a necessity. But who knows what they thought? Their minds may have been blank. I know mine was. (*Fates* 102-103)

It took weeks to clean out the cellars and bury the dead.

There never was an official body count--there was no way to get one. Vonnegut speaks of the confusion of official numbers:

It will never be known how many corpses there were or what sorts of souls inhabited them. I have heard every number from 35,000 to 200,000. The high and low estimates are politically motivated, minimizing or maximizing the viciousness of the raid. The number which sounds right to me, and the one most often heard from people with no axes to grind, is 135,000, more than were killed in Hiroshima. ( *Fates* 101).

Whatever the true body count was, it was staggering.

There was a complete revulsion against such bombings so late in the war. A public demand arose to know who was responsible for Dresden. In typical military fashion, the "buck was passed," and some in high places denied any involvement. Charles Carrington states that General Spaatz cleared himself by suggesting that Harris had acted on an unauthorized executive order which slipped past the British Air Ministry (195). A 4 February 1995 article in *Spectator* by Simon Jenkins accuses Harris of being "beyond the control of his superiors" (26) and even defying the orders of his boss, Sir Charles Portal. Supposedly Portal and the Americans had asked that bombers be directed only at specific military targets and never against civilians. Jenkins accused Harris of "seeing no distinction between Nazis and three centuries of European culture" (26) in his

choice of Dresden as a target.

With the coming peace, however, the investigation quickly died, and Dresden was forgotten until the 50th anniversary celebrations of World War II. Atkinson, in a 14 February 1995 article in *The Washington Post* capsulizes a 50th anniversary memorial held in Germany. Anger seems to have subsided by that time. German President Roman Herzog did not place blame for the Dresden bombing: "no one wants to offset the atrocities committed by Germans in the Nazi state. We are here first and foremost to mourn, to lament the dead" (A18). Britain marked the occasion by offering to provide a gold cross for the cupola of the church that will be rebuilt. The newspaper reports that tens of thousands of people filled Dresden streets to hear a requiem played by the bells of the 46 churches of the city and much money was pledged to help with reconstruction projects that will return Dresden to her pre-war beauty.

A 12 February 1995, *New York Times* article also commemorates the 50th anniversary of the bombing. Christian Habbe and Donald Koblitz label Dresden as the only 50th anniversary observance to mark German victimhood. The article reports the death toll to be a low number of 35,000 and indicates that the city was chosen because it was intact and could serve well to show off the firestorm technique. The article goes on to say that "Few Germans expend energy over why Dresden met such a tortured death; those who dispute which side started the war are simply not taken seriously anymore" (15.4). A *Chicago Tribune* article, published the same day, contains a similar

viewpoint. Ray Moseley, staff writer, says "Some Germans today regard the bombing as a war crime. Many of them are on the extreme Right, but not all" (2). Perhaps the real message of the 50th anniversary articles is that the subject of Dresden is finally ready to be put to rest.

A 17 March 1986, article, "A Night at the Dresden Opera," in the *New Yorker* describes post-World War II Dresden. Modern Dresden is described as existing amid rubble still.

In Hiroshima and in Berlin, a few buildings were left in ruins as a reminder; the rebuilt city flows around them. But this is different. In Dresden, the old city is a monument of ruins. Here it almost seems as if the ruins were meant to be preserved, instead of cleared or reconstructed--as if the destroyed Altstadt were meant to be a piece of propaganda to show people what war was like and what the Western enemies of Germany wrought. Restoration has been going on only desultorily, here and there. (95-96)

The anniversary memorials have begun to put money into rebuilding. It has been suggested that now the Russian empire has fallen, now that the Iron Curtain has been removed, now that the Berlin Wall has been torn down, Dresden can finally be rebuilt.

Recovery from such devastation is difficult; it has taken Dresden half a century. For Vonnegut, recovery from the Dresden experience challenged his ability to write about it. In

his famous Dresden book, Vonnegut quotes a line from Theodore Roethke's *Words for the Wind*, "I learn by going where I have to go." This quote seems to encapsulate what was happening to Vonnegut as he worked his way through his first five novels. While writing those first books, Vonnegut not only developed the writing technique needed to produce *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he alluded to specific horrors which he experienced in Dresden, and then freed himself of them by bringing them all together again in the writing of *Slaughterhouse-five*. Specific encoding uses Dresden sights, smells, sounds, and colors. Political attitudes, military power, governmental propaganda, individual repressibility, historical personalities, apocalyptic endings, and human worth appear as forces of chaos and change in Vonnegut's early writing. It is this scattering and bringing together of the Dresden experience that is the thread which binds the early novels together and builds toward a cathartic conclusion for Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

## Chapter 2

### The Beginning: Guilt and Discontent in *Player Piano*

*Player Piano*, published in 1952, is Kurt Vonnegut's first book. It was originally published in paperback as a drugstore quick sell, appearing under the title, *Utopia 14*; it sold 3,500 copies (Richard Todd 35). Vonnegut was thirty years old at the time of publication, and his experience as a POW in Dresden, Germany was seven years in the past. He had yet to produce his Dresden story, but elements of Dresden can be seen smoking in this first novel. *Player Piano* paints a picture of the helplessness of the individual against the larger forces of government, technology, and military power. Vonnegut speaks of his own helplessness at the hands of these same powers during World War II in *Fates Worse Than Death* (1991):

Everything possible was done to make me die, but I did not die. It wasn't as though the bombardiers knew where I was and were careful not to hurt me. They didn't know or care who was what or where. The leaders of their nations hoped they would burn down the city and kill as many people of any sort as they could with fire or smoke or lack of oxygen, or some combination of the three. (101)



The bombing of Dresden taught Vonnegut much about the insignificance of the individual as far as governments are concerned. One tale that Vonnegut relates in his autobiographical collage, *Fates Worse Than Death*, touches on the moment he and his buddy O'Hare first spoke of this realization:

When a Liberty ship had wallowed up back to the United States through several storms in the North Atlantic, and it was time for me and my buddy to say good-bye for a while, I said to him, "What did you learn?" The future D.A. O'Hare replied, "I will never again believe my Government" (108).

Mistrust of power is a strong part of Vonnegut's message. Barbara Lupack states that Vonnegut "knew that somehow he must move past his own cynicism and despair and bear witness to the [Dresden] disaster and to the abject disregard for humanity and human achievement that it represented" (101-102). And so, the antagonist in Vonnegut's first book is the world of corporate America and the technology which drives it.

Vonnegut's postwar experiences added to the creation of this antagonist. Returning from the war, Vonnegut took advantage of the G.I. Bill to attend the University of Chicago, where he majored in anthropology. Jerome Klinkowitz reveals that Vonnegut was very chagrined to discover that none of his professors cared to hear about

Dresden; and when he did get them to listen, their argument always centered around the German death camps (*Slaughterhouse 4*). He had been through this terrible experience, and nobody really understood. To complicate matters even more, Dresden was now hidden behind the Iron Curtain, in the Communist sector of East Germany. To show too much concern for a Communist city could call one's patriotism into question. Questioning military policy was not "politically correct" in postwar America. The age of McCarthyism did not want to hear about Corporal Vonnegut's Dresden experience or what he thought about an America which could do such a thing. The horrors of Dresden were being justified, silenced, and forgotten--but not by Kurt Vonnegut.

Klinkowitz suggests that Vonnegut's frustration with the university system mounted to even greater heights when his master's thesis was rejected four times. Finally, he left school without a degree and went to work as a public relations man for the General Electric Corporation in Schenectady, New York, where his brother Bernard worked as a scientist (*Kurt Vonnegut 131*). There Vonnegut was again exposed to the problem of the individual against the power structure; this time it was a corporate giant. Lupack believes that the G.E. experience constantly reminded Vonnegut of the capacity of scientific research "to destroy rather than advance the cause of civilization, as had occurred in Dresden" (102).

Vonnegut had been brought up to believe that science and technology would make life better for all of mankind; instead, Lupack argues, he watched as technology "debased man and magnified his brutishness, not his compassion" (102). These experiences reinforced Vonnegut's feeling that he had survived Dresden to give a needed warning to America, and so he became a shaman, a writer whose antagonist often is the power base of politics, government, and the military.

In *Fates*, Vonnegut touches on the antagonist that he always chooses for his stories:

I hold a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago. Students of that branch of poetry are taught to seek explanations for human comfort or discomfort--wars, wounds, spectacular disease, and natural disasters aside--in culture, society, and history. And I have just named the villains in my books, which are never individuals. The villains again: culture, society, and history. (31)

The form Vonnegut chooses to deliver his message is satire and the short, easy-to-read book. As Vonnegut explains to C.D.B. Bryan, "you catch people before they become generals and senators and Presidents, and you poison their minds with humanity. Encourage them to make a better world" (5). And so, during the day, Vonnegut

wrote public relations material for G.E.; at night he wrote stories for magazines such as *Red Book*, *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Klinkowitz compares Vonnegut of the 50s to Fitzgerald of the 20s, as a chronicler of his time. Like Fitzgerald, he is both inside and outside of his material. Vonnegut lives a thoroughly middle-class American existence among businessmen and tradesmen; but, as a trained anthropologist, he is also a witness to the fundamental, human questionings about the meaning and purpose of life and death (*Slaughterhouse 4*). Like Fitzgerald, Vonnegut is both participant and observer; and like him, he writes for the popular market. In Vonnegut's case it was the magazine and the drugstore paperback. It was in these early stories, Vonnegut began using upstate New York as a setting. Schenectady was called Ilium, a city disgustingly unheroic in comparison to its namesake. Richard Giannone notes that the use of Ilium is "a reminder of the need for a genuine rebirth of culture and feeling in American life" (*Vonnegut* 6). At this same time, Vonnegut also tried once more to write his Dresden story. Giannone estimates that the first attempt alone resulted in 5,000 pages of discarded writing (*Vonnegut* 97). What did get written was *Player Piano*. The money from this first book allowed Vonnegut to break free of the corporate world and earn a living as a writer. He quit his job at General Electric and moved to Cape Cod.

The frustration that Vonnegut feels with any "system"--albeit military, political, or economic--reveals itself in this first novel whose main question is "What are people for?" Vonnegut had learned in Dresden, at the University of Chicago, and again at G.E. that the individual worth was often discounted and even considered negligible and disposable. The priceless value of each body removed from the Dresden cellars, the intellectual identity of a student's mind, the creative ability of the corporation soldier all push together as Vonnegut continually hammers home the value of the individual against the machine. It is the major lesson Paul Proteus, the protagonist of *Player Piano*, learns; the people on the other side of the river are not vermin. All people have individual dignity and value; people always count.

In order to get this lesson across, Vonnegut puts the reader of *Player Piano* in a future world where buildings house machines that are more important than people. The setting is similar to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*. Klinkowitz notes that following the pattern of these dystopian novels, *Player Piano* focuses on some of the important issues of the 1950s, such as conformity, boredom, and mechanization (Kurt Vonnegut 35). Vonnegut's setting is Ilium, New York, not long after a great war. Ilium is divided into three geographical areas, which also separate the classes. Northwest Ilium is the home of the elite,

educated people who are managers, engineers, and professionals. Northeast Ilium contains the large buildings which house the machines which run every aspect of life in Ilium through assessment tests and punched IBM cards. Across the river is South Ilium and Homestead, where the majority of the people live. Known as the "Reeks and the Wrecks," some of these people are also members of the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps, which is made up of "those who couldn't compete economically with machines" (21-22). Most of these people live quiet, useless lives of no purpose. But, we are told, there are exceptions: "There were a few men in Homestead--like (the) bartender, the police and firemen, professional athletes, cab drivers, specially skilled artisans--who hadn't been displaced by machines" (23). These people feel a connection with the chosen elite across the river, but are not allowed entrance into that class. All living things in Ilium suffer from the machine mentality that has destroyed the paradise that was America and produced a land where man has no economic value and no purpose. Nature is sick, man is bored, and harmless cats are zapped into nothingness. Nobody in Ilium is happy, and there are whispers of a third revolution.

In the Foreword to *Player Piano*, Vonnegut delivers a warning to his readers:

This book is not a book about what is, but a book about what could be. It is mostly about managers and engineers. At this point in history, 1952 A. D., our lives and freedom depend largely upon the skill and imagination and courage of our managers and engineers, and I hope that God will help them to help us all stay alive and free (v).

Of course, this is pure irony. It is not at all what Vonnegut wants us to learn. What the military leaders did in Dresden and what General Electric did to the promise and creativity of science taught Vonnegut early that the real problem does not come from our managers. In a world where the power structure, the military, and the politicians do not mind sacrificing the individual, man must learn to take responsibility for himself (*Fates* 101). The individual must fight to keep himself free.

The title of the book, *Player Piano*, refers to a machine found in a saloon. When Paul Proteus goes to the Homewood bar, a character named Rudy Hertz puts a nickle in the machine and plays a song in Paul's honor. Rudy is old and rather senile, but in his day he was a very talented machinist. He considers Paul a friend, being too senile to realize that there are class differences now and that he is Paul's disposable inferior. Rudy asks Proteus, the man with the highest income in Ilium, for help with his 18 year old son who has just failed the

National Classification Test and will not be going to college:

Isn't there something the boy could do at the Works? He's awfully clever with his hands. He's got a kind of instinct with machines. Give him one he's never seen before, and in ten minutes he'll have it apart and back together again. He loves that kind of work. Isn't there someplace in the plant-? (27)

Paul explains to Rudy that it takes a graduate degree for someone to work in the plant. Paul feels very uncomfortable as the music plays, the keys moving up and down as if played by a ghost. The machine does not need man. Leonard Mustazza says of this scene, "That machine is the central symbol in the novel, the symbol of a society whose fundamental human activities including the arts, have been mechanized and bled dry of all human feeling" ("Machine" 105). Rudy is not actually playing the machine that gives his gift of music to Paul, the machine is playing itself. Paul has no actual authority to offer Rudy's son a job either, because only the machine can decide that. Man has no power.

Along the same line of reasoning, Sharona Ben-Tov sees the piano and other machines in the novel as "little boxes" which do more than steal jobs from people. "They steal nature, taking for themselves the properties of fertility and omnipresence but, worst of all, nature's



magical qualities" (28). This point presents itself in the very first scene, as the black cat is eliminated by Building 58. Paul had picked the cat up because mice kept gnawing the wires of the building and creating problems. The cat, he thought, would be a good mouser, but the cat does not know how to "mouse." The building is not friendly to the creatures of nature, and the cat is finally destroyed. It got against the electric fence; there was "a pop, a green flash, and the cat sailed high over the top strand as though thrown. She dropped to the asphalt--dead and smoking" (12). Natural law suffers in the mechanized world of Ilium. Paul believes the sounds of the machine in Building 58 are very musical, but he thinks that the player piano of the Homewood bar does not create beautiful sounds. The clacking noises it does make further underscore the lack of beauty, culture, and refinement in Ilium.

In fact, this player piano could represent a smaller version of a much larger machine in the novel. Man's position is especially threatened by the computer known as EPICAC XIV, which reminds one of two infamous computers of the dawn of the postwar computer age--UNIVAC and ENIGMA. Vonnegut's satirical use of allusion cannot be overlooked here. UNIVAC was a huge computer which took up several rooms; it promised to reform the world. ENIGMA was the computer used by the English during World War II to break the Nazi code so that the Allies could intercept messages;

it promised to save the world and end war (B. Johnson 1). Ironically, EPICAC (also the name of an emetic drug) can only promise to make us sick, not cure us of any illness. As Paul ponders the idea of a Third Industrial Revolution, he imagines such big computers devaluating human thinking; in fact, he can barely manage to think about it! (13). Sadly, Paul realizes that as man perfects machines, he will replace himself and nourish them; the ultimate end is man's destruction.

The Shah of Bratpuhr is one who labels the super computer a false god (106). Clark Mayo notes that the Shah is the first of a reappearing character type in Vonnegut's fiction--the visitor from another place who is able to see the truth beneath the surface (13). Peter Reed also feels that such characters provide Vonnegut a way to speak without sermonizing ("*Latter Vonnegut*" 170). We are told that "the Shah had left his military and spiritual fastness in the mountains to see what he could learn in the most powerful nation on earth for the good of his people" (17). He profoundly asks the most important question of the book after he notices that the people of Ilium are nothing more than obedient slaves to the machines. "What are people for?" he asks (277). This messiah figure allows the reader to accept negative comments because they come from the outside. It is through the voice of such characters that Vonnegut often presents his views, and here it is used to deliver a

warning about the use and abuse of science and technology. In *Player Piano*, the identity of each individual has been reduced to a personnel card, punched and sorted, by the computer. The machine is capable of eliminating any who stand in its way. The machine is inexorable and anti-human.

The computer tries to eliminate the protagonist, Paul Proteus. Paul is not a deliberate hero, but none of Vonnegut's heroes are. In fact, Paul Proteus is satirically presented as an average, everyman type, typical of the corporate executive of the 1950s--the man in the grey flannel suit. His wife, Anita, is the supportive, corporate wife. She loves the company and encourages her husband to move up the corporate ladder to success. She measure her success and worth by her husband's promotions and possible future positions. They, of course, are stereotypes. The truth is they display a false exterior. They are not so happy, they are not so in love, and they are not so loyal.

Paul Proteus is a well-chosen name for the protagonist of *Player Piano*. Paul is, of course, the name of the Apostle who is the author of most of the New Testament Bible. Like Saul of Tarsus, Paul, the corporate man, at first persecutes those on the other side of the river. He is their enemy and a leader of the other camp. When he enters Homewood, he looks upon the people with disdain. As a keeper of the machines, he had once designed a mechanized saloon, which was placed in

Homewood. The modern bar was devoid of humanity. It had "coin machines and endless belts to do the serving, with germicidal lamps cleaning the air, with uniform, healthful light, with continuous soft music from a tape recorder, with seats scientifically designed" (23). Nobody would go in it. Instead, they frequented one which was "a dust-and-germ trap of a Victorian bar, bad light, poor ventilation, and an unsanitary, inefficient, and probably dishonest bartender" (23). The people of Homewood live closer to the natural world and do not avoid the dust and germs. Soon Paul begins enjoying the feeling that he has in the Homewood Bar. Like the Apostle, Paul leaves his own people and not only joins the "enemy" but becomes their leader. The name of Vonnegut's protagonist has further significance here; Proteus is the name given to a minor Greek deity who is an attendant or son to Poseidon, god of the ocean and earthquakes. Proteus is able to see the future and change his shape at will. We see Paul Proteus doing this as he changes loyalties and lifestyles throughout *Player Piano*. William Rodney Allen notes that "Paul's transformation from frustrated but loyal corporate soldier to revolutionary is the dramatic center of *Player Piano*" (27). Like a true Protean, Paul changes unexpectedly and also brings about unexpected change within his society.

In the world of Dr. Proteus, buildings are referred to by number. This could have a Dresden connection because Corporal Vonnegut was housed in a Dresden meat factory labeled *Slaughterhouse # 5* when he was a POW. Proteus is assigned Building #58. Building 58 is old and is handled with special care. Allen points out that Building 58 mirrors the position of Dr. Proteus because he is potentially a sort of Building 58--an anachronistic glitch in the rigidly engineered machine of the corporate state." (*Understanding* 21). The building needs special care because it does not have the very latest equipment. It still belongs to the past, but it is being put through transition and modernization. Paul too, still clings to the past. He is sent to the Meadows for programming, but he harbors secret longings to escape to the country and live in the natural world.

Another major character in *Player Piano* is Dr. Edward Finnerty. He is Paul's double in many ways. Where Paul is inwardly rebellious and questioning, Finnerty is outwardly and openly rebellious and questioning. Finnerty's dress is not that of the corporate soldier; he is a slob. He also does not play social games; he dares to be distant, disobedient, and disorderly. He does as he wishes instead of as the corporation suggests. We are told that Proteus and Finnerty are exact opposites: "The two were inseparable, though their personalities met at almost no point. Together, they made an approximately whole man" (38). In fact, when

we are first introduced to Finnerty, it is during a scene where Paul and Anita are dressing in the obligatory corporate uniform and speaking to one another in a mirror. During their discussion, it becomes quite apparent that the absent Finnerty mirrors the opposite of what they are. Finnerty, dressed in wrinkled, baggy clothing, drives an old car and brings women from Homestead to corporate functions. He truly is a rebel. Paul ponders Finnerty's rugged individuality with admiration: "Paul envied Finnerty's mind, for Finnerty could be anything he wanted to be, and be brilliant at it. Whatever the times might have called for, Finnerty would have been among the best" (31). Finnerty is not obedient, unthinking, or blindly loyal to the corporation. Paul has the potential to be like Finnerty, but not yet.

Paul too drives an old car and owns an illegal gun--which is a silent type of rebellion on his part. Throughout the story, he is constantly being told that his headlight is burned out; he never fixes it, underscoring his unwillingness to be a caretaker of machines. However, Paul's first outward rebellion against the machines happens accidentally. At the club, Paul is jumping through the required social hoops with Kroner and Baer when Fred Berrigner, one of the youngest engineers, approaches with a challenge game against Checker Charley, a machine that cannot be beaten by mere man. Not only does Paul outsmart the unbeatable machine, he causes it to short circuit and

self-destruct in a fire. The young Berrigner is shocked and poses the second great question of the novel: "Why did it have to happen?" (151). We are told that this question was one that humanity has been asking for millennia; it certainly is one that Vonnegut asked himself time and time again after the fire at Dresden.

Paul is exhilarated after the humiliation of Checker Charley. He feels alive and victorious, in touch with his humanity. He is able to admire Finnerty's guts for dropping out of the corporate world. Going across the river for a "boys' night out" with Finnerty, Paul falls into open rebellion. Finnerty even asks him, "You figure to be the new Messiah?" (83). Soon, Paul is thinking messiah-like thoughts and turning them into marching orders:

The common people, God bless them. All his life they had been hidden from him by the walls of his ivory tower. Now, this night, he had come among them, shared their hopes and disappointments, understood their earthly values. This was real, this side of the river, and Paul loved these common people, and wanted to help and let them know that they were loved and understood and he wanted them to love him too. (88)

It is time, for Paul is ready to save the people of Homewood--but how can they be saved?

Paul is not ready to lead a rebellion. Frederick Ashe points out that Paul is caught between his social-climbing wife and his best friend Finnerty. At this point, all Paul wants to do is withdraw to a house by the side of the road, where he can "deal directly with the earth and be the object of no harm to anyone" (24). Vonnegut has a little fun poking fun at the graduate degree in this scene. Mr. Haycox is a caretaker who lives on the farmland that Dr. Proteus buys. He shows a total disdain for the doctorate: "Don't call that kind a doctor at all. Three kinds of doctors: dentists, vets, and physicians. You one of those?" (133). Mr. Haycox then elevates himself and insults the doctorate even more: "I'm doctor of cowshit, pigshit, and chickenshit. When you doctors figure out what you want, you'll find me out in the barn shoveling my thesis" (134). Mr. Haycox is no gate keeper to paradise!

Leonard Mustazza sees this withdrawal as an attempt to regain Eden:

what Paul decides to do is to make himself a little Eden, a decidedly personal Eden and not the large-scale one he conceived of in his drunken dream. The process starts with his new-found desire for lonely independence, rugged individualism, and it culminates in his



purchase of the Gottwald farm, which he plans to turn into a pastoral retreat. ("Machine" 104) Everyone else has other plans for Paul, and his dreams of a quiet life on the farm will never be. Anita will not cooperate, and Mr. Haycox is not welcoming. Mustazza and several other critics have labeled this attempt to escape to the farm Vonnegut's "nation of two" (*Forever* 246), noting that this escape from the world will become a familiar idea in Vonnegut's novels.

Unable to escape into nature, Paul attempts to reject the world that drove him there. Lawrence Broer notes that Vonnegut makes frequent use of double agents, and that is exactly what Paul becomes when he gives up his farm. "The double agent can perceive things about the workings of society that are invisible to the average person. Since he must have two contradictory identities at once, he sees all issues from both sides" (32). Paul has always been playing a role outwardly anyway, now he must openly play a role that he has been inwardly feeling all along. To prepare him for his spy mission, Paul is stripped of all of the privileges of the upper-class. He is issued a new computer card, and he is forced to live on the other side of the river. His reward for bringing home the information that will destroy the enemy known as the Ghost Shirt Society is a guarantee of Pittsburgh and more responsibility higher up the corporate ladder. For Paul, the last barrier that has kept him on the corporate side of the river is gone. He must choose; which

side will he join? Which side will he betray?

There are problems with those who would rebel, however. Mustazza points out Vonnegut's purpose in using the Ghost Shirt Society as the instrument of rebellion. "Far from being the egalitarian, anti-elitist force it passes itself off as, the Ghost Shirt Society proves to be as deceitful and manipulative as the main stream group it opposes, maybe more dangerous and manipulative ultimately" ("Machine" 109). No one part of humanity is guilty; all of mankind is responsible for the plight society finds itself in. As Mustazza ironically states, "machines have not imprisoned the people of Ilium; their own humanity has" ("Machine" 113). The enemy is not the machine, but the man who runs the machine.

Paul is not a hero/savior in the end. Although the war succeeds and the people of Homewood are able to destroy the machines that rule their lives, they stupidly begin recreating their own destruction by reviving the machines once again. Paul notices one man who earlier had been so unhappy in the world of machines; now "he was proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what they liked to do best, Paul supposed, replacing men like himself with machines" (292). The clear message is that people never ever learn. Klinkowitz ironically notes that the workers cannot stop themselves from tinkering with the machinery again. "Ilium is indeed divided into three parts: three movements of an endless cycle which, fueled

by human inventiveness, continually makes, unmakes, and remakes itself" (Kurt 38). Sadly, man will always build toward his own destruction.

James Lundquist agrees, explaining that,  
 the ending of the novel suggests, of course,  
 the central metaphor of the book: not only has  
 American know-how resulted in a society that is  
 itself a huge player piano, but history is much  
 like the music on a piano roll--it can only  
 repeat itself. (24)

William Rodney Allen comments that Paul Proteus lives up to his name; like the Greek god who is able to change at will, Paul undergoes a final transformation. Abandoning his revolutionary identity, he is once more swallowed up by the corporate state (*Understanding* 35). The world will not be saved this time, and nobody cares.

Vonnegut's final message in *Player Piano* is that the people of Ilium are once more creating their own undoing, as is mankind in general in postwar America; the machine must not be rebuilt. The fear that another Dresden can happen is part of the package of worry. Vonnegut clearly is horrified by the continued building up of the machinery of mass destruction. Following Dresden came Hiroshima; after that came the Iron Curtain, the Cold War, and the beginning of the arms race. To Vonnegut, the need for warning is urgently clear. In *Fates*, Vonnegut jokes about man's need to rebuild the machine of war, quipping that Western

Civilization needs to be sent to a meeting of "War Preparers Anonymous" (135). After the satirical analogy, Vonnegut goes on to describe some of the symptoms of what he calls "war disease":

And please understand that the addiction I have identified is to preparations for war. I repeat: to preparations for war--addiction to the thrills of de-mothballing battleships and inventing weapon systems against which there cannot possibly be a defense, supposedly, and urging the citizenry to hate this part of humanity or that one. (135)

The world picture is not just threatening to man's identity, it is threatening his very survival. Mustazza rightfully points out that the machines are not the problem in Ilium. The power of the men who build and run them is the true enslaving force of destruction (*Forever* 25). If man will only listen, perhaps he can live in a world of love, free from the destructive flame of his own annihilation. That is Vonnegut's Dresden message in *Player Piano*. The individual man is helpless only as long as he chooses to be.

### Chapter 3

#### *The Sirens of Titan: The Call to Humanity*

After the publication of *Player Piano*, Kurt Vonnegut did not publish another novel for seven years. Finally, cornered at a cocktail party about his next book, he spilled out the plot for *The Sirens of Titan*, and then he had to write it. He told the story about the conception and creation of the novel in a 1974 interview with Joe David Bellamy and John Casey. After describing the scene at the party, he said: "I went home and very cheerfully and very quickly produced it. Almost automagic" (*Conversation* 160). G. K. Wolfe believes that *Sirens* marks the introduction of several Vonnegut themes: the futility of trying to change the world, the necessity of changing within ourselves, the fatality of searching for meaning outside of the self, and the elevation of the main character to new levels of understanding through a quest for meaning in human existence (1). In *Sirens*, the quest ends with a new understanding of love. Although the novel has been classified as a zany science fiction story, it contains Vonnegut's important Dresden lesson: loving people is important, more important than the agendas of governments, society, politics, religion, or individual power. In a *Playboy* interview with Willis McNelly, Vonnegut reveals that he writes science fiction because it seems to be the best way to record his thoughts on

various subjects, such as General Electric and the loss of human dignity, the loss of faith in government, the loss of faith in God, or the loss of faith in the innocence of science (89). It is almost certainly the Dresden experience that creates such feelings of loss for Vonnegut. In *The Sirens of Titan*, the winners are those who learn the Dresden lesson well: *life is precious*.

*The Sirens of Titan* is set in the distant future. Niles Rumfoord and his dog Kazak have accidentally entered a *chrono-synclastic infundibulum* which allows them to travel back and forth through time and space. Rumfoord takes advantage of his new found ability by manipulating the lives of all around him. His ultimate plan is to set himself up as a God-like ruler on earth. To accomplish this, he orchestrates a war between Earth and Mars, designs a new religion to control the masses of people under his domain, and sets up Malachi Constant as a messiah for this new religion. The *new messiah* is then disposed of by being sent to Titan along with Rumfoord's spoiled, rich bitch wife Beatrice. This sends many of the characters on a search for meaning in life, which creates the central tension of the story. This is Kurt Vonnegut's second attempt at his Dresden novel.

Vonnegut's own Dresden experience is reflected in this search for meaning. He survived the 1945 firestorm of Dresden by hiding out in a meat locker many feet underground. This may be why descents into spirals, holes, waves, caves, tunnels, and other enclosed spaces appear frequently

in *The Sirens of Titan*. For example, Unk (Malachi Constant) and Boaz sit out the deadly war on Mercury. It is not that they are cowardly and miss the war; they are imprisoned far from Earth's battlefield. Their space ship makes a descent when it lands on Mercury:

It had delivered its cargo to the floor of a cave one hundred and sixteen miles below the surface of Mercury. It had threaded its way down through a torturous system of chimneys until it could go no deeper. . . . They determined that their tomb was deep, tortuous, endless airless, uninhabited by anything.

(190-192)

For the duration of the war, they are surrounded by the music and the peaceful beauty of harmoniums. Thousands die on Earth, but Unk and Boaz do not die.

Three years later when Unk returns to Earth, the war is over, and the dead are everywhere:

The churchyard was full, the spaces between its naturally dead chinked tight by the bodies of the honored war dead. Martians and Earthlings lay side by side. There was not a country in the world that did not have graveyards with Earthlings and Martians buried side by side. There was not a country in the world that had not fought a battle in the war for all Earth against the invaders from Mars. (216)

Unk had missed it all.

Kathryn Hume sees those occurrences as symbolic use of the death-rebirth hero monomyth connected to cleansing and renewal. She traces the traditional hero through specific and traceable steps which can be connected to the actions of Malachi Constant. The hero begins his quest as a member of society who confronts female power. He then meets a monster or challenge of some type, which he conquers. There follows some type of reconciliation with the father, a gathering of a boon or gift, and an awakening to greater knowledge, followed by a hero's homecoming ("Kurt," 206). Obviously, the female takes two forms for Malachi: the picture of enticement offered to him by Rumfoord of the Sirens of Titan and the doubling picture of Beatrice Rumfoord, looking so haughty and clean in her little girl white. These two pictures also represent the two choices of love that await him at the end of his journey. One is a sexual power love; the other, a pure spiritual love. Malachi becomes a constant messenger as he leaves for his quest in space. When he returns, he has been through the purification of the underground entrapment on Mercury and expects to return a warrior. Instead, he is welcomed as a Messiah and sent away once more, this time to Titan. On Titan he ends his search for meaning and love by discovering the paradise within himself. Filled with a new message, he makes his final homecoming to Earth, but his return is not heroic. Hume suggests that few of Vonnegut's heroes can truly fulfill the hero myth because at every turn they are



blocked by Vonnegut's personal Dresden experience ("Kurt" 207). For a Vonnegut hero, there is seldom a normal homecoming of welcome and victory. Malachi's final return to earth finds him ushered away ignominiously on a bus, for example. Hume suggests that this is the major reason for Vonnegut's inability to write his Dresden story. "Vonnegut's experience contradicts the basic symbolic situations of the hero monomyth, our culture's primary literary structure for conveying an optimistic sense of life's meaning" ("Kurt" 210). Hume further suggests that "were Vonnegut to come to terms with this archetypal force in his inner pantheon, he might well cease to write, for much of what he says grows out of this tension" ("Kurt" 206). This theory also explains the presence of Dresden "markers" throughout the early books produced by Vonnegut as he was attempting to produce the elusive Dresden novel. In disagreement, Christine Brooke-Rose views the book as an anti-quest. She writes of Malachi Constant:

the quest is not sought for, but forced upon him, and, thus denuded, all he will seek for, on Mars, and later, is his friend Stony Stevenson and the love of the family he is told he has founded. He will only get a semblance of the latter, and a final illusion of the former, at the moment of his death. (258)

In either case, if Malachi Constant is a hero, he is a manipulated and disillusioned one!

The treatment of time especially intrigues many readers of *Sirens*. William Rodney Allen points out that it is in *Sirens* that Vonnegut first uses the idea of nonlinear time (*Understanding* 42). In a 1973 interview, David Standish asked Vonnegut about his treatment of time; Vonnegut replied:

We do live our lives simultaneously. That's a fact. You are here as a child and as an old man. I recently visited a woman who has Hodgkin's disease. She has somewhere between a few months and a couple of years to live, and she told me that she was living her life simultaneously now, living all the moments of it. (*Conversations* 77)

In his novel, Vonnegut attributes this philosophy to the plumber's-helper-shaped creatures of Tralfamadore who teach that all time exists simultaneously. Embracing such a belief makes individual experience and events rather less traumatic, and it may be one way that Vonnegut manages to come to terms with the trauma of his Dresden experience. Rumfoord has learned this lesson as he passes in and out of time warps:

"I am not dying," said Rumfoord. "I am merely taking my leave of the Solar System. And I am not even doing that. In the grand, in the timeless, in the *chrono-synclastic infundibula*-ed way of looking at things, I will always be here. I shall always be wherever I've been."  
(296)

Such an idea makes tragedy less horrible because those who suffer are still alive and well somewhere at the very moment of their suffering. Nothing is ever forever.

One of Vonnegut's major themes is that of the purposeless universe. Charles B. Harris believes that this theme receives its most elaborate treatment in *The Sirens of Titan*. He considers the novel "more an extended metaphor for an absurd universe than the science fiction novel it is usually taken to be" (60). Those who classify it as pure science fiction may not understand Vonnegut's true motive. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald Lawler agree with Harris somewhat: "Vonnegut does not suggest that human life or destiny is necessarily absurd. It is only man's attempt to find an objective meaning to life that is" (68). Man always ends up the victim of the largest joke of all when he makes such an attempt, for there is no meaning to life, and nobody is in charge. Marc Leeds sees the *chrono-synclastic infunibulum* as the most distinguishing feature of the book. He notes a parallel between this force, which allows one to fit all truths together into the great order of the universe, and Vonnegut's own World War II experience:

Having been caught within the great whirlwind of World War II and the more particular flash point which was Dresden (while his genetic ancestors fought for their truths against the truths of his more recent homeland), Vonnegut's career-long obligation has been to tell others how cruel our intentions sometimes appear.

Fated to an eternity of conflict without any particular truth above the rest, the chrono-synclastic infundibulum describes a physical trap. Though man tends to believe he is on a linear track toward perfection, Vonnegut's wrinkle in time prompts the rhetorical question, "What makes you think you're going anywhere?" (533)

For mankind, there are no answers; there are only confusing traps.

In *Sirens*, Rumfoord thinks that he has figured out the answer. He has had Earthlings kidnapped and programmed into believing that they are Martians. Rumfoord's "Martians" then invade Earth in a huge suicide attack, where most of them are killed. The situation now allows Rumfoord to establish the Church of God of the Utterly Indifferent, thus allowing him to control the masses both politically and spiritually. The joke is that all of Rumfoord's great strategies eventually lead to the delivery of a missing space ship part to the Tralfamadorian robot, Salo. Rumfoord's great ideas have not been his at all; he has been directed, moved, and turned by the Tralfamadorians all along. Vonnegut gleefully lets us in on the joke:

The worst possible thing had happened. Not only had Rumfoord found out, seemingly, about the influence of Tralfamadore on Earthling affairs, which would have offended him quite enough--but Rumfoord also regarded himself, seemingly, as

one of the principal victims of that influence.

(284)

It is a revealing moment for Rumfoord, who has been feeling very powerful. He bitterly states that the Tralfamadorians had "reached into the Solar System, picked me up, and used me like a handy-dandy potato peeler!" (285). That is rather below the position of universal or Earthly political leader that Rumfoord had thought he was setting up for himself. The big moments in human history and such monuments as The Great Wall of China and Stonehenge have been nothing more than messages to the stranded robot, Salo, assuring him that his needed space ship part is on its way. The moment is made even more bitter when it is discovered that the very important, sealed message that all of this manipulation has supported is nothing more than one dot, "Greetings" (301). Even Salo is distraught about the useless message:

"Would you like to know how I have been used, how my life has been wasted?" he said. "Would you like to know what the message is that I have been carrying for almost half a million Earthling years--the message I am supposed to carry for eighteen million more years?" (300)

At this point, the reader is told that Salo kills himself by throwing all of his mechanical parts in several directions. He does not enjoy being useless.

Leonard Mustazza analyzes the novel from the Edenic point of view. He acknowledges that wealth, political power, and intelligence will not bring happiness: "The

'paradise within' is a garden sown with seeds of virtue--chief among those virtues, love" (Forever 46). Mustazza draws up copious parallels between Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. He sees Titan as an Eden where Beatrice, Malachi, and Chrono will each find "the paradise within" (47). The opening lines in Vonnegut's novel are, "Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself" (7). The world outside of Titan is fallen and troubled. We are told that mankind is ignorant, which is how Winston Rumfoord has gotten himself in a position to manipulate so many. Mustazza sees Rumfoord's god-playing as the most problematical moral issue in the novel (48). Rumfoord enters in and out of the time zones and people's lives because he and his dog Kazak have accidentally run into the "heart of an uncharged chrono-synclastic infundibulum" and they both now exist "as a wave phenomena" (13). Kazak, the dog from outerspace, has an appropriate name for a hound that can come and go, since his name is spelled the same, coming and going. Since both man and dog now belong to no time and no place, Rumfoord is in a perfect position to manipulate the lives of all around. He has especially singled out Malachi Constant, whose name means "faithful messenger."

Sometimes Rumfoord's attempt to find meaning in life focuses on religion, and it is here that the atheist in Vonnegut cannot resist having fun. Religion only adds to the confusion in a purposeless, Vonnegut-created universe. Klinkowitz feels that the institution of religion supplies

an organizing principle for this novel. Religion allows for a reinvention of reality and provides a way for one person (Rumfoord) to enslave others. Toward the end of the novel, we see that Rumfoord has placed handicaps on everyone but himself, so that all may be equal, and he may be superior. He has the entire planet earth awaiting the arrival of a messiah-like messenger and casts Malachi in this role, only to send him and his family off to exile on Titan. He has established a church called the Church of God of the Utterly Indifferent, and he plans to use this new religion to give himself power. Rumfoord is able to feed upon one of the basic needs of mankind; as Klinkowitz points out, "Mankind is driven by its need for meaning: this theme which in *Player Piano* had been limited to people's roles in society, is for *The Sirens*, expanded from sociological to philosophical and theological proportions" (Kurt 43). It is this need that gives Rumfoord control.

The final words of the novel are Vonnegut's final jibe at the stupidity of people who think that anyone is in charge of the universe: "Somebody up there likes you," Constant is told (319). From the beginning, it has been suggested that Constant has had great luck because of the Bible and this "somebody" who likes him. Constant dies believing this. The pathos of this is that Salo has arranged a death "dream" for his old friend Constant; "Salo had hypnotized him so that he would imagine as he died, that he saw his best and only friend, Stony Stevenson" (319). The fact that Salo arranges this is not an indication that

he or his race of robots is in charge either. The race of Tralfamadore had once pondered the unanswerable question of the purpose of life. They found no purpose, and so they created machines lower than they were and gave the machines the job of finding out the purpose of life. When the creatures found that even the machines could find no purpose in life, the Tralfamadorians began killing each other because they hated having no purpose. Finally, we are told, they "turned that job over to the machines too. And the machines finished up the job in less time than it takes to say *Tralfamadore*" (275). So the final joke is that the Tralfamadorians, who have been controlling human history, have no existence beyond their created robot race. They are a race of machines now who merely manufacture each other for no purpose; and if Salo is any indication, that robot race may be as suicidal as their creators. Vonnegut's irony is quite cutting as he comments on man's need for a higher order: "The Earthlings behaved at all times as though there were a big eye in the sky . . . the big eye was indifferent as to whether the Earthling's shows were comedy, tragedy, farce, satire, athletics, or vaudeville" (276). The final reality is that there is no one up there at all. What happens just happens because of an accidental occurrence--not because "somebody up there likes me." Rumfoord is not happy to find this out, and Constant, the faithful messenger, never does figure it out. Perhaps that is his final great luck; he never knows the truth.



In *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, William Rodney Allen reveals source of the Rumfoord character, indicating that Vonnegut himself has said that understanding Rumfoord is the key to the novel (244). The character's name is a combination of the two Allied leaders perhaps most responsible for Dresden, Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Alexander McKee's revelation in Chapter 1 suggests that Churchill and Roosevelt ordered the Thunderclap operation for pure political showmanship in coordination with the Yalta Conference (110). Allen points out that Vonnegut's description of Rumfoord is very close to the caricatures of President Roosevelt. During the last months of his term, Roosevelt was terminally ill; but prior to that, he was often pictured as an optimistic sort carrying a jaunty cigarette holder (244-245). Vonnegut's description of Rumfoord has similarities: "He put a cigarette in a long, bone cigarette holder, lighted it. He thrust out his jaw. The cigarette holder pointed straight up" (284). We are also told late in the novel that Rumfoord looks "palsied" (279). However, it is not just the caricatured figure of Roosevelt that Vonnegut uses. Allen points out:

Praised for getting the country out of the Depression, Roosevelt was also resented for his willingness to manipulate the public in order to put in place the sweeping social welfare programs of the New Deal. Similarly, Rumfoord appears both as a charismatic intellectual with

the good of his fellow Americans at heart and a ruthless manipulator willing to brainwash his fellow Earthlings, sacrifice countless Martians in a doomed invasion, and to do so even though he realizes he is himself being manipulated by the Tralfamadorians. (40)

Allen argues that the Rumfoord character is the result of the ambivalent feelings Vonnegut shared with many Americans about this president who spent the longest term in office and so dramatically changed our country and its government. Again, criticizing *Sirens* as he makes his point, Allen states that the Rumfoord character is "a striking, complex character in a weak novel" (40). Allen sees Rumfoord as a precursor to Eliot Rosewater and other characters that will evolve in Vonnegut's later novels (40). Rumfoord is the type of power-seeker Vonnegut likes to present--weak and furtive. His final fate puts him in the position that Vonnegut would like to see all manipulative, political power bosses occupy--one of insignificance.

Yet, with all of these elements so obvious in *Sirens*, the one driving force of the novel comes from the Dresden experience. After the firestorm ended, Vonnegut was brought out of his hidden meat locker and pressed into service as a corpse miner. For days that is all the young soldier did--drag the dead from their cellars and pile them up for burning. As he did this, thoughts of their humanity affected him. He was a full-blooded German himself. He had

always been proud of his German heritage and could not help but feel that but for an accident of fate, he might still live in Germany, and he might even be one of these thousands of dead being hauled out of cellars and burned (Hume "Kurt," 204). It was this experience that caused Vonnegut to absent himself from the political agendas of any individual country and join the community of man (*Palm Sunday* 122). Dresden was occupied by women, children, and old people who had no political agenda. They were simply families, just people. They were as harmless as was their city, which Vonnegut described as "sinister as a wedding cake" (*Fates* 100). The Dresden dead may be his source for the Earthlings who had been taken to Mars and reprogrammed. The "Martians" and the Earthlings did not know that they were killing their own kind. Vonnegut sees those who attacked Dresden as programmed in much the same way--programmed, lied to, and set into unthinking motion by Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt; they were as hapless as those soldiers of death sent into action by Winston Rumfoord. The space ships that left Mars had only two buttons for control. We are told that "the off button was connected to nothing. It was installed at the insistence of Martian mental-health experts" (167). In a book entitled *Soldier at Bomber Command*, Charles Carrington reveals that the allied forces that bombed Germany were also told nontruths, for their mental health. They were given to believe that they were bombing fuel supplies and other important military targets--not hospitals and art treasures (310). Once the

campaign began, there was no off button to halt it, no turning back. The last of the Martian war was waged against women, children, and old people, just at the last of the Allied war was waged against the defenseless in Dresden. As he moved the dead, Vonnegut sorrowed for the condition of mankind. The Earthlings and the Martians voice the Dresden lesson: "all living things were brothers, and all dead things were even more so" (216). Life is precious and political allegiances are irrelevant.

Two other images of Dresden fill a minor spot in *Sirens*, but they are images that Vonnegut will use more and more in later novels. These images are fire engines and water fountains (usually empty ones). They encompass two of the saddest Dresden horrors. The first attack hit Dresden the night of 13 February 1945. That first hit is not the one that destroyed Dresden and would have been survivable. The firemen from the neighboring cities and towns rushed into Dresden after that first hit, only to be trapped and destroyed by the huge firestorm that was set up with the second hit the following day. David Irving writes of the annihilation of the rescuers in his book, *The Destruction of Dresden*:

the bomb-aimers could see the roads and Autobahn leading into Dresden alive with activity. Long columns of Lorries, their headlights full on, were crawling towards the city. These must have been the convoys of lorries with relief supplies, and the fire

brigades arriving from other cities of central Germany; clearly the second component of Harris's [Air Chief Marshall Harris] double-blow strategy was being substantiated: the annihilation not only of the passive defenses of Dresden, but also of a large number of forces summoned from surrounding cities.

(142)

The firemen were swept into the firestorm and were not able to provide a rescue.

The one firetruck in Sirens likewise does not provide a much-needed rescue either. Rumfoord has the entire population under his control and has billed the return of Malachi Constant as a messiah with a message. A fire truck delivers Constant as a tumultuous crowd watches. Rumfoord welcomes the Space Wanderer: "How meet it is that you should come to us on the bright red pumper of a volunteer fire department. I can think of no more stirring symbol of man's humanity to man than a fire engine" (242). Shortly after this dramatic entrance, Rumfoord reveals Malachi's true identity and makes him into the sacrificial lamb of the new religion. Rumfoord tells Constant that he is about to take a trip to Titan and why: "You are going to do this voluntarily, Mr. Constant, so that the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent can have a drama of dignified self-sacrifice to remember and ponder through all time" (255). Constant's message about luck and accidents will not be

received. The unsaved population will remain, handicapped and controlled by the power-hungry Rumfoord.

The fountain image is another Dresden allusion. At the beginning of the novel, Malachi climbs a dry fountain as he is trying to get into the Rumfoord mansion to witness the materialization of the great space wanderer, Rumfoord. This fountain's center is described as being a "cylindrical shaft forty feet high" (16). The bottom bowl of the fountain is described as "a regular Beelzebub of a bowl, bone dry and insatiable; waiting, waiting, waiting for the first sweet drop" (19). The Hell imagery associated with this fountain is an appropriate introduction for the long spiral that Malachi is about to enter. He climbs this fountain, thinking that it will show him an escape from the maze in which he finds himself trapped. When Malachi sees the fountain again just before he is sent to Titan, he is confused because the fountain is now filled with water. "The fountain, I remember that fountain," said the Space Wanderer gropingly. "It was dry then" (243). Now the fountain is bubbling with water, which could be symbolic of the water of life. Malachi has just returned from the depths of Mercury and is just about to enter a Paradise on Titan.

The dry fountain that crosses Malachi's mind, however, could also be an allusion to a water cylinder in Dresden that Vonnegut had seen and that Irving describes. Most of the water cylinder was underground. The bowl or lip of the tank stuck out of the ground approximately two or three feet. The rest of it was more than eight feet into the

ground. Irving describes a horrible scene that any survivor out and about the city had to see. Many, trying to escape the heat and the flames, had jumped into the low water tanks. The heat was so intense that the water in these tanks cooked the people before it evaporated. Bodies filled the dry water basins. As Irving says, "The people in the tanks were all dead, very dead" (191). It may not be accidental that the fire truck and the dry fountain appear at the same moment in the novel. Lawrence Broer notes that "vivid images of petrification, destruction by fire, and death by drowning" appear at various times in Vonnegut's writings (10). Although he relates these images to mental illness, it is very possible that they are connected to the terrible sights that filled Dresden for days after the bombing--sights Vonnegut walked through daily on his corpse mining detail.

Vonnegut enjoys two other little jokes in the novel that relate to his feelings about war, bombs, and military commanders who direct them. Boaz brags about his ability to use the antennas that control soldiers. He chuckles as he tells about the treatment of the generals,

Two nights ago us real commanders got ourselves in a argument about which general could run the fastest. Next thing you know, we got all twenty-three generals out of bed, all bare-ass naked, and we lined 'em up like they was race horses, and then we put our money down and laid

the odds, and then we sent them generals off  
like the devil was after 'em. (118)

One of the bare-ass, running generals who places in the race is named Harrison. Ironically, the one man most responsible for carrying out the Dresden raid with such thoroughness was Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris.

Vonnegut's other little joke takes place on Titan. Shortly after Constant's little family arrives on Titan, we are given a scene where Chrono and Beatrice are looking at some statues. One is of a laboratory-gowned scientist who holds a test-tube in his hand as he searches for truth. Vonnegut tells us:

At first glance, one was convinced that nothing but truth could please him as he beamed at his test tube. At first glance, one thought that he was as much above the beastly concerns of mankind as the harmoniums in the caves of Mercy. There, at the first glance, was a young man without vanity, without lust--and one accepted at its face value the title Salo had engraved on the statue, *Discovery of Atomic Power*. And then one perceived that the young truth seeker had a shocking erection. (288-89)

This idea of the irresponsibility of scientists goes hand in hand with the lesson learned in Dresden. The destruction of Dresden was very scientific, and it was done perfectly. It killed as many as 135,000 people with perfect precision. Shortly after Dresden, the firestorm



technique was abandoned because the atomic bomb was invented. Vonnegut, fresh from the huge body count of Dresden, was very sensitive to the idea of the bomb. Perhaps a distant moon is the proper place to house such glorification of the power of science--away from peopled Earth.

All of the "good guys" in the novel learn that the truest value in life is the power of unconditional love. Klinkowitz and Lawler point out the particular characters who can be listed the winners in the search for life's meaning. Boaz adopts the Harmoniums, and Beatrice and Malachi find true Edenic love with one another. In addition, together and separately, they learn their proper parental roles as they live out their lives on Titan with their son, Chrono. The son of Eden, Chrono, gives up his delinquent past and becomes the leader of the bluebirds of Titan, finding fulfillment in nature (68). Even Salo, the robot from Tralfamadore, becomes more "human," able to feel for Malachi in his dying moment. Once unconditional love is embraced, all is right with the universe.

The Sirens of Titan, who reside on a distant moon of Mercury, are like the Sirens of Greek mythology; they lure man away with false promises of love. After residing on Titan, Malachi is no longer lured by their beauty; he has found love with Bea and a deep respect for the beauty of life. He is no longer driven by the call of sexual love and worldly power from without; he is empowered by the higher agape love from within. However, with the death of Beatrice,

Titan can no longer hold Malachi. He returns to Earth with a well-learned lesson: "the purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (313). Politics, governments, military agendas, religious institutions, and scientific discoveries are not important because they fail to put humanity first; they are, after all, just so many sirens ready to lure man away from the true purpose of life. When death comes for Malachi, it is painless and loving as he responds to Stony's smiling invitation. The philosophical questions about death are quite irrelevant. The Sirens' call has taught Malachi Space Wanderer Hunk the most important concept there is to learn. It is the lesson Kurt Vonnegut learned in Dresden: life is precious, and we must love our fellow man simply because he is our brother.

## Chapter 4

### *Mother Night* and Vonnegut's German Identity

Published in 1961, *Mother Night* is Vonnegut's third book. William Rodney Allen considers it his "first important novel, despite the fact that it originally appeared only in paperback and was not reviewed until its reissue in 1966" (*Understanding* 44). *Player Piano* and *Sirens of Titan* were written in the science fiction genre, but Klinkowitz points out that what makes *Mother Night* different is that it has all of the characteristics of the spy novel: "double identities, mixed loyalties, complex intrigues, suspenseful danger, and hairbreadth escapes" (Kurt 51). In a 1980 interview with Charles Reilly, Vonnegut discusses the conception of his spy novel. He explains that he was at a cocktail party in Chatham, Massachusetts, with a man who had been in intelligence. He began talking with him about spies and what they were like. Vonnegut then explains to Reilly:

Then he made an amazing statement. He says what you have to realize is that all these people are schizophrenics. They have to be insane, he said, because otherwise they would either blow their covers or simply die of fright. He went on to say that someone ought to make a spy movie about what spies are really like. (7)

Vonnegut has talked to Zoltan Abadi-Nagy about the spy connection in *Mother Night* and reveals that once he started the book, he talked to several people who had been in intelligence during the war. "They all told me that any successful spy must be two things: one, he must be a double agent; he must work for both sides or he's doomed; and, two, he is schizophrenic. He is not well. Only a sick person could do it" (Peter Reed and Marc Leeds 16). From that came the idea of a schizophrenic main character, Howard Campbell. And so, *Mother Night* had its beginning rather like *Sirens of Titan*, born from conversation at a cocktail party. Vonnegut dedicated the book that resulted to a famous spy, Mata Hari.

The novel may have many of the characteristics of a spy novel, but the book is also very autobiographical. Allen notes that in *Mother Night*, "Vonnegut was first coming to terms with the sources of what can only be called his essential pessimism--coming to terms not in an abstract, philosophical sense through the genre of sci-fi, but through the more direct medium of autobiographical fiction" (*Understanding* 48-49). The personal markers of Vonnegut's life are easy to find, beginning with an introductory line from a poem by Sir Walter Scott in which the call of the homeland is mused upon:

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,

Who never to himself hath said,

"This is my own, my native land!"

Whose heart hath ne'er within him burne'd

As home his footsteps he hath turn'd

From wandering on a foreign strand? (16)

Is the homeland America, or is it Germany--the ancestral home of the Vonneguts? In a 1971 interview with Laurie Clancy, Vonnegut admits that when he wrote *Mother Night* his German heritage was an influence:

I think people should think of their breeding from time to time and see what sort of a dog they are, and the German things had been on my mind. Both my father and mother were of German ancestry, were fluent in German and went back to Europe often. I'm not aware of relatives in Germany, though I must have many. (50)

Kurt Vonnegut was a member of a very large German/American family, which was four generations into assimilation. The first Vonnegut had come to America in 1850. They were a wealthy family, and they were extremely proud of their German heritage. World War I, World War II, the economic damage of the Great Depression, and the growing attitude of distrust toward German-Americans changed the Vonneguts forever. Anti-German feelings developed after World War I and flared again at the outbreak of World War II. In a 1994 speech, presented at the Indianapolis library by Ray Boomhower in honor of the Indianapolis born Vonnegut, some of the pre-WWII anti-German reactions in Indianapolis were

remembered:

the city orchestra disbanded because its  
soprano soloist was German; city restaurants  
renamed Kartoffel salade as Liberty cabbage;  
the Deutsche Haus became the Athenaeum; and the  
board of education stopped the teaching of  
German in schools. (2)

Such public feelings caused the Vonnegut family to teach their younger generation almost nothing of their German heritage. They were ashamed of and apologetic about their connection to Germany. The language, the literature, and the music of the Fatherland disappeared from the Vonnegut home. The protagonist of *Mother Night* deals with the same problem, a split German/American identity.

Some of Vonnegut's biographical markers are one-liners, tucked in almost as a secret sign for those who know his personal life history. One example could be an allusion to his sister, Alice. Vonnegut ended up raising the orphaned children of his sister after both she and her husband died within 24 hours of one another. In *Mother Night*, Campbell gets the news of his parents' deaths and sheds a tear because he realizes that they died not knowing the truth about his work as a spy. Wirtanen informs Campbell of the deaths: "Your father first--your mother twenty-four hours later" (138).

Kathryn Hume sees the female presence in *Mother Night*

as heavily influenced by the suicide of Edith Vonnegut. On Mother's Day of 1944, Mrs. Vonnegut died, a suspected suicide. Boomhower suggests that Edith Vonnegut had become increasingly depressed over her family's status and her inability to remake their lost fortune by selling fiction to the popular magazines of the day. This may have been a driving force that later led Vonnegut to write for such publications as *Colliers*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Ladies' Home Journal* (4). It was a hard and final ending of childhood for Vonnegut. He left for the war, only to be captured seven months later by the Germans, who sent him to Dresden as a POW. Hume tells us that "because of its timing, his mother's suicide appears to have been a gesture directed at her son. His mother thus made herself an almost archetypal figure, a siren luring him to his death, a maenad seeking to dismember her Orphic son." Hume points out that the loving female absents herself from Vonnegut's writing. For example, not only do Helga and Resi desert Howard Campbell's "nation of two," but the dark mother of the book's title calls him to a world of chaos and death. Hume tells us that "Vonnegut admits that his mother's example has been a nagging temptation to suicide whenever his life seemed unpleasant ("Kurt 204). It is also notable that the book ends with Howard Campbell embracing suicide as the solution to his problems. Approaching *Mother Night* as a hero myth, Hume points out that "In *Mother Night* he [Vonnegut] shows himself unable to accept the comforting myth of Germany as undiluted evil and America as moral

perfection" ("Kurt" 205). After experiencing the horror of the Dresden bombing, Vonnegut knew that America was not totally innocent and pure. American newspapers carried nothing about Dresden's destruction, and there was no indignant reaction; according to Barbara Lupack, Vonnegut saw such an absence as a loss of moral sense (101). To Vonnegut, America was clearly guilty.

Several clear Dresden markers exist in the novel. For example, during the firestorm, Vonnegut was housed three stories underground in a slaughterhouse locker. In *Mother Night*, Campbell takes Resi to his apartment and calls it a "cozy little burrow, a hole in the ground, made secret and snug" (108). Another safe hiding place appears in chapter twenty-seven, when Campbell wakes up after a beating: "As for the room where I awakened after my beating: it was the cellar that had been furnished for the Iron Guard of the White Sons of the American Constitution" (113). There Campbell feels that he might find safety. In chapter forty-one, Campbell is seen walking back to his Greenwich Village home. Lightning bugs fill the air, much as incendiaries did on the first night of Dresden's bombing. A siren wails in the darkness, but is ineffective--another allusion to the useless sirens that gave no warning in Dresden. The mailboxes bring to mind the "doors of cells in a jail in a burning city somewhere" (164). Is it the Dresden fire? Campbell is stopped by a policeman and the two have a conversation about why people go crazy and kill. They decide that it must be a chemical imbalance of the brain;



otherwise, people would never do such things. Although their conversation about the enemy centers around the Japanese, the message for Vonnegut is the same. The enemy is made up of nice people too--Why kill them? Why kill babies? Why kill anyone?

In another scene, Wirtanen and Campbell are talking about dying in the war. Wirtanen comments: "A moral? It's a big enough job just burying the dead, without trying to draw a moral from each death. Half the dead don't even have names" (137). At first, as the job of burying the dead began in Dresden, great care was taken with removing and labeling jewelry and identifying each body (David Irving 187). As a realization of the countless number of dead began to surface, individuality disappeared. The bodies were hauled out and stacked for burning. There was no time for the dignity of identification as the bodies began to rot. Another Dresden marker appears in the chapter entitled, "My Best Friend. . . ." While in Germany, Campbell often visits a friend named Heinz Schildknecht. During these visits, the two usually sit in a pillbox and drink. This pillbox had been very recently built for the defense of Berlin, but it is not armed. Campbell reveals that "As the war drew to a close, Heinz and I couldn't drink in our pillbox any more. An eighty-eight was set up in it, and the gun was manned by boys about fifteen or sixteen years old" (91). In his description of Dresden in the days before the bombing, Alexander McKee describes a similar scene:

Before the January offensive, the demands of the front lines had stripped Dresden almost bare of heavy anti-aircraft guns, notably the dual-purpose German 88s, which were effective against tanks also. All that was left in and around Dresden was some of the light flak for use against low-flying aircraft. Like the 88s, these guns were partly crewed by children, schoolboys of fifteen or sixteen taken out of school. (80)

The child-manned guns also give weight to Vonnegut's often used label of soldiers as being mere children or babies.

McKee also reveals that during Vonnegut's imprisonment in the Malt Syrup factory, a rather flamboyant man named Howard Campbell arrived dressed in a bizarre uniform. One of the odd things he wore on his uniform was an Abraham Lincoln insignia (83). An easily recognizable Dresden marker appears when we see Campbell in chapter 18 of *Mother Night*; he is wearing the uniform described by McKee: Campbell says, "I was wearing a uniform. At my belt was a tiny pistol and a big fancy, ceremonial dagger. I didn't usually wear a uniform, but I was entitled to wear one--the blue and gold uniform of a Major in the Free American Corps" (77). In addition, Vonnegut uses two chapter titles that bring Lincoln to the mind of the reader: "Last Full Measure. . . ." and "His Truth Goes Marching On. . . ." In chapter five, Campbell explains how a pageant he was ordered to produce

for the Nazis caused Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to come to the attention of Goebbels and Hitler. Goebbels considers borrowing phrases from the address in dedications of German military cemeteries, while Hitler writes that some parts of the document make him weep and serve as proof that "all northern peoples are one in their deep feelings for soldiers" (28). These are obvious connections to Vonnegut's Dresden experience.

Several Dresden markers are connected to Howard Campbell's guards. Arnold Marx has the Vonnegut experience of hauling dead bodies. He is assigned to *Sonderkommando*, a special detail leading the Jews into the gas chambers and then carrying the bodies out. Marx remembers vividly music on loudspeakers being interrupted for the announcement, "Leixhentrager zu Wache" or "Corpse carriers to the guardhouse" (21). A further Dresden connection is found in chapter three, entitled "Briquets...." Another of Campbell's guards uses the term to label "people who did nothing to save their own lives or anybody else's life when the Nazis took over, who were willing to go meekly all the way to the gas chambers, if that was where the Nazis wanted them to go" (22). Vonnegut saw many a citizen of Dresden burned to a "briquet" as he cleaned up the results of the firestorm. Bernard Mengel, another Campbell guard, reflects the feeling of men who kill in war. Mengel says, "I got so I couldn't feel anything. Every job was a job to do, and no job was any better or any worse than any other" (25). A

deep criticism of the soldier at war is delivered in a scene where Campbell is watching Kraft pop away at a human target. Campbell tells us that "it recalled the stink, diseased twilight, humid resonance, and vile privacy of a stall in a public lavatory--echoed exactly the soul's condition in a man at war" (117). The reminder is that men suffer in war, mentally and spiritually. There is no glory and recognition for soldiers in a Vonnegut novel.

After the Dresden story began to seep out to the world, nobody wanted to claim responsibility. The proverbial "political" buck was well passed. Charles Carrington describes the rush to place blame: "Some persons in high places took the trouble to wash their hands in public and to shrug off the guilt. General Spaatz made a move to clear himself by suggesting that an unauthorized executive order might have slipped past the British Air Ministry" (195). There was even an attempt to make Russia the guilty party! "Sir Robert Saundby understood that the Russians had specifically asked for an attack on Dresden and assumed the request had been made at Yalta" (McKee 100). Vonnegut satirizes this oldest of ploys in *Mother Night*. Campbell is imprisoned with Adolf Eichmann. When asked if he felt guilty of the murder of millions of Jews, Eichmann makes excuses. Campbell says of the response, "The man actually believed that he had invented his own trite defense, though a whole nation of ninety some-odd millions had made the same defense before him" (123). Of course, the long hunt for war

criminals repeatedly produced such a defense after the war ended.

One of the more humorous Dresden markers is the use of the character Bernard B. O'Hare. In *Mother Night* O'Hare is responsible for capturing Campbell. In real life O'Hare is Vonnegut's friend. In a 1980 conversation with Reilly, Vonnegut explains about the biographical connection to the O'Hare character:

O'Hare was a district attorney in East Hampton county in Pennsylvania--he's now in private practice--and I used his name in a *Saturday Evening Post* story as a joke. He turned the joke around by circulating the word that he wrote on the side to pick up extra change, and he "proved" he was an author by showing the story. So, I started using his name in a lot of my fiction.... He's my only war buddy, by the way. The only one left over from the war that I ever hear from. (7).

O'Hare appears in other Vonnegut novels, but with a different middle initial and a different personality. Hume tells us that O'Hare is always in uniform, wherever Vonnegut uses him. In *Mother Night* he is a righteous American who is sure that God is on his side. He is arrogant, abusive, and alcoholic. Looking for anything that will give him meaning in life, he has not felt justified since he was able to kill Germans in the war. Whichever O'Hare appears in a Vonnegut novel, he is always naive and unthinking in his political

views of America ("Heraclitean" 210-211). In real life, O'Hare shared the Dresden experience with Vonnegut, and is the one person who can best understand Vonnegut's message. O'Hare displays his empathy in an article written in honor of Vonnegut's sixtieth birthday. In it, he complains about some reviewers who classify his buddy as a black humorist; he says of those reviewers, "They don't know that what they read is only his reaction to the sight of the world gone mad and rushing headlong toward Dresden to the hundredth power" (Vonnegut, *Fates* 216). The presence of O'Hare's name is a private joke for Vonnegut.

Significant dates also appear as markers. Campbell last sees his in-laws on February 12, 1945. It is the last day for the family, as it was the last day for many Dresden families. Dresden died on February 13-14, 1945. The date is a very appropriate "last day" before death. April 15, 1945 is another date carrying a marker. Franklin Delano Roosevelt died then, just as the war was ending. Ironically, a character named after him, a Franklin Delano Rosenfeld, happens to die on April 15, 1945 (141); he is one of three people who hold the secret of Campbell's identity. Interestingly enough, Abraham Lincoln also died the same April week in an earlier century and just as an earlier war is ending. Lincoln also was born on a February 12th. Vonnegut ties all three people--Campbell, Roosevelt, and Lincoln together with these dates in *Mother Night*.

Yet another significant day for Vonnegut is November 11th, which had been Armistice Day and also happens to be Vonnegut's birthday. In the novel, Campbell is disgusted to discover that the 11th now has new meaning:

"Veterans' Day," I said to Helga as we walked on. "Used to be Armistice Day. Now it's Veterans' Day."

"That upsets you?" she said.

"Oh, it's just so damn cheap, so damn typical," I said.

"This used to be a day in honor of the dead of World War One, but the living couldn't keep their grubby hands off of it, wanted the glory of the dead for themselves. So typical, so typical." (102)

In 1966, five years after the 1961 publication date of *Mother Night*, Vonnegut felt the need to add a preface to the novel. He had been struggling with his Dresden experience and found himself incapable of writing about it. The 1966 preface is the first extended treatment Vonnegut gives Dresden. He alludes to problems with his Dresden experience and his German identity in the concluding lines of this introduction:

If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes. There's another

clear moral to this tale, now that I think about it: When you're dead you're dead.

And yet another moral occurs to me now: Make love when you can. It's good for you. (vii)

This Dresden introduction was added to *Mother Night* three years before the 1969 publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Klinkowitz notes that in this added statement, Vonnegut presents himself, not as a textual editor, but as an archaeologist of the recent past, digging for the remnants of a destroyed civilization so that he can learn first hand how the inhabitants lived and died (*Slaughterhouse* 46). Interestingly, all of the themes of the 1969 Dresden novel are woven into this 1966 message: war and the forces that produce war are bad, love of the fellow human is good, and death has no meaning. These are ideas that Vonnegut touches on in the novels leading up to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but in this preface, he pulls them together and references them. In addition, in *Mother Night* the idea that death is meaningless is (for the first time) coupled with Vonnegut's famous phrase, "so it goes"--a phrase that will perhaps become Vonnegut's most famous and oft repeated line.

Klinkowitz notes that the view Vonnegut presents of the German people, as he saw them a few days before the bombing, is not typical of the contemporary American attitude toward the enemy. *Mother Night* presents Nazis who are not committing atrocities, but merely going about the ordinary tasks of daily life while harming no one.



Klinkowitz argues that the war in the United States "was being portrayed in images variously heroic, horrific, or cartoonish" (*Slaughterhouse* 46). The clear result of the American approach, suggests Klinkowitz, is that it reduced the enemy to caricatures and shut down the imagination. Because of this propaganda, the reasons for war were never put in focus or given a chance to be understood. The opponents dealt with each other in stereotypes and theatrical figures instead of reality (*Slaughterhouse* 46). The human element becomes a missing quotient, which makes war more acceptable. Klinkowitz also believes that the 1966 introduction makes

it harder for critics to dismiss *Mother Night* as a flippant response to the Nazi horror, because the author now reveals his credentials as witness and reminds them that the Allies were not immune to racking up atrociously high numbers of innocent deaths themselves.

(*Slaughterhouse* 48)

Although Vonnegut presents himself as an eye witness, an account of the actual fire bombing is not included in *Mother Night's* added introduction. Klinkowitz insists that the absence of detail is not because Vonnegut could not yet stand to write it; in fact, he was well into writing his Dresden book by now; the omission was done for effect. "By not portraying the event itself, the author is able to recast it, not as a describable entity, but as an unanswerable question, 'What do you say about a

massacre?' " (*Slaughterhouse* 48). There is nothing that can be said.

John Roth feels that *Mother Night* invites the reader to peer deeply into the human soul, explore the roots of human alienation, probe the individual's search for his own identity, and lift the veil that separates reality and illusion (498). The invitation begins with the title of the book, supposedly supplied by Howard Campbell, Jr., which is from the speech by Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*:

I am part of the part that at first was all,  
part of the darkness that gave birth to light,  
that supercilious light which now disputes with  
Mother Night her ancient rank and space, and  
yet can not succeed; no matter how it  
struggles, it sticks to matter and can't get  
free. Light flows from substance, makes it  
beautiful; solids can check its path, so I hope  
it won't be long till light and the world's  
stuff are destroyed forever. (xi)

Rodney Allen believes that the use of this quote from *Faust* makes clear that the threat of annihilation comes not only from man-made war but from the nature of the universe itself. Allen reveals that Vonnegut's view of the universe seems to come from the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who believed that consciousness is an accidental and temporary anomaly in the vast unconscious process of the material universe. Allen insists that

because of this vast cosmic meaninglessness, many of Vonnegut's characters consider suicide to hasten their return to the cold and certain embrace of Mother Night, which is their destiny (*Understanding* 49-50). The pessimism and dark disorientation begin with the title and end with the finality of Howard Campbell's decision to execute himself for crimes against himself; in the end, death and darkness win.

Leonard Mustazza notes that this is the only Vonnegut novel with a mythic title. He reminds us that night is the daughter-consort of Chaos in classical mythology. Both Milton and Pope use Night and Chaos to represent the forces of miscreation and the "uncreating world"; but, argues Mustazza, it also represents the presence of moral and intellectual disorder (*Forever* 62). As Campbell, an artist, attempts to build his little world, we see the endless conflict between light and the greater darkness occur. Mustazza comments that Campbell's little world collides in chaos with those around him. He chooses art, love, and limited participation as he attempts to hide out in his Edenic nation of two; others choose political participation or social diversion, but there is no escape from the final victory of night (*Forever* 63-64). The world is very like that destroyed by God in the story of Noah--filled with immorality and wrong doing. Mustazza sees many flood myth connections as Campbell attempts to survive (*Forever* 67). At one point, Helga and he climb to the roof of a

bombed out building and view the open beauty of the sky. Campbell comments that they felt like Noah and his wife, but then reality interrupts. Campbell tells us: "The air-raid sirens blew again, and we realized that we were ordinary people, without dove or covenant, and that the flood, far from being over, had scarcely begun" (173). Time and time again, we see Howard Campbell set up his own little world in an attempt to escape, but death and night conquer. He attempts to build a world with Helga, and after the war he hides out in Greenwich Village and attempts to build a world with Resi. In the end, he chooses death rather than become part of the chaotic world outside of his wished-for Eden. According to Mustazza, it is the violation of Campbell's artistic self and the subversion of his mythical recreations which usher in the reign of *Mother Night* and which cause Howard in the end to prefer death to freedom (70). The final satiric line from Campbell is "Auf wiedersehen?" *Until we meet again?* (192). The creation and uncreation of chaotic worlds will never really end. In the case of Campbell, the reader will meet him again in the destructive chaos of Vonnegut's famous Dresden novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Malcolm Bradbury agrees that the theme of *Mother Night* is the absurdity of the human endeavor. Bradbury points out that the world in a Vonnegut novel functions as a vile joke where there is a desire for consolation through fantasies. The book is absurdist because it suggests that the only

response to such a world is agonized laughter or a saving myth which leads the characters to a resigned passivity and a harmless innocence (215). So many of the characters in a Vonnegut novel become innocent victims of a world gone mad around them. William Keough also notes the heavy use of irony as jokes abound in the confusion of *Mother Night*. Bodoskov, the Russian writer, plagiarizes Campbell's work; but when he creates on his own, he is shot for "originality." The Black Fuhrer of Harlem wants to organize colored people to drop the hydrogen bomb on China (he does not consider them to be "colored"). Adolf Eichmann is not the fierce man of evil; he is a stupid little man concerned about finding a good literary agent, so he can publish his stories about dead Jews. Keough also points out, however, that the presence of real characters from history, such as Eichmann, remind us that the novel is only part fiction and that Nazi Germany was a destructive reality (106-107). Through satire, one may be able to laugh at the stupidity of man, but the message is clear that his stupidity causes death, war, and destruction. Tom Hearron says that the "accidents" and "mistakes" of Vonnegut's characters suggest that "we are all as much victims as villains" (191). In a Vonnegut book, the real villain is society, and we all play our roles in what society does.

None of the *Mother Night* characters function in the world of reality; all is darkness and confusion. Allen points out that almost every character in the novel has a cover, which masks his or her true purpose. Vonnegut then

mixes up identities with accident, irony, and history so that the fabric of the individual dissolves and no one is who he seems to be (*Understanding* 47). A Jewish prison guard has posed as a heartless SS officer during the war in order to serve as a double agent. Campbell's neighbor, George Kraft, seems to be an artist but is instead Iona Potapov, a Russian spy with plans to kidnap Campbell. Campbell's wife of many years reappears after being presumed dead, but she is really wife Helga's younger sister, Resi. Resi has an additional secret identity as a Russian spy who is working with George Kraft. A man named Harold J. Sparrow has no identity until the last page of the book. Using the name Frank Wirtanen, he recruits Campbell as a spy in chapter nine, and thereafter is referred to as "my Blue Fairy Godmother" by Campbell, because there is no way to prove that he even exists.

Howard Campbell, Jr., an American with German connections, has many parallels to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Brought to Germany in 1923 because of his father's work with GE, Campbell's principal identity becomes German. His friends are German, his education is German, and his language is German. He has no political connection to Germany, just a cultural one. He marries a German actress and is himself a playwright who creates in German. During the war, however, Campbell accepts a job as a writer and broadcaster of Nazi propaganda. This is another Dresden marker, for Allan Michie argues that such patriotic citizens who spoke propaganda for the Nazi

radio were one of the possible causes of the Dresden bombing being carried out (35). Howard Campbell's role has historical reality. Speaking in his native English, Campbell sends secret messages in a code that he does not understand; to him, it is just acting. The code is transmitted with a series of coughs, throat clearings, stammers, and snorts. He becomes a double agent, hated by all. Everyone believes that he is loyal to the Nazis, and he must act that part in order to serve the Allied cause and the Americans. For Campbell, life becomes a game of hide-and-seek. Vonnegut uses the well-known call, "olly-olly-ox-in-free" throughout the book, just as he will later use "so it goes" throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The call of childhood's innocence invites Campbell to come out of hiding, and perhaps it invites all to free themselves by ending destructive games.

Lawrence Broer sees a definite connection between Vonnegut, who is editing the confessions of Campbell, and Campbell who serves as the narrator and main character of *Mother Night*. He too notes that both men are of mixed German/American heritage and suffer because of their split identities during the war. Broer concludes,

We find both men daring to venture into their own heart of darkness, their own 'Mother Night,' to expose the capacity for cruelty and moral blindness within the soul of every man and woman. It is the same spiritual journey

into darkness made by Conrad and James, and by Hawthorne and Melville before them. It is a plea for the recognition of the Devil within.

(46)

Vonnegut faced the darkness in Dresden, and he returned to tell the world what he had learned: People are precious. Be kind. Love is important. A lack of these moral concepts is often the problem in the world presented in a Vonnegut novel.

Hume sees Howard Campbell as emblematic of his creator. Campbell broadcasts two messages; one is propaganda and the other is the important espionage message. Campbell himself does not really understand the message he must send; he believes in the truth of his message, but he does not really know what that truth is. Hume suggests that Vonnegut's books are like Campbell's messages, in that they are delivered on two levels: one containing a symbolic message; the other, a pseudo-science fiction ("Vonnegut's" 178). Like Campbell, Vonnegut does not really know what the true message should be. He cannot find the form for the Dresden story; all he can do is encode it into his work. Edward Jamosky and Jerome Klinkowitz agree that Vonnegut uses Campbell to encode his real message: "If Campbell is an effective double agent, so is Vonnegut, deliberately confusing the voices of author and character so that the authority resides in the text itself, a document secure from the schizophrenic tangle of personal allegiances *Mother Night* has shown the world to be" (219). Vonnegut



serves as the editor of Campbell's book of confessions; but as a witness to Dresden's bombing, he also is able to give moral guidance to the reader along with what Campbell has to say.

In Vonnegut's cosmos, individual insanity is the result of a world gone mad. The same Vonnegut message of *Player Piano* and *Sirens* emerges in *Mother Night*. This message, according to Broer, is a warning about big business and its indifference to suffering, corporate legal viciousness, irresponsible mechanization, the stockpiling of nuclear weapons in the pursuit of peace, the belief that God and spiritual salvation can be found in technological advances, patriotism that makes war gladly, self-serving religions that believe in pure good or evil, the incompetence of political leadership, and the horror of death (41). There seems to be no one voice that can be heard above the madness; mankind cannot be stopped from rushing to destruction. As Broer points out, Campbell sees himself as a Don Quixote, out to save a world that does not want to be saved, while Vonnegut sees himself as a Shaman, trying to warn us that we are doomed unless we learn to replace aggression and cruelty with love (5). Vonnegut learned that lesson while removing thousands of dead bodies from hiding places that did not give them safety. The call of "olly-olly-ox-in-free" did not set him free after the war; try as he would, the Dresden story could not be told to the world. Ironically, the "bird of warning" in *Mother Night* is malfunctioning because a few gears and teeth are missing.

The missing teeth represent part of the truth that is unknown or not understood. The absent parts cause skips and jumps, and as a result, the bird has gone cuckoo:

Hence the cuckoo clock in Hell, keeping perfect time for eight minutes and thirty-three seconds, jumping ahead fourteen minutes, keeping perfect time for six seconds, jumping ahead two seconds, keeping perfect time for two hours and one second, then jumping ahead a year. (162)

The reason for the cuckoo's condition is that the bird of misinformation is no true Shaman; it is symbolic of the closed mind of men like Lionel J. D. Jones, who warn of future problems with narrow non-truths. Jones publishes a paper called *The White Christian Minuteman*--a paper full of craziness rather than real warnings.

Perhaps Vonnegut feels like a cuckoo clock in hell in his attempts to deliver his Dresden message. Marc Chenetier notes that the problem with Vonnegut as a modern artists is that he communicates, "not the final state of impressions, the state when the author has grasped, sorted out, and tidied up his data, but the preliminary state, in which he still needs to understand and has failed to catch up with the initial stimulus" (219). Through Campbell's voice, we may well have the frustrated voice of Vonnegut as he deals with the problem of presenting the Dresden story to a world that will not listen and does not wish to learn. Campbell's says,

"The part of me that wanted to tell the truth got turned into an expert liar! The love in me got turned into a pornographer! The artist in me got turned into ugliness such as the world has rarely seen before" (150).

Campbell may be voicing Vonnegut's feelings when he bewails his writing career.

With *Mother Night*, Vonnegut prepares the way for his great novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For the first time, he is not writing about a future world, but a world closer to Dresden; World War II and Nazi Germany. For the first time, he is actually able to write of the firebombing with the added preface of 1966. However, it would take a younger generation, born just after World War II, a generation not so ready to go to war in Vietnam, a generation that saw the need for peace before the audience would assemble to listen to the Dresden story and the lesson Vonnegut wanted to teach.

## Chapter 5

*Cat's Cradle: The Missing Explanation*

*Cat's Cradle*, published in 1963, is Kurt Vonnegut's fourth book. It earned him a long overdue master's degree from the University of Chicago. In a 1977 interview with David Mayman, Vonnegut explains that twenty years after leaving the university with no degree:

I got a letter from a dean at Chicago, who had been looking through my dossier. Under the rules of the university, he said, a published work of high quality could be substituted for a dissertation, so I was entitled to an M.A. He had shown *Cat's Cradle* to the Anthropology Department, and they had said it was half-way decent anthropology, so they were mailing me my degree.

I'm class of 1972 or so. (Allen, *Conversations* 182)

Marc Leeds includes some interesting background of the novel in his *Encyclopedia*. While working at General Electric, Vonnegut heard a story about a visit from the famous H.G. Wells in the early thirties. Worried about the visit, G.E. had assigned their only Nobel Prize winning scientist, Irving Langmuir, to entertain the famous writer. As part of the entertainment, Langmuir made up a story about a form of ice which was stable at room temperature, hoping the famous Mr. Wells would use it in his writing. Wells was not interested; but then after Langmuir died, Vonnegut decided that it was all right for him to pick it up (107). And so the kernel of

the story was formed.

Shortly after the decision to use the idea was made, Vonnegut found himself at a cocktail party with a crystallographer, whom he told about the ice that would remain stable at room temperature. Vonnegut describes the scene, driving home the point of how eccentric scientists can be:

He put his cocktail glass on the mantelpiece.

He sat down in an easy chair in the corner. He did not speak to anyone or change expression for half an hour. Then he got up, came back over to the mantelpiece, and picked up his cocktail glass, and he said to me, "Nope."

Ice-9 was impossible. (Leeds, *Encyclopedia* 108)

Impossible or not, Vonnegut decided that the invention could be pure scientific bunk and still have moral value; and so, the writing began.

*Cat's Cradle* was a great success. Rodney Allen calls it a "jazzy, Zen-influenced, metafictional, mock-apocalyptic tour de force" and labels it light years beyond Vonnegut's earlier novels. Allen believes that with the publication of this fourth text, Vonnegut had at last discovered his voice and had changed to a whole new plan of satiric attack. He had learned that the "best way to challenge authority was first to undermine it with ridicule" (*Understanding x*). Frederick Karl argues that the book was so successful because it spoke to several opposing elements and brought them together:

elements such as old pastoral themes, development of a cult following, apocalypse, living at the edge of doom, and the collapse of world order (169). Vonnegut appealed to the 60s generation, a generation which had grown up with the bomb and now found itself swimming in the middle of social change fueled by the civil rights movement and the growing conflict over Vietnam. Thomas Clareson notes that many writers of the 1960s focused on the fallen world but said nothing new. They "merely rearranged the furniture" (189). Clareson accuses Vonnegut of doing nothing more in *Cat's Cradle* than adding fresh icing to the dark vision of *The Sirens of Titan*. As for the new voice, Frederick Karl sees a possible influence from *Brave New World* and 1984 because Vonnegut makes up language throughout the book (169). Allen agrees that Vonnegut would have known of such doomsday books as *On the Beach* and *Seven Days in May*, but notes that he also experienced the Cuban missile crisis at the time of the book's writing. Therefore, Allen argues, "current historical events probably had as much to do with the novel's apocalyptic ending as did Vonnegut's awareness of other literary precursors..." (*Understanding* 62). The critics do make valid points; Vonnegut was influenced by the 60s culture, Barth's theory of the novel, and American politics; but something else happened in *Cat's Cradle* as well. Because our country once more sat upon the brink of war with new and wondrous atomic weapons provided by the scientific world, Vonnegut the writer had to deliver a warning.

One of the first oddities the reader might notice about *Cat's Cradle* is the organization of the book. Vonnegut purports to address a very important and terrifying subject: the end of the world; yet he delivers a novel made up of short sentences, small paragraphs, tiny chapters, and cartoon-like characters, hardly the stuff of great philosophical preaching. Jerome Klinkowitz observes that the train of events in the plot is deliberately improbable, and even the chapter titles are cryptic: "Vice-President in Charge of Volcanoes," "When Automobiles Had Cut Glass," "A Medical Opinion on the Effects of a Writer's Strike" (Kurt Vonnegut 52). The seriousness of the subject and the absurdity of the writing style seem to be paradoxical, but there is a reason Vonnegut chooses to do this. According to C.D.B. Bryan, Vonnegut deliberately keeps his books short because he wants people to read them (5). Vonnegut provides 127 chapters in just 191 pages. The message must be simple and quick. Peter Freese sees Vonnegut's writing style as a good example of Barth's observation that "not just the form of the story but the fact of the story is symbolic; the medium is (part of) the message" ("Surviving" 5). Each part of the story contributes a strand to the cat's cradle, the game played in the novel.

The book begins, "Call me Jonah" (12). This first line is a lie, for we are immediately told that the narrator's name is John. This sets the stage for what is about to happen, as lie after lie is exposed and our search for the truth is

undermined until we become exasperated. The narrator tells us that he is writing a book entitled *The Day the World Ended*. This book is to be a factual account about what important Americans were doing on the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. By the end of the first page, the narrator admits that he never finished writing that book. While gathering information for his book, John spends his time telling us about another book (which he is reading) called *The Book of Bokonor*. Then we find out that John has not finished reading this second book, nor has the author finished writing it! Finally, we discover that there is yet a third book, still to be written. This book will be a history of human stupidity--but then, the reader realizes the joke. That is the book he has just finished reading, the one he has in his hand, the one entitled *Cat's Cradle*! Steven Weisenburger points out a further irony. The narrator had, after all, begun by wanting to write a book entitled *The Day the World Ended*. When we get to the end of the novel, the world has ended because of Dr. Hoenikker's invention--not the fire of the atomic bomb, but by the frost of ice-nine. So, questions Weisenburger, "Why did fiction become fact?" (93). To take it a step further, the novel Vonnegut is writing is fiction; is he warning that fiction can become reality if we do not heed the warning his book delivers?

Wendy Faris suggests that there is only one book, the one being read, and the key to the mystery is in knowing the truth of who the narrator really is. She puts the clues



together:

At the start of *Cat's Cradle* the narrator says that the book he never finished was to be called *The Day the World Ended*. At the end, as we watch the world being destroyed by ice-nine, he reads from a piece of paper given him by Bokonon--the high-priest-like leader of Bokononism says: "If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mt. McCabe...." On the preceding page he has blurted out my dream of climbing Mount McCabe . . . , and at the start of the book he writes that *when I was a younger man, I began to collect material for a book I never finished*. It is just possible that John the narrator may also be Bokonon, and that the two books alluded to are the same one . . . (46).

If that is true, then who is the narrator, really? Could it be Vonnegut, since it is his book we hold in our hand?

A good clue might be hidden in chapter 34, entitled "Vin-dit." Jonah and his cab driver are talking to the stone mason, Marvin Breed, about the tombstones the Hoenikker children chose for their parents. While in the shop, the cab driver notices a carved angel and asks about its price. The shop owner explains that the monument is not for sale and proceeds to tell its history. He relates how a German

immigrant family was on the way west, when the wife died of smallpox in Ilium. The family met with further misfortune and went onward to land they had bought in Indiana. They never returned for the angel statue. Although their name was on the monument, the shop owner surmises that they have doubtless changed and Americanized their German name by now. Listening to this conversation between the cab driver and the shop owner at a distance, Jonah/John murmurs: "There you're wrong" (55). If the unread German name on the marker is "Vonnegut," then Jonah/John/Bokonon/Vonnegut might be the same person, and the real title of *Cat's Cradle* might be *The Book of Bokonon*. Thus, like the strings of the cat's cradle, the novel loops and turns back into itself, again and again.

Melvin Friedman and Ben Siegel point out that this will become Vonnegut's pattern in fiction for the next twenty years. He will establish his narrator and then give him authority by having him participate in the story (156). Invariably, the narrator and the reader are swept up in the text, along with Vonnegut.

The title, *Cat's Cradle*, is full of subterfuge itself. It seems to be connected to the string that the brilliant Dr. Felix Hoenikker, creator of the atomic bomb, was playing with on the day his creation was dropped on Hiroshima. According to Frederick Karl, the title is symbolic. It is taken from a children's game where a series of x-figures are formed as the string weaves in and out between the fingers. The "Z" formed by the looped string makes connections, joining fingers and

hands, and completing a loop back to where it began.

"Symbolically, it represents a tying together and up of characters and events in the novel" (169). It is an innocent game any father might play with his son. As an adult, little Newt will paint dark and confused pictures of a cat's cradle and many will ponder its meaning. Ironically, the string Dr. Hoenikker is playing with on that eventful day was removed from a package someone had sent to him. The package contained an unread book about the end of the world. Rather than reading the book, the good doctor is playing a game with the string. Faris states that the volume we are reading is just as funny and playful as Dr. Hoenikker's game, but our *Cat's Cradle* is "strung over the horror of nuclear war" (50). It is while playing another game that the doctor comes up with his second deadly invention, ice-nine.

James Lundquist states that the title underscores an important message of the novel: "that there are two kinds of cats' cradles--scientific models (the lines, angles, and frame of the string game suggests this) and philosophical and religious systems" (38). Both cradles are artificial and mask reality. In the end, neither one can supply happiness. The strings of the game collapse, and nothing remains. Jones compares the strings of the game to the infamous Cheshire cat, whose image fades in and out at the faintest suggestion. He compares the cat's cradle to the string Dr. Hoenikker playfully shows to his son, stating that "here, science is the chameleon figure, progressively less

comprehensible to the laymen" (216). Peter Jones tells us that the cradle then materializes in the painting Newt did while on San Lorenzo, making art the cat's cradle. Soon the puzzling string connects itself to Angela's loveless marriage, making love the cat's cradle. Finally, the string attaches itself to religion, before it fades away again (216). Ironically, even the book, like the strings of its name *Cat's Cradle*, disappears in the end, and we are left like little Newt, to stare and ponder and wonder about where it went and what it might have meant.

David Goldsmith labels *Cat's Cradle* Vonnegut's first full-fledged satire (19). In his autobiographical collection, *Fates Worse Than Death*, Vonnegut speaks of what a beginning writer should do and why the joke is important in order to be heard:

So good advice to a young writer who wishes to circumvent mortality might be "Moralize." I would add this caveat: "Be sure to sound reader-friendly and not all that serious when doing it." Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) comes to mind. The sermons of Cotton Mather (1663-1728) do not. (195)

Very early Vonnegut learned that laughter was the best way to get the message of man's stupidity across. Faris compares Vonnegut to Swift, Rabelais, and other satirists, stating that Vonnegut is very aware that man is a dirty animal (185). To further mark the absurdity of man's

plight in *Cat's Cradle*, Jess Ritter calls attention to the fact that Vonnegut often uses the phrase, "Busy, busy, busy," and that use of such set phrases shows up in many of his early writings (37). In a 1982 interview with Peter Reed, Vonnegut explained the purpose of these interruptions:

I might say almost everything I personally want to say on the first page, and meanwhile we have to produce a book. And as far as delivering messages, I almost insert a telegram anywhere I like, and meanwhile there's this bribery to the readers to keep going which is a plot and jokes and all that. ("Conversation" 4)

The jokes function like the clowns or the comic relief scenes in a Shakespeare play--the subject is serious, but the audience has to be able to laugh. When things start to get too serious or morbid, then it is time to bring in the clowns.

The satiric characters contribute to the fun and confusion in *Cat's Cradle*. Charles Harris believes that Vonnegut peoples his novels with oversimplified, two dimensional figures in order to mock the belief that humans can be understood or captured on the printed page at all (140). But it is also just the simple fact that the medium of satire helps us see ourselves. The characters are given humorous names; for example, William Doxey, looking at the name of the inventor of "ice-nine," Felix Hoenikker, suggests that the Latin meaning of "felix" means happy while "Hoenikker" suggests Hanukkah, a Jewish celebration of lights (6).

Felix Hoenikker, the brilliant and innocent scientist, represents the great ability of science to bear gifts to our world. Another character Doxey mentions is Earl McCabe, a founder of the Bokonon religion on San Lorenzo, whose name might be connected to Judas Maccabeus who led his people to the victory, now celebrated with Hanukkah (6). There is Asa Breed, the head of the research lab where all of the scientists breed up death and destruction in the form of the A-bomb and ice-nine. His first name conjures up the word "Ass," which does describe his behavior. "Everyone in Ilium was sure that Dr. Breed had been in love with Felix Hoenikker's wife . . . . Most people thought that Breed was the father of all three Honeikker children" (27-28). If he did "breed" with Mrs. Hoenikker, perhaps that explains the perversion of the supposed offspring of the famous Dr. Hoenikker. The daughter Angela is an absolute Amazon, measuring in at over six feet, and there is Franklin, who shows many signs of psychosis. Newt is a midget who is only four feet tall. According to Dr. Breed, he is "no bigger than an umbrella stand" (35). Since a Newt is also a very small lizard with very short and stubby appendages, the name is very appropriate. Mona, the great beauty of San Lorenzo, causes one to think of the painting of another great and mysterious beauty, *Mona Lisa*. Giannone labels her a "debased Venus whose symbolic standing as a national shrine suggests Vonnegut's notion of politics as a derangement of sexual energies, which is the paradigm of political order on San

Lorenzo" ("Violence" 58). It is the sexual desire for the lovely Mona that drives John into accepting the Presidency of San Lorenzo.

Geographical names are significant. The story takes place in two localities: Ilium, New York, (which brings to mind the classical city of Troy) and the tropical island of San Lorenzo (which conjures up Biblical images). Leonard Mustazza labels them the modern world of scientific technology and the primitive world of mythical reinvention (*Forever* 77). Both cities have an outer layer of harmony, but underneath each is a hideous lie. Ilium is the city where a mad artist can borrow an apartment and leave a sign saying "meow" around the neck of a dead cat; while San Lorenzo is a city where a dictatorial government and an illegal religion are used to heat up the drama of life and keep the people silent and unquestioning. Giannone sees the cities as doubles: Ilium as the city where affluence is used to fill in for spiritual want, while San Lorenzo uses spirituality to fill in for material want ("Violence" 62). The people Jonah describes on the island of San Lorenzo are beyond being oppressed: "The islanders were oatmeal colored. The people were thin. There wasn't a fat person to be seen. Every person had teeth missing. Many legs were bowed or swollen" (*Cat's Cradle* 95). The religion that gives these pitiful people hope is a hopeless, comic lie.

The religion of San Lorenzo is Bokononism, and everyone on the island is a secret believer. The guru of this religion has an easily recognized name: Lionel Boyd Johnson--or LBJ (very obviously playing upon a famous political name). Bokononism has a ridiculous history. A black man from Tobago (Bokonon) and an American marine deserter (Earl McCabe) arrive as castaways on the island and manage to take control and maintain a type of order. They create Bokononism in order to keep the people from thinking of their situation, which is pretty wretched. Klinkowitz states that the religion is "based on the silliest of sacred texts, Charles Atlas's comic book advertisement for muscle building through the exercise of dynamic tension" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 54). The religion is a parody of Christianity. Goldsmith finds many parallels, noting that both Christianity and Bokononism center around a religious leader who is an ex-carpenter. The followers of both religions must be very careful because their belief is outlawed and its believers persecuted. Both religions teach meaning through parables and psalms; the psalms of Bokononism are set to the Calypso beat (19). Both religions are opposed by the existing government, and both religions fail to save mankind. Such a treatment of religion and society is the product of the atheist and the anthropologist in Vonnegut.

We are constantly provided quotes from Bokononism throughout the text of *Cat's Cradle*. In addition, several allusions to Christianity are present in the book. The



death of Dr. Hoenikker on Christmas Eve is an obvious device, carrying several ironic parallels. Christ was born at Christmas and gave each of his earthly children the gift of life. Dr. Hoenikker dies at Christmas and gives each of his earthly children the gift of death--or ice nine. Each offspring trades his gift of ice-nine for love; thus each plays a role in bringing death and destruction to the world. Giannone labels Christmas the "nativity of the world's end" in this novel ("Violence" 56). Of course, religion and science become tied together and criss-cross like the strings of a cat's cradle in all of this ironic gift-giving. When the narrator opens the story by saying, "Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John," (11) a strong Biblical allusion appears. Jonah was a prophet of God who was forced to go to Nineveh and deliver a message of warning so that the city would not be destroyed. The apostle John was the author of the biblical book of *Revelations*, which warns of the end of time. That is also the mission of the Jonah/John/Bokonon/Vonnegut of this novel. The first words spoken by Jonah also remind us of the famous opening lines of another survivor of a famous ship accident which destroyed "humanity"--Ishmael from *Moby Dick*. Another common religious image is the use of the wedding. The end of the world is often connected to a wedding in the Bible. Christ, the messiah, and his church are referred to as a bride and groom. The day the world ends for San Lorenzo is a day of betrothal for Jonah and his bride. The wedding guests are

caught unaware as apocalypse comes upon them.

Frank Hoenikker, the oldest son of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, believes that he has come to the island through an act of God. Lawrence Broer points out the irony of Frank's mission. He believes that he will be the cornerstone of a Utopian society and that he will play an important and meaningful role in the progress of humanity through his position as Minister of Science and Progress, yet, in his pocket he carries the destructive force of ice-nine (60). Mustazza states that by bringing with him the most dangerous potency of the technologically advanced world, the military, the scientific community, and Frank himself are responsible for the end of the world as we know it (*Forever* 87). He gives away his inheritance of ice-nine in return for power and recognition. What Frank really does is unwittingly to complete the process of moral petrification his father had begun in Ilium. Broer states that "by relinquishing what is left of his frozen soul to the totalitarian forces on San Lorenzo, he becomes transformed into a totally subservient, puppet-like creature, who expedites his own doom while initiating global destruction" (60). Broer believes that it is Frank's fate to link the cat's cradle of scientific progress in Ilium to the cat's cradle of totalitarianism in San Lorenzo; the ice-nine which he brings with him is a Trojan horse that brings destruction to a second Ilium, New Lorenzo (61). The surprise gift that brings death in this case is carried in a small tube of ice-nine that Papa

Monzano, the dictator, now wears as a necklace.

Opposing religion and at the center of the story is the scientific world, encompassed in the research laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company. Peopled by the vacant Miss Pefko and the girls of the secretarial pool, this is a place where no one questions what is going on. The General Forge and Foundry Company is no contributor to society; the corporation is a perfect example of scientific knowledge running amuck.

Vonnegut based this company on General Electric and his experiences there. "When I worked for General Electric and reported on the activities of scientists there, it was fashionable for them to be sweetly absent-minded, to have no sense of the consequences of whatever they might turn over to the company in the way of knowledge" (Charles Platt 258). Vonnegut came away from his experience at General Electric with one strong idea: "Scientists should be withholding things from the government all the time. Government is liable to do almost anything with whatever levers a scientist gives them" (Platt 258). In a 1980 interview with Robert Musil, Vonnegut relates his brother's experience with the government and a scientific invention that Bernard Vonnegut had created. Bernard developed a method for seeding clouds to cause rain. He was later horrified to learn that his technique was being used in Vietnam to flood crops and starve the North Vietnamese! (231). The way political power takes over ice-nine in *Cat's Cradle* is another perfect example of

how governments cannot be trusted with scientific invention.

Dr. Hoenikker, inventor of the Atomic bomb, is simple, detached, and eccentric. Charles Harris labels him "more of a naive child than a father of three" (63). His laboratory is more like a private playroom, filled with kitchen gadgets and toys. Klinkowitz does not see such innocence. To make his point, he looks at the incident where the absentminded Doctor Hoenikker abandons his car in the middle of a traffic jam. His wife, who was unfamiliar with driving, had to come get the car. As a result, she was in a terrible car crash, which crushed her pelvis. This wreck ultimately caused her to die in childbirth. "We now realize, it is not so funny that Dr. Hoenikker's winsome play, ostensibly for no real purpose, produced the horrors of the atomic war" (Kurt Vonnegut). Dr. Hoenikker is no innocent; he gave his wife a loveless marriage, and he gave the world the means of self-annihilation.

In his autobiographical collage *Palm Sunday* Vonnegut says that as a child he had great faith in technology, but that trust was lost on the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan. Vonnegut then asks, "what other sort of soul would create a new physics based on nightmares, would place in the hands of mere politicians a planet so destabilized, to borrow a CIA term, that the briefest fit of stupidity could easily guarantee the end of the world?" (69-70). As the cold war escalated, Vonnegut saw a United States government that was about to repeat the largest act of stupidity and do the

unthinkable--stockpile weapons in an arms race and then make war. *Cat's Cradle*, with its apocalyptic vision, is a true warning about the destructive aspects of war.

Religion and science cannot save the people of San Lorenzo. James Lundquist points out that just as Bokonon and McCabe have pulled a joke on the people of San Lorenzo with their fake religion, so a greater power has perpetuated a joke on all of mankind with the notion that "the physical will remain stable, that water will always solidify at the same temperature, that the climate will always remain hospitable in the warm southern seas" (35). Ice-nine has changed the geographic picture, but a higher power brought ingredients of the cataclysm together. The most pessimistic thought is that there is no loving God in charge up there; or there is a God, but he is indifferent to what man is doing.

As in previous novels, Vonnegut plants small Dresden seeds, rather like private jokes or markers for himself or for those who know the Dresden story. After the military had passed the blame for Dresden down through the ranks, the one person held responsible for the Dresden bombing was Bomber Commander Harris. Vonnegut sometimes plants the name Harrison in his writing. In *Cat's Cradle* Angela Hoenikker's married name is Mrs. Harrison C. Conners. Her husband, is a handsome man who is considered to be a snappy dresser with Don Juan eyes. He is president of Fabri-Tek, a company that has a connection to electronics or weapons--no one is certain. The naive Angela has lived in isolation with her

father, but after his death, Harrison Connors "cons" her into marrying him after a two week courtship. Her share of ice-nine is the cause of his sudden love interest.

In the early Vonnegut novels, the name Frank or Franklin often suggests Franklin Delano Roosevelt, one of the guilty participants in the Yalta conference where the decision to bomb Dresden was sealed. Although the military would never admit to such an agreement between the Allies, Charles Carrington states that "the B.B.C. news bulletin of 14 February [1945] described the raid as 'one of the most powerful blows at the heart of Germany which the Allied leaders promised at Yalta'" (100). The Frank of this novel is another of Dr. Hoenikker's' strange children. Like that other Franklin, he is an observer and creator of countries and wars and death. We are told that "on the day they dropped the bomb, Frank had a tablespoon and a Mason jar. What he was doing was spooning different kinds of bugs into the jar and making them fight" (19). To keep the insect war going, the jar had to be constantly shaken. Newt says that on the day of the bomb, that is just what Frank was doing---"shaking, shaking, the jar" (19). Ironically, Frank goes on to become president of a country. He also once built a model of the battleship *Missouri*. It was, of course, aboard the *Missouri* that the papers of peace that officially ended World War II were signed in August 1945.

The exact numbers of the Dresden dead were never determined. Estimates ranged from a grossly underestimated 10,000 to a shocking 450,000. Generally, history, the military, politicians, and the news media ignored the Dresden deaths. In true satiric form, Vonnegut plays with historical accounts in a chapter entitled "The Jumping-off Place." Dr. Asa Breed is talking to the narrator about the proud history of Ilium. Not only was Ilium the starting point for the Western migration, it also was the chosen execution spot for public hangings. Breed explains that the very spot where the Research laboratory now stands was the site of the old stockade where the hangings actually took place. He displays horror over one criminal, a George Milnor Moakley, who was hanged for murdering twenty-six people. "Think of it!" said Dr. Breed. "Twenty-six people he had on his conscience!" (28). Ironically, the laboratory Breed now heads is the very one that worked on the Manhattan Project and produced the bomb. When are we held accountable for the numbers of dead? 450,000 at Dresden, 92,000 at Hiroshima, 26 at Ilium stockade? What does it take to shock the conscience of man? Vonnegut emphasizes again and again that each human life is important, so any number is unacceptable. Just one death is too much.

At one point in the novel, the American ambassador Horlic Minton is invited to make a speech in honor of San Lorenzo's "Hundred Martyrs to Democracy." The martyrs are men who were loaded on a ship which was to take them to the

United States for military training. San Lorenzo had just declared war on Germany and Japan because of Pearl Harbor. However, the men never go to war; their ship is sunk by a German submarine as soon as it set sail. Sounding much like the voice of Kurt Vonnegut, Minton refuses to glorify war and make heroes of any who participated. After commenting that those who died were merely children, Minton says: "And I propose to you that if we are to pay our sincere respects to the hundred lost children of San Lorenzo, that we might best spend the day despising what killed them; which is to say, the stupidity and viciousness of all mankind" (170). This same idea will emerge later in Vonnegut's Dresden novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

A quick snapshot of a Dresden scene appears in a chapter entitled, "Black Death." Ten days after an outbreak of the bubonic plague, 1400 dead had to be buried. Philip Castle describes the Dresden-like scene:

After death, the body turns black--coals to Newcastle in the case of San Lorenzo. When the plague was having everything its own way, the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle looked like Auschwitz or Buchenwald. We had stacks of dead so deep and wide that a bulldozer actually stalled trying to shove them toward a common grave. (111)



A Dresden scene reported anonymously in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1947 sounds amazingly similar:

Ten days after the attack the mountains of bodies had not been disposed of in spite of the fact that big trucks had been put into service to carry the dead as quickly as possible to the mass graves. No one was taking the trouble to identify the bodies. They simply were loaded on these trucks, often together with debris and ashes. (27)

Vonnegut claims he cannot remember many details of Dresden, but he has read the written accounts by Irving, McKee, and the journals. Perhaps he even read the anonymous report in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*; but very likely, he saw such a scene.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut employs colors that are reminders of Dresden. The major colors used in the novel are orange, black, blue, and white. Vonnegut tells us that orange stands for "change and caution" (29). Black is, of course, the color of secret night and the color of death. These also were colors used to mark prisoner locations for the bombers to avoid during World War II. The blue and white color combination appears in all of Vonnegut's early novels. They are emblems of the Dresden dead. As the countless corpses were uncovered and hauled away for burial at Dresden, Vonnegut noticed the smell of mustard gas and roses (*Slaughterhouse 4*) and took note of

the blue and white coloring of dead bodies. This is very like the account of an anonymous witness who wandered the ruins the days after the raid looking for his family. He said: "In the cities most streets were impassable, filled with piles of rubble. In those streets were what looked like tailor's dummies (which undressed are white). But these were people with their clothes blown off" (McKee 249). Another survivor, Eva Beyer, wrote about how by the morning of 15 February 1945, there was a "sickly-sweet stench of unburied corpses" everywhere, much like roses and gases that Vonnegut described (McKee 242). Other accounts described the dead as blue, purple, or greenish (McKee 256). Some were carbonized black, and most were placed on makeshift frames and burned. The flames rose high day after day as the job of disposing of the dead continued. Orange, black, blue, and white are colors repeated by many observers.

In *Cat's Cradle* ice-nine is labeled "that blue-white gem, that seed of doom . . ." (43). When Mona arrives, bride of Jonah/John, she is dressed in a blue gown. Although blue is often connected with the Virgin Mary, here it is used appropriately because Mona delivers death to the human race by refusing to copulate and bear children. Mount McCabe is called a "fearful hump, a blue whale" (142). Jonah eats bite-sized cubes of albatross, a white bird that had been shot (an obvious connection to the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which also carries warnings about the precious

nature of life). The death camp doctor attending Papa washes his hands, and notices that the water in the sink is solid. He then makes the error of touching "his lips to the blue-white mystery" (160). Frost bloomed on his lips and he froze solid. Blue and white are the colors of death. When ice-nine is released into the ocean, all of the green world disappears, and the earth is covered with a blue-white pearl. Finally, in the last scene of the book, Bokonon is seen wearing a "white bedspread with blue tufts" (191). This is a very appropriate color since he is about to become a corpse.

Another important symbol for Vonnegut is the canary. Vonnegut feels that the role of the artist is very important in a culture. He adheres to what he calls the canary in the coal mine theory of arts. He says, "This theory says that artists are useful to society because they are so sensitive. They are super-sensitive. They keel over like canaries in poison coal mines long before more robust types realize that there is any danger whatsoever" (Jerome Klinkowitz and John Lawler, 101). He sees the role of the writer as very critical, much like that of a shaman or a scop. On the first text page of *Cat's Cradle*, the narrator begins: "Listen" (11). After a pause, the story-telling begins. Much like the Germanic scop in the Viking hall, the "singer of the tale" tells us of mankind's great sorrow, of how the stupidity of man with the help of the military, government, and religion has brought the world to the great sorrow of death and destruction.

The Vikings always launched their dead in a burning ship; such is the case with Papa Monzano, whose lifeboat is about to be burned in a great ceremony: the ceremony seems to connect to the mythology of the island. One of the great legends of Bokononism is that "the golden boat will sail again when the end of the world is near" (78). Ironically, Papa Monzano dies in a "bed that was of a golden dinghy--tiller, painter, earlocks and all, all gilt. His bed was the lifeboat of Bokonon's old schooner, the *Lady Slipper* . . . " (146).

How perfect that this lifeboat (from the very ship that brought Bokonon and McCabe to San Lorenzo so long ago with their promises of a better life) is the one that carries away the body of the first man to die of ice-nine. Faris believes that Vonnegut's repeated use of gold . . . is . . . related to . . . the satirist's excremental vision. In Freudian terms, gold is a respectable form of shit . . ." (185-186). Perhaps Vonnegut is saying that the gift of Bokonon and McCabe was nothing more than a pile of excrement: the gift of ice-nine being bourne out to sea in that golden lifeboat is pure scatology. With images of fire and ice, the accidental launching of the lifeboat soon spreads ice-nine to all of the world and brings about the apocalypse. The scene seems to allude heavily to the famous poem, "Fire and Ice," by Robert Frost. The poem ponders how the world will end, by fire or ice? The conclusion to the poem is that it really does not matter.

Bokononism has a term for those who adopt a wrong approach in the search for the meaning of life--that term is *granfaloon*. H. Lowe Crosby of Evanston, Illinois, and his wife Hazel are aboard the fateful airplane that brings John, Newt, Angela, and the Minton to San Lorenzo. Hazel declares herself to be a "mother" to all the Hoosiers she meets. Jonah explains that "Hazel's obsession with Hoosiers around the world was a textbook example of a *false karass*, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the way God gets things done" (67). We are told that other examples are the Communist Party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, and the Odd Fellows. The Crosbys describe a visit to the Chamber of Horrors Wax Museum, where they see the infamous hook of San Lorenzo along with a wax figure of Harry Truman! The satiric implication is, perhaps, that President Truman belongs in a chamber of horrors because of his decision to drop the atomic bomb. During their interview Musil asked Vonnegut about Truman's role in the bombing. Vonnegut commented: "I had seen bombings so when Truman spoke of marshalling yards and all these other military targets that had to be hit there in Hiroshima, I knew what bullshit it was, because anything is a marshalling yard . . . (237). The bombing of Japan was, in Vonnegut's mind, a direct parallel to Dresden. Japan was on the brink of having to surrender, just as Germany had been. Dropping the bomb served no real purpose, except to give off a false illusion of America's military might and scientific superiority.

Vonnegut is also sensitive to the propaganda constantly released about the expertise of the bombers of World War II. It is the pilot that brought the deadly bombs to Dresden and Hiroshima. It is appropriate, then, that the Air Force plays a role in the ice-nine destruction of San Lorenzo. As the funeral pyre for Papa's body is being built, one black dot of a plane, trailing black smoke, brings death to the innocent people below. There was no deliberate target; it was a case of pure malfunction and ineptitude. Ironically, innocent people were targets when Dresden was bombed, and this is a very clear Dresden marker in this book. Mustazza claims that deaths cannot be chalked up to accident because it is never just an accident. "Instead, it is caused, in the last analysis, by a way of thinking that places politics above people, material avarice above common decency" ("Forever" 88). Franklin overlooked his burden of moral responsibility because his thinking was limited to his own greediness. The military leaders care more about making a statement than safe-guarding the public below.

Throughout his writings, Vonnegut often uses a bird's tweet to warn mankind that he is about to be destroyed. It is the reason he refers to himself as the canary in the coal mine. As the castle wall comes tumbling down, as Papa's body is borne seaward, John is about to make a suicidal swan dive into the ocean. The sound that calls him back is the call of one lone bird--Vonnegut's famous "Pootee-phweet?" (174). Vonnegut came to connect the sound of the bird to death's

warning because after the Dresden fires had stopped and the clean-up work began, the birds were soon back, chirping and calling for new life. The bird's tweet stopped Jonah and called him back to life; the next minute, he looked, and "all the sea was ice-nine" (174). Apocalypse had arrived.

The small group to survive the ice-nine apocalypse includes the false mother, Hazel Crosby. Other false mothers appear in *Cat's Cradle*. John and his bride make an escape into a bomb shelter provided by a Father. Papa Monzano had built a bomb shelter and fully stocked it with a Sears Roebuck Catalog, plenty of Campbell's soup, a short wave radio, 20 years of *National Geographic*, and twin beds. Allen notes that many Americans had similar fallout shelters in their backyards in the 1960s (*Understanding* 64). It should also be noticed that many of the Dresden dead were hiding in basements and underground food cellars. A firestorm raged above ground in Dresden, just like a different type of wind storm blew over San Lorenzo. Up above, tornadoes and unbridled windstorms spread ice-nine, death, and destruction across the world. Down below, a different type of destruction is happening, for Mona rejects the idea of love-making, saying "It would be very sad to have a little baby now. Don't you agree?" (178). Mona too is a false mother. John spends his time peddling the bicycle which powers the fan to produce air. "Man breathes in oxygen and exhales carbon dioxide," (178) the new age Adam tells his unwilling Eve. The reader acquainted with the Dresden story

cannot help but remember that what killed most of the population of Dresden was a lack of oxygen as the firestorm sucked it out of the atmosphere and replaced it with the deadly gases that killed. When the "nation of two" finally emerges from their underground shelter, it is to find the world gone. Mona remarks, "Mother Earth--she isn't a very good mother any more" (180). And so Mother Earth is a false mother. Without the nourishing mother, the child of mankind will not survive. John and Mona may be a new Adam and Eve, locked in their bower, but Mona will not bring forth a new race of mankind. Later, when they join the other survivors, the only other surviving female will be that other false mother, Hazel Crosby, who is too old to mother the new race.

As the surviving couple surveys their dead and silent Eden, they see a shocking sight: a natural bowl near Mount McCabe is filled with thousands upon thousands of dead. Vonnegut labels them "morbid statuary" (182). They are not tossed or thrown about at all; they are sitting there in death, seemingly unharmed except for the white frost at their lips and the finger in or near the mouth--the tell-tale sign that each has deliberately delivered himself from the frozen, dead world. This passage is very parallel to a Dresden scene that Vonnegut doubtless saw. David Irving relates that because of the intense heat and strong fire wind, many fled to the safety of the water storage tanks and fountains. After the storm ended, the huge bowls were found full of bodies. The water had evaporated, but the bodies were still



there. Vonnegut, working as a corpse miner, also told how many times when they would break into a cellar, the dead would be sitting there as if waiting for something--not looking at all dead. A blank space in the middle of San Lorenzo's dead bowl leaves us to believe that Bokonon had lately been there, delivering the equivalent of "The Sermon on the Mount." Such a sermon contains a lesson of mercy and unconditional love, and it is the real lesson the singer of *Cat's Cradle* wants us to hear.

The gathered dead of San Lorenzo may be sitting as if waiting for a sermon; but they have waited too late, and now they cannot hear. Bokonon has left the stage because he cannot save any of them now. Lundquist wryly comments that "Bokonon can take the joke: he is ready to make an ice-nine statue of himself, thumbing his nose at God just as the novel ends" (35). Peter Jones suggests that suicide may be the only way man can defy God and take control of his own universe (210). The Mintons make that decision, and so does Mona (the Eve of this paradise gone awry). Angela and the Castles commit suicide for a cause. The two Castles, father and son, set out for the House of Hope in an attempt to save the natives. Angela dies for art's sake. She picks up a clarinet and puts it to her lips to play before she realizes that it has ice-nine on the mouthpiece. But Jonah resists dying and remains to tell the story--is there anyone who will listen?

Can the writer tell the story of mankind's folly? Can hearing the story ever stop man from destruction? Tom Hearn suggests that, to Kurt Vonnegut, this is the "essential paradox of our time that people are equipped with such large brains that they have become extremely stupid when it comes to foreseeing the consequences of their action" (191). The role of art and the writer is a heavy one, and it is the last assignment given John. Jones comments about the dark and hopeless conclusion of *Cat's Cradle*:

The narrator turns, muttering a line from Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," remembering Angela's suicide by clarinet and Ice-nine as he views the frozen Caribbean: art to artifact, the world remains, testifying to the failure of both God and man. (217)

Bokonon has run out of words. When we last see the great spiritual leader sitting on a rock by the side of the road, he is trying to think of a final sentence for the *Books of Bokonon*. The final writing is a wish for more time, a wish to "be a younger man" who could tell the story. Jonah/John/Vonnegut takes the paper from the wise, old man; and so, the string has come full circle and now loops around once more to the beginning. Once more Vonnegut will try to write the message. He begins again, "Listen."

## Chapter 6

## Rosewater's Anguish

Kurt Vonnegut's fifth book, *God Bless You Mr.*

*Rosewater: or Pearls Before Swine*, was published as a hardcover original by Holt, Rinehart & Winston in 1964. It was issued again as a Dell paperback in 1965. This publication is a turning point for Vonnegut because for the first time, he is able to describe the Dresden firestorm directly. With *Rosewater*, Vonnegut also receives his first serious reviews. In the following year, 1966, he is able to return to *Mother Night* and add his personal commentary about the Dresden bombing as an introduction to the book. By this time, he also has begun a draft of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

The fly leaf of any Vonnegut book is usually filled with quotes, poems, enigmatic statements, or allusions. They are intriguing to read because of the joking, satirical fun Vonnegut always uses as he invites his reader to enter his world and listen. *Rosewater's* fly leaf contains a quote by Eliot Rosewater:

The Second World War was over-and there  
I was at high noon, crossing Times Square  
with a Purple Heart on.

-ELIOT ROSEWATER

President, The Rosewater Foundation. (v)

Here the allusion may cause the reader to envision a stock scene from the American Western--the duel between the man with the star and the bad guy. This time the star is a "Purple Heart," such as a wounded veteran of war might wear. Notably, Vonnegut possesses a Purple Heart.

The setting is not the hot, dry streets of a parched western town; the duel at high noon takes place in the busy city of New York, specifically, at Times Square, one of the banking and technological centers of modern America. The good guy is Eliot Rosewater, whose ideas come from the artist/writer Kilgore Trout. The bad guy is the power of mammon.

*God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* contains a subtitle (or *Pearls Before Swine*). One of the major tensions of the story is created by money and how people use and react to it. The subtitle alludes to a verse taken from the sixth chapter of Matthew. Besides warning the reader not to cast pearls before swine, the verses leading up to it contain the famous passage known as "The Sermon on the Mount." Vonnegut refers to this passage many times in his writings. He considers the lesson contained in "The Sermon on the Mount" to be critical to man's survival in the world. Vonnegut has repeatedly focused on the idea that the *New Testament* approach of forgiving love is superior to the *Old Testament* resolve of revenge. It is the lesson Paul Proteus learns, it is the type of love Malachi Constant accepts, it is the reason Howard Campbell embraces Mother Night, it is the

message Jonah begs us to listen to, and it is the example Eliot Rosewater lives by.

Max Schultz argues that *Rosewater* juxtaposes an earlier vision of pioneer America as the new Eden against the junk yard that modern America has become. Into this fallen Eden comes Eliot Rosewater, prepared to give money and love to the poor in body and spirit. Thus, suggests Schultz, the first half of the title (*God Bless You*) reminds us of the blessings of God's love, while the last half of the title (or *Pearls Before Swine*) underlines the warnings about wasting the gifts of the Kingdom of God as outlined in "The Sermon on the Mount" (36). In the case of Rosewater County, the pigs are those who have grabbed more than their fair share and oppressed their earthly brothers and sisters. By worshipping Mammon, they have destroyed the earthly paradise and disrupted the chain of being. It is interesting that Fred Rosewater, who is trying to get the Rosewater fortune for himself, is called a "Rhode Island pig," and Eliot gives a speech about the Golden Age of Rome when there were no pigs.

The Biblical verses in Matthew following the warning of wasted gifts contain the famous "Lilies of the Field" passage. These verses warn man that there is no need to worship Mammon because the Heavenly Father will meet all of man's needs with his love. Ironically, it is the father role that Eliot takes upon himself, and in the end, he even has himself declared the father to all of the fifty-eight

children in the county who will claim him: "Let their names be Rosewater from this moment on. And tell them that their father loves them, no matter what they may turn out to be" (190). By so doing, he distributes the Rosewater fortune and puts the "money" chain of being right again. The pearls will not be cast before the swine, and the pigs will not continue to get more than their fair share.

The first line of the text tells us what the book will be about. "A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people, just as a sum of honey might be a leading character in a tale about bees" (7). Leonard Mustazza states that money plays both the protagonist and antagonist in this story because it represents both humility and pride, as well as good and evil in human history (*Forever* 89). The long generational history of the Rosewater family illustrates this point. We are told that Noah Rosewater and a few men like him "came to control all that was worth controlling in America. Thus was the savage and unnecessary and humorless American class system created" (12). And so, because of the early use and abuse of money, Rosewater County came to be divided, not along geographical lines, but along the lines of social status. All men were no longer equal. Peter Freese suggests that the problem with Rosewater County is that "the Sermon on the Mount has been replaced by the hunger for money" (*Vonnegut's* 154). The Calvinism of the early fathers no longer serves them. Mustazza sees the two polarities of the book as being the proud rich who want

supremacy over the "Utopian dreamer," who still believes in the myth of the American dream (*Forever 93*). Standing between these two worlds is Eliot Rosewater, who is the protagonist.

The staff of the McAllister Law Firm calls Eliot "John." This nickname has been used by Vonnegut in prior novels and carries religious allusions. This nickname makes us think of an Apostle. Mustazza notes:

Like John the Baptist, the saint who dwells in the wilderness, dressed in a rough coat of camel's hair, subsisting on locusts and wild honey--indeed like all of the holy "nuts" with whom he is figuratively equated--Eliot is a man crying in the wilderness, crying against the tide of greed and hypocrisy that has swept over America. (98)

Because of his behavior, the reader questions Eliot Rosewater's mental stability throughout most of the book. The character of Norman Mushari is used to place the reader in the position of the observer and investigator. Mushari wants to prove that Eliot is insane so that he can get some of the famous Rosewater fortune for himself. His function is to observe and record insane moments.

The reader can easily notice overtones of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the book. Vonnegut has used allusions to *Hamlet* before. For example, as *Cat's Cradle* ends, Jonah is suffering with Hamlet's dilemma of having to put the world

aright. Eliot Rosewater begins carrying the same burden. His quest causes him to return to Rosewater County, the home of his ancestors. Something is indeed rotten in Rosewater County, so Rosewater begins to reorganize the social order so that he can re-empower the common people. Somebody has forgotten what people are really for. Eliot sets up the Rosewater Foundation and gives himself a mission statement: "I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and unattractive. That is going to be my work of art" (36). Eliot then proceeds like Hamlet; he behaves as if he were insane, and no one is certain of his lunatic status.

Eliot thinks that the greatest prophet of the day is Kilgore Trout, author of *2BR02B* and eighty-seven other sci-fi novels of little importance (98). When Mushari investigates this craziness, he discovers that Trout works at a trading stamp redemption center and his little known books are grouped with pornography and sex fantasies. Of course, Kilgore Trout is a self-parody of Kurt Vonnegut, who experienced a similar treatment of his own early, literary efforts. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald Lawler tell us that at the time Vonnegut was writing *Rosewater*, he was in a terrible economic crisis. He was struggling to support six children, and the magazine market had seemingly dried up. He got little recognition for his books because he was apparently filed away as an inconsequential sci-fi writer by the critics. Vonnegut felt his literary career was in



danger, and it was during this period that Vonnegut "came the closest ever to being Trout himself" (*Vonnegut in America* 67).

The book, *2BR02B*, not only alludes to Hamlet's most famous soliloquy where suicide is pondered, but Musahri's summation of it sounds suspiciously like Vonnegut's *Player Piano*:

Trout's favorite formula was to describe a perfectly hideous society, not unlike his own, and then, toward the end, to suggest ways in which it could be improved. In *2BR02B* he hypothesized an America in which almost all of the work was done by machines, and the only people who could get work had three or more PhD's. There was a serious overpopulation problem, too. (20).

Eliot writes a letter on the stationery of the Elsinore Volunteer Fire Department. Although written to his wife Sylvia, the letter is addressed "Dear Ophelia-" (30). In the letter, Eliot and compares himself to Hamlet:

I think that I have things in common with Hamlet, that I have an important mission, that I'm temporarily mixed up about how it should be done.... There is a feeling that I have a destiny far away from the shallow and preposterous posing that is our life in New York. And I roam. And I roam. (31)

Finally, in one scene Mushari goes to the mantelpiece and looks at a photograph of Eliot taken at the end of World War II. Mushari then says, "What a noble mind is o'erthrown!" These same lines are spoken by Ophelia (3.1.158) as she too agonizes about insanity and love.

Of Rosewater's madness, Mustazza comments that he does show signs of mental illness. He is depressed most of the time and guilt-ridden over two incidents in his past: he believes that he caused the boating accident that killed his mother, and he feels great remorse over the accidental wartime killing of three German firemen that he mistook for soldiers (98). The wartime scene was especially traumatic:

Eliot, like the good soldier he was, jammed his knee into the man's groin, drove his bayonet into his throat, withdrew the bayonet, smashed the man's jaw with his rifle butt. And then Eliot heard an American sergeant yelling somewhere off to his left. His visibility was apparently a lot better over there, for the sergeant was yelling, "Cease fire! Hold your fire, you guys. Jesus Christ--these aren't soldiers. They're firemen!" (64)

For Vonnegut, these traumas experienced by Eliot have significance in his own life.

Wilfird Sheed, discussing *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, makes a definite connection between the book's protagonist and Vonnegut: "He [Vonnegut] has been a volunteer fireman,

in memory of Dresden; and his mad saint, Eliot Rosewater, joins a different fire department every time he gets drunk" (13). Although Rosewater and Vonnegut are connected, another character is the actual voice of Vonnegut in the book. Peter Freese notes that in *Rosewater*, "the author's ego, the unsuccessful and eccentric science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, who looks 'like a frightened, aging Jesus, makes his first appearance" (*Vonnegut's* 154). Loree Rackstraw labels Trout "a caricature of Vonnegut" (136). In *Rosewater*, Vonnegut uses Eliot to express certain opinions, but then these ideas are attributed to Kilgore Trout. This ploy allows Vonnegut great freedom in expressing his own ideas, because he is never speaking directly or even indirectly to the reader.

In the last chapter, Eliot is in the garden of an asylum where he has been for a year. The Senator, the psychiatrist, and Trout are there with him. The fate of the Rosewater fortune will be in the balance tomorrow when the case goes to court. Eliot has explained that all of his thoughts make sense and that Trout can clear the situation up. Trout then speaks to Rosewater, reminding him of the logic of their argument. He acknowledges that the future looks dim for people because technology is going to make them useless, and it will be difficult to find a reason for them to exist. Trout then gives a statement that seems to sanction mass destruction of human life: "So--if we can't find reason and methods for treasuring human beings because

they are *human beings*, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out" (183). Vonnegut's main mission in writing then follows as Trout explains why Rosewater has accomplished an amazing thing by showing unconditional love:

It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be part of human nature. Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see.  
(186)

At the conclusion of this speech, Vonnegut's signature "Poo-tee-weet?" is heard. Rackstraw states that the bird's call symbolizes "the renewing, generative spirit" (136). As Eliot looks around, the blackness of his nightmare disappears and the solution for all of his problems appears "instantly, beautifully, and fairly" (188). This is one of the strongest Dresden markers of all. Vonnegut has commented that after the bombing, there was such an eerie silence, but then the birds began their tweeting--somehow they had survived. For Rosewater, the "poo-tee-weet?" does seem to be a call back to reality.

The Rosewater text uses the elements of fire, earth, air, and water--each connected to certain characters or objects around which the tension of the novel revolves. Fire and water both connect themselves to Eliot Rosewater. He is

a volunteer fireman, has fond memories of being the mascot at a firehouse when he was a child, and keeps a fire hat and a red phone on his desk. It is interesting that glycerin and rose water are the main ingredients of a soothing hand lotion which was popular in the 1960s, which is the time Vonnegut would have written the book. Rosewater could be an aromatic, healing liquid, while a trout is a type of fish which would live in water. Air of course, refers to the natural element of oxygen; but it could also connect to the air horn that warns of disaster. The earth is, of course, the planet that man has monkeyed with too much; but it could also be the people, who are the children of the earth. When the elements are in harmony, all is well with the world, and it is this harmony that Eliot seeks. Another scene serves as an example of the use of the elements. While in a bar, Eliot offers free drinks to anyone who can produce a fireman's badge. Soon, he begins crying in his beer, "claiming to be deeply touched by the idea of an inhabited planet with an atmosphere that was eager to combine violently with almost everything the inhabitants held dear" (22). All of the elements are present in this scene: fire (firemen), earth (the planet), air (oxygen), and water (Rosewater). Eliot, the element of water, could stop the combustion and destruction.

The unstable and combustible atmosphere could also have a Dresden source, as could the periodic appearance of firemen. Sometimes when writing, Vonnegut will slip a one

word allusion to Dresden into the sentence. Those informed of Dresden quickly recognize its significance. For example, David Irving reveals in his historical text about the bombing of Dresden that the "code name of the operation was *Thunderclap*" (186). The word "Thunderclap" significantly appears three times in the *Rosewater* text. The reader is told that Eliot has two phones, a black one for foundation calls and a red one for fire calls. When the red phone rings, Eliot pushes a red button, which activates a doomsday bullhorn. Right after the reader is given this explanation, the passage says, "there was an earsplitting thunderclap" and Eliot is awakened from his sleep (55). The second and third appearance of "thunderclap" are connected to the frightened Diana Moon Glampers. Her parents were electrocuted by lightning, which causes her to fear storms. She calls Mr. Rosewater on the black phone, and he calms her fears (57, 59). Ironically, according to the main headline of the 15 February 1947 issue of *The New York Times*, there were three "Thunderclap" attacks on Dresden. It is also interesting to note that the placement of the suicide of Eliot's mother appears just before the three thunderclaps are heard in the book. This would parallel the occurrence of the suicide of Vonnegut's mother just prior to his own exposure to *Thunderclap*.

Eliot has a special love for volunteer fire departments. Images of fire, firemen, or fire departments appear a total of thirty-three times in *God*

*Bless You, Mr. Rosewater.* David Goldsmith sees fire as a mirror image of the deadly ice of *Cat's Cradle*. Ice-9 becomes a symbol of man's endless capacity to hate, while the fire department becomes a symbol of man's capacity to love (22-23). Kilgore Trout compliments Eliot for being a volunteer fireman. Trout says of firemen, "they are, when the alarm goes off, almost the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land" (184). The presence of firemen could be another Dresden marker because firemen unselfishly sacrificed their lives in Dresden. After the first attack on Dresden, many volunteer firemen arrived from neighboring cities. They arrived just in time to be hit with the second attack. Alexander McKee explains: "The fire-brigade dispatched to Dresden by Badschandau, ten miles from Dresden, arrived soon after 11:00 a.m. From the men of this brigade there was not one survivor. All were overwhelmed by the second raid" (175). Hume agrees that "for Vonnegut, fire is the ultimate nightmare. It is apocalyptic" ("Heraclitean" 228). Firemen can stop the destruction.

The "doomsday bullhorn" is another interesting word . choice. It is activated when there is a thunderclap or when there is a fire call. The bullhorn is a gift from Rosewater, and interestingly, it once was the siren that protected Berlin during World War II. The bullhorn puts out a loud wailing siren. In another scene, Rosewater sets off the loudest fire alarm in the Western

Hemisphere. This time we are told that there is no fire. It was simply high noon in Rosewater. Coincidentally, in an article entitled "Dresden Recalls the Allies' Act of Terror," which appeared in the 12, February 1995 "News" section of the *Chicago Tribune*, Ray Mosely reports that the third and final Dresden attack came "at 17 minutes past noon" on 14 February 1945 (1).

The strange mix of oxygen or lack of oxygen and fire is alluded to several times in *Rosewater*. In one scene, Eliot and his wife go to the opera. We are told that in the last scene,

the hero and heroine were placed in an airtight chamber to suffocate. As the doomed pair filled their lungs, Eliot called out to them, "You will last a lot longer if you don't try to sing." Eliot stood, leaned far out of his box, told the singers, "Maybe you don't know anything about oxygen, but I do. Believe me, you must not sing" (29).

Later in the book, the old Rosewater Opera house is labeled "a terrifying combustible frame wedding cake" (39). In yet another place we are told that the The Log Cabin Inn has burned down (67). It was the location of the famous restroom walls containing the poetry of Eliot and his favorite writer, Kilgore Trout. These scenes may have Dresden significance. Margret Fryer was there the night Dresden was bombed. She remembers that many people were out in costumes



that night for the carnival. Other people were dressed in evening dress because they were going to the opera. Each restaurant, cafe, pub, and bar was crammed full of people (McKee 144). Of course, almost all of these people died in the raid. According to McKee "Most of the [Dresden] casualties had been caused by inhalation of hot gases, and by infiltrating carbon monoxide and smoke poisoning; to a lesser extent lack of oxygen had added to the deathroll" (176). David Irving states that the Dresden fire burned over sixteen hundred acres of the city, and that it continued to burn for seven days and eight nights (157). The opera house would have been destroyed.

Blue and white are colors Vonnegut has tended to use, perhaps because he connects them with the color of the dead bodies. In *Rosewater*, after one lightning crash, we are told that "Lightning turned everything to blue-white diamonds" (54). The word "Rose" might also be connected to Vonnegut's stated remembrance that the bodies smelled like mustard gas and roses. Another one-line allusion appears in chapter 13. Eliot is walking along the sidewalk when he runs into a man. "The old man wasn't a drunk or a pervert or anything. He was simply old, and a widower, and shot full of cancer, and his son in the *Strategic Air Command*, and his personality wasn't much. Booze upset him" (167). Eliot had given this poor old man a *Rosewater* grant for medicine. What is significant about the one-liner, however, is that, according to Anthony Verrier, among others, the

Strategic Air Command planned and carried out the destruction of Dresden (302).

With the destruction of Dresden came the destruction of some of the greatest art in the world. To Vonnegut, art is important. He sees the writer as the lone person willing to duel the forces that harm mankind. One of the complaints that Vonnegut has made throughout his writings concerns the position of art in the modern world. As a writer, Vonnegut considers the artist to be the saving grace of the modern technological world, which so often devalues the nobility of the human spirit. This attitude, so dominant in Vonnegut's writing, may have a Dresden connection. McKee's description of the city before the bomb emphasizes her great beauty:

Apart from the baroque and rococo architecture, a catalogue of what one can only call the "treasures of Dresden" would run to two dozen volumes. The picture galleries included many works by old masters such as Holbein, Cranach, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Hals, and van Dyck, Ruben, Botticelli, and Canaletto. Many of the paintings were too large to be taken out and put in a safe storage place. The engravings collection by 1945 [was] half a million. Porcelain had been invented [here]. To smash this delicacy seemed unthinkable. It was truly a capital city, with something to delight and

interest everyone. It had theaters, libraries,  
a magnificent circus, a zoo. (78)

Vonnegut described the city to be "as harmless as a  
wedding cake" (*Fates* 100). Dresden was a beautiful  
treasure and a perfect example of art destroyed by  
technology.

The beauty and necessity of art is sarcastically  
devalued by the character Eliot Rosewater. Through the eyes  
of Mushari, the reader has just finished reading a letter  
written by Eliot Rosewater. This letter, addressed to a  
cousin and potential heir, summarizes the development of  
American culture and the Rosewater family's position within  
it. Eliot writes that "the American dream turned belly up,  
turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity  
unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun"  
(13). After tracing America to this deplorable stage, Eliot  
then advises his cousin, "you can safely ignore the arts and  
sciences. They never helped anybody" (15). We later learn  
that Eliot's favorite poet composes on bathroom walls, and  
then we are told that Eliot himself is a poet who has  
written the same message in men's rooms all over town  
(67-690). The level of truth that poetry can present in the  
modern world has sunk to the level of graffiti. In another  
incident, Rosewater is at a cocktail party when he writes a  
generous check and gives it to a poet named Arthur Garvy Ulm  
so that he can be free to tell the truth (66). What Ulm  
produces is pure erotica; but then the power of sex may be a

most powerful and important truth, especially in a world driven by money and technology. The purple heat of the novel's introductory scene may carry a sexual allusion, for Rosewater prepares to battle the power of mammon with a "purple heart on" (v).

The passage describing the firestorm appears in chapter 13. Eliot is riding on a bus and reading a book by Hans Rumpf entitled *The Bombing of Germany*. For some reason that Eliot cannot understand, he feels compelled to hide this book, as if he were reading pornography. The passage he looks at describes the effects of the massive firestorm over Dresden. The flames are everywhere, trees are being uprooted, strong winds are beginning. At this point, Eliot looks out the window toward Indianapolis to see a "column of fire, which was at least eight miles in diameter and fifty miles high" (176). McKee confirms that these columns of fire over Dresden were rolling in horizontal waves and could be seen from 200 miles away by the airplanes above (146). The shock is so much, Rosewater blacks out. Reed connects the image to Dresden, commenting that "like the firemen of Dresden, he [Rosewater] has been bombed underground" ("Economic Neurosis" 122). This is a truly disturbing scene. Allen states that "Vonnegut shows just how close he was to getting to being able to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*" with this fire scene (*Understanding* 74). Allen points out that historical fact (the bombing of Dresden), the fiction (Eliot's hallucination of a firestorm), and

metafiction (Trout's book about the destruction of the galaxy) all merge into one image of horror (*Understanding* 73). The nightmare ends in total blackness. The darkness of death and destruction reign supreme in this horrible dream.

When Eliot wakes up, one year has passed. He is dressed for tennis, and the sunlight filters through some huge trees. He finds himself "sitting on the flat rim of a dry fountain" (177). The fountain confuses him, and he does not know why. A tabloid newspaper gives him the date. This fountain is a grim Dresden marker which Vonnegut uses frequently. Irving tells of some water tanks in the city that were rather like short fountains. Many ran to them for safety when the fires raged. After the temperatures rose, the water also rose to boiling temperature. When the firestorm was over, the water was evaporated, and the tanks were filled with boiled, dead bodies (191). The fountain basins would be a disturbing sight.

As the book ends, Eliot's confusion is lifted. With the law and the power of money (the foundation) on his side, he creates a better world. When we last see him, he is waving his tennis racket in the air, telling all of his children "to be fruitful and multiply" (190). Muztazza sees the raised tennis racket as a symbol of Eliot's upper-class social position as well as a sign that magic wands do exist (101). Rosewater, the kind father, and his children take control of the future. The patrician, money forces are

defeated and the firestorm of destruction becomes only a nightmare dream. The happy ending brings a feeling of unease, however, because we are all aware that the masses who now control Rosewater County are so many unthinking and innocent children. Vonnegut's fear for man is that he may face the reality of the Dresden storm if he remains in such an innocent and childish state of irresponsibility and dependency. To accept life under such terms is indeed an act of insanity. Eliot Rosewater may have victored, but his magic tennis racket is being waved from the lawn of an insane asylum. The Rosewater children may be free, but Vonnegut's final wish may be that they soon take responsibility for themselves. Perhaps the final message of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* contains just such a warning. If we choose to remain trusting children, we may find ourselves led into a world driven by insanity and threatened by the Dresden firestorm. Eliot Rosewater may have the forces of power and money temporarily at bay, but they will not stay there long if the individual children of Rosewater County do not grow up.

## Chapter 7

*Slaughterhouse-Five: A Struggle With the Message*

Twenty-four years after World War II ended, Kurt Vonnegut's, long-awaited Dresden book was published. He called the book *Slaughterhouse-Five: or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance With Death* (1969). It was short, a mere 215 pages divided into ten untitled chapters. Written in what Vonnegut calls the Tralfamadorian style, the book is a collage of events--some in the past, some in the present, some in the yet to be. Five stories blend into the collage, each with its own structured moments. The five stories are about Kurt Vonnegut (the author), Dresden (the city), Billy Pilgrim (the American soldier), Tralfamadorians (the peaceful creatures from outer space), and military aggression. Each scene has been carefully chosen, so that when they are all seen together, "they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep" (88). To read in what Vonnegut calls the Tralfamadorian style, one is asked to view all times and all places equally, to suspend judgment until each part is considered in the context of the whole. Finally, the reader is asked to focus on the happy and good moments as much as possible and accept the rest as the way it is, the way it has been, and the way it will always be.

Focusing on story number one, the reader will note that Kurt Vonnegut is listed on the title page as the author of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. From this title page, the reader finds out something of his past, present, and future. Vonnegut is a fourth-generation German-American, who smokes too much. He has obtained his share of the American Dream and now lives in Cap Cod. While serving in the military as an infantry scout, he was taken prisoner and incarcerated in Dresden, Germany. As a POW, he witnessed the bombing of Dresden and lived to write this novel, whose style is influenced by the imaginary planet Tralfamadore. He has been trying to write his book about Dresden for years. The anthropology professors don't want to hear about it, the military will not talk about it, and he and his war buddy cannot remember it. He has even tried freeing up his mind with crayola drawings of Dresden; nothing works. In the present, he gets an unwelcome reception from Mary O'Hare, his war buddy's wife, who has some definite ideas about writing a book about war. Then, awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, he takes his war buddy, Bernard O'Hare, with him, and they return to Germany. He has problems with plane connections while traveling to Dresden. Once he gets there, revisiting does not help; he only gets inspiration for other stories, which he will write in the future. As he struggles to write the Dresden book, he compares himself to Lot's wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at the destruction of a city. He feels that his book will be



a failure, "since it was written by a pillar of salt" (22). For Vonnegut, the conception of the novel was difficult, its birthing was painful, and its future uncertain.

Story number two encourages the reader to understand the history of Dresden. The city has a very noble past, which the reader is introduced to through a history book that Vonnegut reads, *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery*, by Mary Endell. How Dresden's beautiful and unique architecture evolved, how her landmarks in art developed, and how she expanded musically are all topics covered. Dresden was the Florence of the Elbe and grew into a great capital city. But she also has a very tragic past and has faced destruction before. The 1945 bombing is not the first destructive blow the city has known. Vonnegut tells us that present day Dresden looks "a lot like Dayton, Ohio," but there is a modern austerity about it (1). Now under Communist rule, Dresden's beauty is subservient to utilitarian lifestyles; her future is a mere shadow of what she once was.

Story number three belongs to Billy Pilgrim. His past is made up of the stock events of any middle-class American childhood--such as swimming lessons from Dad and vacations to Carlsbad Caverns. His war experience is not glorious. A chaplain's assistant, he is weaponless, bootless, and helpless through most of the war. Taken prisoner at the Battle of the Bulge, he soon finds himself in a prison camp, which becomes a daze of overfilled latrines, sickness, and hunger. For Billy, life as a POW in Dresden is bearable,

but then the city is destroyed, and he reels in blank confusion. In Billy's present, he has achieved the American Dream, such as it is. He has a nice home, his own business, and a tolerable but loveless marriage. With two kids, two cars, and a dog named Spot, his is the typical middle-class life-style. Like any average American, he makes mistakes, surrenders to compromise, faces personal tragedy, and contends with boredom. In the future, Billy leads a rather unusual lifestyle in outer space. He lives in a Tralfamadorian bubble-zoo with Montana Wildhack, who has his baby. Learning from the Tralfamadorians, Billy returns to Earth, takes speech lessons, and uses his wonderful voice to preach the philosophy of the peaceful Tralfamadorians. The odd thing about Billy is that he has come unstuck in time and can live in any of these times or in all of these times simultaneous-ly. This condition sometimes causes him to appear confused. There are those who think that he is crazy.

Story number four is about the Tralfamadorians, who also have a past, a present, and a future. Much of their past can be found in an earlier Vonnegut book, *The Sirens of Titan*. In the present, they are doing scientific research by kidnapping specimens, placing them in a zoo, and observing them. That is how Billy Pilgrim got in a Tralfamadorian zoo, and that is how Montana Wildhack, the porno queen, got there too. Tralfamadorians know that their scientific research will bring universal destruction in the future, but they do not believe in taking any steps to prevent it. They already

know that a "Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears" (117). When they are asked why they do not do something to prevent this from happening, their reply is, "He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way" (117). The Tralfamadורים consider earthling history to be insignificant in the larger scheme of the universe.

Story number five is the story of armies who make war. The military's past is a ruthless one. Other armies, other cruelties, other misuses of people are included in the inglorious history of the military. Vonnegut's look back into history begins with the Crusades. Although glorified in history as an army of powerful Christian knights, the truth is that the Crusades gave temporary power to a few and destruction and death to many. The Children's Crusade of 1213 was especially ignoble. Its organizers planned to make a profit off of the children by selling them to the Arab slave market. In 1760, the military might of Prussia destroyed Dresden, causing Goethe to write sadly about the ruins that were left. In 1945, the Allies bombed Dresden, destroying her classical architecture, obliterating her art, and killing countless innocent people. In the present (1969), the reader is aware that the U.S. military is engaged in Vietnam. Vonnegut complains, "And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam" (210). As for the future-- well, there

are going to be wars, there have always been wars, and there will always be wars. We do know that the universe will eventually be blown up by scientific experimentation; only then will wars end. The Five stories that make up *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when read together, deliver a message about war that is surprisingly deep and meaningful.

Jerome Klinkowitz believes that the seemingly chaotic structure of the novel is important. The book is really the story of Vonnegut's struggle with writing about Dresden. The structure is a result of that struggle. The opening and closing chapters show Vonnegut at work and then portray his anguish at the result. He had tried the technique of putting himself inside the work as the self-apparent creator in 1963 with *Cat's Cradle*, but the idea was rejected by Vonnegut's publisher (*Literary Subversions* 178). Then, under the influence of the Iowa Writer's workshop, Vonnegut came up with another writer's trick. Klinkowitz states that

Vonnegut planned to have the pages of *SHF* darken to impenetrability as they marched on toward the trauma of the firebombing, which should itself take place on a page of utter blackness; then as the book moved forward and the days advanced beyond February 13, 1945, the print would gradually become readable.

(*Literary Subversions* 98-99)

Vonnegut decided to abandon that idea as well. Klinkowitz explains that these approaches were the result of a post-modern tenet that fiction could best find itself in the process of writing rather than in pondering the finished product. It was believed that process could best be kept alive by involving the reader in the novel's creation (*Literary Subversions* xxii). These new post-modern ideas of what the novel should be only made Vonnegut's task of writing more difficult.

Vonnegut had left Dresden, a survivor. The news reporter and the writer in him knew that he would have to write the story of Dresden the minute he got home. However, once he arrived home, he was amazed to discover that there were no news articles about the event and nobody had heard about it. That made him think that Dresden wasn't such a big operation after all. The world's eye was focused on the German death camps and the drama of the war's end, and so he was silenced. He persisted:

I wrote the Air Force back then, asking for details about the raid on Dresden, who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on. I was answered by a man who, like myself, was in public relations. He said that he was sorry, but that the information was still top secret. (11)

The frustration grew. The Eisenhower years gave birth to a great age of patriotism, and the Cold War began. Vonnegut was a German-American, and he could appear communistic, nonpatriotic, even traitorous, and so he was silenced again. Then he read David Irving's book, *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963), and he realized that he had been involved in the largest massacre ever known. By now, many novels had been written about World War II, and the whole idea of what a novel should be had also begun to shift, giving him a whole new set of rules to go by. And so, he decided on the "Tralfamadorian design." The use of the scenic collage coupled with the resolution of Vonnegut's writing dilemma would fully involve the reader, requiring him to step outside the book and read like a Tralfamadorian. Not only would the reader be a part of Vonnegut's struggle to write, he would be an organizer of the material as he read the book, the book with no beginning, no middle, and no end.

Upon finishing the 215 pages and pondering upon the individual parts as a whole, the reader may question the veracity of some of those parts. Three of the strands appear to be valid, but two of them are very questionable (The Tralfamadorians and Billy Pilgrim). After all, this is supposed to be an eye-witness account. These two questionable elements belong to the science-fiction realm. The narrator of Chapter One tells the reader, "All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (1). Why would Vonnegut mix up the true

and the untrue? Why did he not just write what actually happened and leave out the funny-looking spacemen and the spastic private?

Jerome Klinkowitz again sheds light onto Vonnegut's purpose in using the oddball characters and unbelievable geography that enter his novel. Laughter is a tool Vonnegut uses deliberately so that when his reader faces a closed door, there is a way out. The newly opened door provided by laughter releases the tension that has built up and takes the reader forward to the next chapter. That, coupled with the short sentences and brief paragraphs, keeps the reader going so that the book gets read and the message gets delivered ("Ultimate" 196). Vonnegut gives a similar explanation in *Wampeters Foma and Granfalloon* (1974):

The science-fiction passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just like the clown in Shakespeare. When Shakespeare figured the audience had had enough of the heavy stuff, he'd lighten up a little and bring on the clown or a foolish innkeeper or something like that before he became serious again. And trips to other planets, science fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing on the clown every so often to lighten things up. (262)

Richard Todd thinks that juxtaposing the events of Dresden against comedy and fantasy is a deliberate device Vonnegut uses to increase the horror (32). For example, after the

scene where Montana and Billy notice that the Tralfamadorians are playing with the clocks as they watch the earthling family, the reader is given a time capsule of shocking current events of the 1960s that are happening on earth at that very moment (political assassinations, Vietnam's death toll, race problems). The reader becomes a voyeur, laughingly watching Billy and Montana in their love bubble one moment, helplessly watching the senseless carnage on earth in the next. Placing the reader on such an emotional roller coaster causes him to be more attentive and aware of the moment of horror. In another spot, Vonnegut and O'Hare are on the plane traveling back to Dresden for research. They are curiously looking at birth and death statistics as a scientific formula. Simultaneously, Billy Pilgrim has been on his way to Dresden in a different time, 1945. Now, it is two days after the bombing, and Billy is participating in unearthing the grisly corpse mines. After opening a cavity, a German soldier goes in to investigate. He returns with the report that there are dozens of bodies down there, just sitting as if they were waiting for something. The reader is told that then the corpse mining began--the bodies had to be removed.

They didn't smell bad at first, were wax museums. But then the bodies rotted and liquefied, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas.



So it goes.

The Maori Billy had worked with died of the dry heaves, after having been ordered to go down in that stink and work. He tore himself to pieces, throwing up and throwing up. So it goes. (214)

The reader is given a calm or funny moment in life, just before the horrifying scene, which makes that next moment more horrible because there is no emotional build up to it. Suddenly, the reader just finds himself thrown in the middle of the trauma.

Sharona Ben-Tov sees a totally different purpose for the use of the science fiction world of the Tralfamadorians. She sees them as representative of alienated nature and scientific experimentation. They have their comical side, looking like green plumber's helpers with a hand on top and an open eye set in the palm of that hand. Like scientists, they are emotionless--everything is scientific curiosity. Their main occupation is to see, observe, and record data. They are not just aliens; they are alienated nature as well. Ben-Tov explains:

They are the nature who imprisons human beings within irrevocable linear time; the time of biological reproduction (including Montana's pregnancy), of history (including the button-operated Bomb), and of mortality (including the heat death of the universe).

While Billy preserves an artificial innocence in his chamber, the Tralfamadorians encompass all knowledge and experience in the poisonous atmosphere of alienated nature. (63)

It is noteworthy to remember that the little green creatures do finally blow the universe up with their experimenting. Like Tralfamadorians, scientists with their experiments too often play with natural laws, thereby unwittingly unleashing alienated nature and threatening man's very survival. The two forces go hand-in-hand. Ben-Tov accuses the genre of science fiction of artificially preserving American innocence. She warns that there is a great danger in viewing our scientists as innocent. If the scientists decided to act in the name of moral responsibility, they could help bring about social change and lessen the power of political agendas (87). On the other hand, they have the capability of bringing us to apocalypse. It is for just that reason that Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse* gives us the innocent and babyish Billy Pilgrim. He is every one of us, and he needs to be awakened from his innocent oblivion and notice what is happening around him. Vonnegut developed similar themes about the evils of science and technology in *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, and *Cat's Cradle*.

Nature can be forgiving and will respond to man, even after he has alienated her and blackened her beauty. One of the most repeated images in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the bird that goes, "Poo-tee-weet?" This bird signal also appears in

all of the Vonnegut novels preceding the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut explains the reason for it to Seymour Lawrence, his publisher, in chapter one of *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

It [the book] is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?" (19)

The first use of the bird is at the beginning of the book. The authorial voice informs us that the book will begin with "Listen" and end with "Poo-tee-weet?" (22). Another appearance is while Billy is in the camp hospital, heavily sedated. Suddenly, he wakes up in a mental ward; it is 1948. "Billy uncovered his head. The windows of the ward were open. Birds were twittering outside. 'Poo-tee-weet?' one asked him" (100). The final image of the book also belongs to the bird, because what more can be said about Dresden? The war is over, spring has come, and the prisoners are going home. "One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, "Poo-tee-weet?" (215). Wars and deaths from wars are not something that nature and birds understand; they can only question with a "poo-tee-weet?"

Another expression, "so it goes," is used a total of 100 times in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, every time someone or something dies. It is significant that there are also 100 prisoners of war in Billy's group. Vonnegut does not always attach the expression to tragedy, however. Sometimes he jokes around with it. For example, at one point Billy opens a bottle of champagne that is flat: "So Billy uncorked it with his thumbs. It didn't make a pop. The champagne was dead. So it goes" (73). Vonnegut also attaches the phrase to a scene in the German camp. The prisoners have just been put in the showers and we are told, "The Americans' clothes were meanwhile passing through poison gas. Body lice and bacteria and fleas were dying by the billions. So it goes" (84). The expression depersonalizes death. It isn't good; it isn't bad--it just randomly happens.

One of Vonnegut's purposes is to give a fair warning to the American public about the dangers of allowing governments to make war. War should not be glorified and looked upon as an acceptable solution to man's problem. In *Fates Worse than Death* (1991), Vonnegut speaks about the politics of the Dresden dead:

Among the unidentified, not-even-counted dead in the cellars of Dresden there were, without doubt, war criminals or loathsomely proud relatives of war criminals, SS and Gestapo, and so on. Whatever they got was too good for them. Maybe most of the Germans killed in

Dresden, excepting the infants and children, of course, got what was coming to them. I asked another great German writer, Heinrich Boll, what he thought the dangerous flaw in the character of so many Germans was, and he said, "Obedience." (102)

The warning is clear. In the name of patriotism, too many Americans are following governmental policies with obedience instead of a questioning mind. This is the message brought out in Vonnegut's first book *Player Piano*. It is also a part of the tension of *The Sirens of Titan*, *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*. It is the driving force of death in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Focusing on the same idea of the mindless masses, Tom Hearn suggests that Vonnegut's true purpose in writing is to awaken us to our individual responsibility. "The central issue is not so much the horrible event itself, but the effects of it--and, even more important, the degree to which one can assign blame to the humans who are the agents for its coming about" (186). The Allied forces may have done the bombing, but the virtue of patriotic obedience also killed the people of Dresden, Germany.

Vonnegut does not wish to participate in the duty dance by glorifying war in any way. And so, he creates Billy Pilgrim. He is no hero; he is pathetic.

Billy was preposterous--six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. On his feet were cheap, lowcut civilian shoes which he had bought for his father's funeral. Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down, made his hip joints sore. Billy was wearing a thin field jacket, a shirt and trousers of scratchy wool, and long underwear that was soaked with sweat. (33)

The broken shoe, of course, makes Billy seem to be doing a "duty dance" as he walks.

In *Fates Worse than Death*, Vonnegut discusses the source for Billy Pilgrim. He was a fellow soldier named Joe Crone. Another soldier, Tom Jones, was his paired-up partner; Jones remembers having to walk behind Crone on forced marches and pick up all of the junk that constantly fell out of his poorly laced backpack. While at the German prisoner camp, Joe woke up one morning with a head swollen as big as a watermelon. He went to sick call and never came back. Unlike Billy Pilgrim, Crone did not make it out of Dresden. We are told that "Joe Crone is buried somewhere in Dresden wearing a white paper suit. He let himself starve to death before the firestorm" (457). Not only is Billy naive and careless like Crone, Billy's life is nothing more than a series of accidents.

Using Billy Pilgrim for his protagonist allows Vonnegut to be critical of what the average American is doing. For example, Frederick Ashe points out one scene where Billy is at a Lion's Club luncheon listening to a speech which calls for even more aggression in Vietnam. Ashe comments:

Despite the horrors he has seen such a mentality make possible in Dresden, Billy responds to the speech by shaking the speaker's hand afterwards and emptily acknowledging pride in his son, Robert Pilgrim, who is a Green Beret (60-61).

This is a compromise Billy should never make, and Vonnegut makes it quite clear in his own voice that there are certain things no Dresden survivor should countenance (35). We should be teaching our children never ever to make war. Like many Americans, Billy is too ready to go along with governmental policies without questioning them. He obeyed orders without thinking in Dresden, and now he is sending the next generation forward to do the same. He may have been innocent in the war, but he has not learned anything from Dresden--he still does not understand that war is evil and must be avoided at all costs.

Once on Tralfamadore, Billy gains some confidence for the first time. "Most Tralfamadorians had no way of knowing Billy's body and face were not beautiful. They supposed that he was a splendid specimen. This had a pleasant effect on

Billy, who began to enjoy his body for the first time" (113). Marc Leeds tells us that later, "Billy sees his own role as a cosmic optometrist capable of enabling others to see time through his knowledge of Tralfamadorian philosophy" (581). Billy has similarities to Paul Proteus of *Player Piano* (1952), Malachi Constant of *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Howard Campbell of *Mother Night* (1961), Jonah of *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and Eliot Rosewater of *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965): like these messengers of earlier Vonnegut books, Billy tries to get people to listen so that they will understand what is really important. Frank McConnell feels that "Billy eventually learns to look at all human effort, life and death, from the vantage of a weary eternity, seeing the passions of our planet as cosmically insignificant" (183). Billy sees himself as an interplanetary citizen with a sermon that will help alleviate the pain of living. Not even death is painful. When it happens, that means it is just time to be dead for a while. Billy's closing words are always the Tralfamadorian greeting: "Farewell, hello, farewell, hello" (142). There is no fear: there is no beginning, there is no middle, there is no end. When he does die on February 13, 1976 (significantly the day and month of the Dresden bombing) death "is simply violet light and a hum. There isn't anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there" (143). From this, we can learn that the thousands who died in Dresden simply had come to a time when it was meant for them to be dead. The moment was simply



structured that way. There should be no guilt; there should be no blame. It just happened.

John Tilton does not interpret Billy's Tralfamadorian experiences this way. He argues that Billy escaped to a planet created in his own head in order to avoid responsibilities (72). In fact, Tilton suggests that Billy's exposure to Vonnegut's alter-ego Kilgore Trout is the source of Billy's knowledge of the Tralfamadorians (79). He has not really been to Tralfamadore, because there is no such place, except in the world of Trout's science fiction. Billy functions as a mirror image of Vonnegut. At the time Vonnegut is traveling to Dresden, Billy is traveling away from it, going to this imaginary planet. As implied by the Roethke poem, "The Walking," that Vonnegut reads on the plane, Vonnegut must learn by going where he has to go (20). Billy, on the other hand, does not learn by going; he merely escapes Dresden by going away from it and escaping into insanity. Billy's final inability to understand the significance of the Dresden deaths separates him from Vonnegut. What Billy experiences is a gradual withdrawal from humanity and the world's cruelty. With his imaginary planet of Tralfamadore, Billy creates a galactic womb and returns to infancy in order to escape old age, death, and the responsibility that awaits him in this changing world (102). Vonnegut, on the other hand, "had to dance with death, and the dance restored his commitment to life" (102). Like Billy, he may have gone away from Dresden for a time,

but he eventually faces his past the only way he can--by writing about it. A third possibility is that Vonnegut may also be speaking through Billy as well as through the book he writes. The book does get written, but perhaps it is by embracing Billy's view of history that Vonnegut is able to release the guilt and sorrow of Dresden. If Vonnegut can face Dresden, but also accept that those people are alive and well somewhere in fated time, the massacre loses its finality.

To bring the book back to reality, away from the unbelievable, Vonnegut uses a technique that he had used in *Cat's Cradle* (1963). He places himself in the event; but just for a moment. In one scene of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the prisoners have just arrived in Dresden. A delirious and dying colonel has lost all of his troops, but he thinks the boys unloading from the boxcars belong to him. He gives a glorious speech to the prisoners, asking them to call him "Wild Bob" and promising them a wonderful reunion one day at his ranch in Wyoming. Suddenly, Vonnegut steps into the scene and says, "I was there. So was my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare" (67). It happens again at The British POW camp. It is night, and Billy is walking toward the latrine, which is overflowing. "An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (125). Philip Stevick comments that in these places

the illusion of the novel collapses for a moment and one is invited to feel enormous compassion both for Billy Pilgrim, within the novel, and Kurt Vonnegut, in the world, both of them victims of the fire-bombing of Dresden and the politics of death; both of them frightened, tired, cold, and alone. It accomplishes a minor miracle of the creative imagination.... so that the reader is forced into ... a profound compassion for the vulnerability of two lost little boys who lie at the center of the scene.

(72-73)

War is not glorified. In the real world picture that we are given, war is ugly and cold, deadly and cruel.

The ages of the soldiers are mentioned to drive home the point that the World War II movies we all see starring John Wayne and Frank Sinatra are not realistic. Most of the soldiers are not big macho men; they are babies. Billy is twenty-one; Roland Weary is a mere eighteen; most of the German soldiers who guard the 100 American POWs are in their early teens. One German soldier whose feet are swaddled in rags has "the face of a blond angel, of a fifteen-year-old boy" (53). The German Colonel of the prisoner hospital cannot believe that the boyish soldiers put under his care are old enough to fight a war. Talking to the middle-aged Edgar Derby, he says:

You know--we've had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. "my God, my God--" I said to myself, "It's the Children's Crusade."

(106)

This scene echoes the sub-title as well as the earlier argument Vonnegut had with Mary O'Hare (to whom the book is dedicated). After Mary had vented her anger, the anger of all mothers who send their babies to war, Vonnegut promises her in chapter one,

I don't think this book of mine is ever going to be finished. I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away. If I ever do finish it, though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. I tell you what.

I'll call it "The Children's Crusade." (15)

If World War II is comparable to the Children's Crusade of 1213, then the fact that the POWs are American children now working as slaves in Dresden factories is significant.

In 1213, the children thought that they were going away to fight for a noble purpose, but the organizers of the crusade had lied to them--there was nothing noble about being sold into slavery. Similarly, the governments involved in World War II send the children off to war, with

noble and patriotic ideas. Instead of being honored with heroism, we find them with rags on their feet and clownish clothing in lieu of uniforms. We find them stuffed in cattle cars carpeted with dung. Most of all, we find them to be scared, quarreling children. The great camaraderie the films so often show is simply missing. Roland Weary wished to make that myth true. As Weary is dragging the helpless Billy along, he attempts to glorify his actions by labeling himself and the two soldiers that were with him as "The Three Musketeers." However, the reader is told that "this was the first the scouts had heard that Weary thought of himself and them as the Three Musketeers" (48). Any hope of noble brotherhood vanishes completely when the other two scouts later ditch Weary and Billy in a creekbed. Roland, whose name conjures up thoughts of another warrior from "Song of Roland," is too weary to even live in the end; he dies without glory. Paul Lazzaro is another example of the lack of camaraderie; he is at war with himself and humanity, not the Germans. All he ever does is threaten revenge in the form of assassination, cutting, beatings, and ambush; and all of this spewing hatred is aimed at his brother soldiers, not the enemy. Edgar Derby, being older, seems to gather some patriotic nobility about him: when Howard Campbell arrives with his bizarre uniform and attempts to bribe the innocent and starving boy soldiers with food, warmth, and new uniforms, Edgar has one of his finest moments delivering a speech of patriotism which involves all of the glory he

and the boy soldiers have always been told made up the secret brotherhood of warriors. But in the end, he lays down his life for a teapot. With all of humanity lying dead around him, one more human life surely should have been more valuable than a teapot, but it wasn't because there is no morality or nobility to war. Death comes randomly, unexpectedly and without reason.

If any one is the bad guy in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is the military and the governments that support them. For example, the English POWs treat war as if they were away at camp. They form a fraternity, of sorts. When the American POWs first arrive at prison camp, they are placed with this group of English soldiers. The Americans are deliced, showered, and shaved--herded through like so many animals. Then they are shown into a shed for dinner. As if it is now showtime, a guard knocks on a door, which is then flung open. Out march fifty middle-aged Englishmen, all singing, "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here" (93). They sing unbelievably well, and they are always putting on plays. We are told:

They had been singing together every night for years. The Englishmen had also been lifting weights and chinning themselves for years. Their bellies were like washboards. The muscles of their calves and upper arms were like cannonballs. They were all masters of checkers and chess and bridge and cribbage and

dominoes and anagrams and charades and  
Ping-Pong and billiards, as well. (94)

This is no concentration camp. Their uniforms are snappy; their boots, polished. We are told that "a clerical error early in the war, when food was still getting through to prisoners, had caused the Red Cross to ship them five hundred parcels every month instead of fifty" (94). The English are using these excessive supplies to bribe the Germans into letting them have other items, such as lumber and nails, so they can fix things up a bit and have projects to keep them busy. They also have candles and soap "made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies and communists, and other enemies of the State" (96). We are told that "they were adored by the Germans, who thought they were exactly what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun" (94). They will probably go home and make heroes of themselves and talk of their life-long brothers who were the chosen few. They have no idea of what war is. The Americans offend the British. They are ill-mannered, unkempt, ill-clothed, and too exhausted to socialize with grace.

There is no fraternal brotherhood of soldiers for them. For example, the military is an unthinking, unstoppable force. On the way to Dresden, the American prisoners are packed in cattle cars, but the seven officers are separated into their own cattle car. In Billy's cattle car, there is no room to move. "Human beings in there took

turns standing or lying down. The legs of those who stood were like fence posts driven into a warm, squirming, farting, sighing earth. The queer earth was a mosaic of sleepers so nestled like spoons" (70). For Kurt Vonnegut, this was his first Christmas at war, and it was dehumanizing. He wrote a letter about that train. The letter is dated 29 May 1945, just a few days after the surrender of Germany. Vonnegut wrote,

We were loaded and locked up, sixty men to each small, unventilated, unheated box car. There were no sanitary accommodations--the floors were covered with fresh cow dung. There wasn't room for all of us to lie down. Half slept while the other half stood. We spent several days, including Christmas, on that Limberg siding. (Klinkowitz, *Reforming* 98-99).

In a 1977 interview with David Hayman and others, Vonnegut tells of an attack on the train:

British mosquito bombers attacked us at night a few times. I guess they thought we were strategic material of some kind. They hit a car containing most of the officers from our battalion. Every time I say I hate officers, which I still do fairly frequently, I have to remind myself that practically none of the officers I served under survived. (Allen, *Conversations* 172)



Although one officer dies, and they are given special treatment and more comforts, Vonnegut did not include the bombing of a train car in *Slaughterhouse*. Such a bombing could have occurred, but there is no omniscient observer here; the reader is locked in a dung-filled cattle car with Billy.

The largest example of the inhumanity of the military is, of course, the bombing of Dresden. In that 1977 interview with Mayman, Vonnegut talks about why Dresden was bombed when it was supposed to be a safe city:

American bombers were engaged in saturation bombing. It was kept a secret until very close to the end of the war. One reason they burned down Dresden is that they'd already burned down everything else. You know: "What're we going to do tonight?" Here was everybody all set to go, and Germany still fighting, and this machinery for burning down cities was being used. It was a secret, burning down cities--boiling pisspots and flaming prams.

(Allen, *Conversations* 174)

The only allusion to random firing appears in chapter eight of *Slaughterhouse*. Billy's group has just come out of the slaughterhouse onto what appeared to be a moonscape. For miles there is no living thing to be found. The city is one big pile of rubble. Suddenly, some American fighter planes fly over, to see if anything is moving down there, and they

see Billy and the others from the slaughterhouse.

The planes sprayed them with machine-gun bullets, but the bullets missed. Then they saw some other people moving down by the riverside and they shot at them. They hit some of them. So it goes. The idea was to hasten the end of the war. (180)

The inhumanity of the military power did not care if the targets were American POWs or Germans; they were just killing.

Alexander McKee indicates that the military was well aware that over 20,000 Allied prisoners of war were housed in Dresden at the time of the attack (183). Vonnegut has wryly commented on the final gain made by the Dresden raid:

I will say again what I have often said in print and in speeches, that no one Allied soldier was able to advance as much as an inch because of the firebombing of Dresden. Not one prisoner of the Nazis got out of prison a microsecond earlier. Only one person on earth clearly benefited, and I am that person. I got about five dollars for each corpse. (*Fates* 100)

Actually, according to Klinkowitz, Vonnegut received \$25,000 from Seymour Lawrence for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Klinkowitz has commented about Vonnegut's great Dresden book that "among its fifty thousand words the reader will not find a single description of the bombing" (*Reforming* 44). There may be two reasons for this. Since Vonnegut

was three stories underground in a meatlocker at the time, he did not actually see the event. Anyone who was out there and could have been an eyewitness to the actual bombing would have died. What Vonnegut does give us is what he experienced, the sounds. He writes of Billy:

He was down in the meat locker on that night that Dresden was destroyed. These were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked. The meat locker was a very safe shelter. All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine. (177)

The eyewitness account covers the part Vonnegut did see, the aftermath:

It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead. (178)

For the next several weeks the prisoners were used to carry the dead bodies out of the basements and cellars of Dresden. It was a grisly task. The sights Vonnegut saw during that time fill his first five books in a type of a code. These "signs" of Dresden get some explanation in *Slaughterhouse*.

The fountain image has appeared in *The Sirens of Titan*, where Malachi Constant climbs it; in *Cat's Cradle*, where the many dead of San Lorenzo sit in it as if asleep and awaiting a lecture to begin; and in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, where Eliot sits and ponders it in the garden of the mental hospital. In *Slaughterhouse*, the appearance of these fountains and bowls in the earlier works finally makes sense because we now see the Dresden connection. Billy is lecturing on Tralfamadore.

As you know, I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning of time. I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen, who were proud of fighting pure evil at the time. This was true. Billy saw the boiled bodies in Dresden. (116)

The colors blue, white, orange, and black that continually show up in the previous novels also get an explanation at last. Barbara Lupack explains their function in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. They are used to trigger memories in the reader and therefore connect images. This is especially necessary since the events that occur in the book are not in chronological order (124). The color cue brings the reader's mind back to a previous event in the novel, which in a chronologically developed novel would have happened naturally.

Blue and white are attached to Billy's feet when he gets cold and on the night the Tralfamadorians come to get him. The dead of his boxcar dream have blue and white feet, as does the hobo who dies in the boxcar. On the train, Billy cannot sleep next to anyone, so he stands up and holds onto a blue and ivory claw hook. These two colors always seem to be connected to imprisonment, discomfort, and corpses. The other two colors, orange and black, have significance as well. Lupack explains that orange and black colors on a train or roof of a building were a sign that the train or the building held prisoners or hospital patients and, therefore, was a safe area and not to be bombed (124). In *Slaughterhouse*, Vonnegut attaches these colors to the train, to daggers, to the striped tent that is set up for Barbara Pilgrim's wedding, and the crayola paintings Vonnegut draws in an attempt to purge his frustration with trying to tell the Dresden story. Orange and black are also the colors of the wallpaper Vonnegut used to write his rough outline of the Dresden story. (124).

Characters walk between books. The Blue Fairy Godmother appears in the play production of the British POWs. Billy ends up wearing the garb of a Blue Fairy Godmother (net, silver boots), and the agent in *Mother Night* who delivers messages to Howard Campbell is code named "Blue Fairy Godmother." Rosewater's tennis racket could be a code for the magic wand of a Blue Fairy Godmother. In each of these cases, an agent from outside of the story intervenes,

offering a panacea of adventure and release. Sadly, there are no "Blue Fairy Godmothers," and there is no magic wand that will solve man's problems. The garb of the godmother does not bring Billy glory, nor does it provide him the basic warmth and protection of survival that he so desperately needs.

When Billy is in the hospital after his plane crash, he shares a room with a Harvard history professor named Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a name recognizable from *Sirens of Titan*. Rumfoord is working on updating the official Air Force History.

His one-volume *History of the Army Air Force in World War II* was supposed to be a readable condensation of the twenty-seven-volume *Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two*. The thing was, though, there was almost nothing in the twenty-seven volumes about the Dresden raid. (191)

This other author, who is also struggling with writing a book, speaks for those who defend the bombing of Dresden. Two official books were put out, and neither of them detail Dresden. *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany*, by Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, has one paragraph on page 108 of Volume III. It merely groups Dresden in with several other German cities as a target. The official report, *Army Air Forces in World War II*, prepared by Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, likewise has a very brief

paragraph on Dresden and acknowledges that there were 30,000 deaths (733). Another history, Anthony Verrier's *The Bomber Offensive*, also drastically underestimates the death toll at 30,000 and suggests that Dresden was chosen because geographically it allowed for the needed co-ordination between the American and British Air Forces and would allow them to display tactical innovations (301-308). Rumfoord, like Vonnegut, wishes to fill in the silent gaps. "Americans have finally heard about Dresden" said Rumfoord, twenty-three years after the raid" (191). No official count can ever be accurately done now. This passage suggests that the military accounts are actually being rewritten at the present moment, which brings the novel and the reader into the present, 1969.

During another hospital stay, Billy finds himself sharing his room in the mental hospital with Eliot Rosewater, the protagonist from *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Rosewater introduces Billy to science fiction and to the writings of Kilgore Trout. It is at this point that Vonnegut parodies his own publishing history. In chapter nine, Billy goes into an adult bookstore. "Billy Pilgrim wasn't beguiled by the back of the store. He was thrilled by the Kilgore Trout novels in the front" (201). When Billy purchases a Trout novel, the clerks think that he is a pervert because those books were in there just for window dressing. Kilgore Trout, of course, is Vonnegut's alter-ego. In Vonnegut's early career, he was

classified as a science fiction writer who wrote paperbacks which were usually displayed in drug stores. It was not until the 1963 publication of *Cat's Cradle* and the 1964 publication of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in hardcover by Holt, Rinehart & Winston that Vonnegut was able to attract any serious literary reviews. However, after the 1969 publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut became a public spokesman for the age, winning recognition that compared him to other chroniclers of their age, such as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Mailer.

For Vonnegut, the Dresden book was a turning point. William Rodney Allen labels *Slaughterhouse-Five* "the ground zero of Kurt Vonnegut's career" (*Understanding ix*). Klinkowitz believes that the book was a success because it was "published at the nadir of America's self-confidence during the Vietnam war years; it abandoned conventional notions of time and space as readily as it discarded the easy assumption of national innocence and intrinsic American worth" (*Kurt 21*). In agreement, Allen states that "not since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a work of fiction so deeply affected the public's perception of an ongoing American war" (*Understanding ix*). Finally, Vonnegut had found his voice. In a 1982 conversation with Peter Reed, Vonnegut said of the 1969 publication,

I had a sense of completion, of the mission accomplished with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and after that I had to start a new business, a



major new business, that was all. That was closed out, and that was satisfying to me, and that was more than I ever expected to do with my life. ("A Conversation" 3)

The idea was expressed much more eloquently in a *Playboy Interview*:

I don't know why, exactly. I suppose that flowers, when they're through blooming have some sort of awareness of some purpose having been served. Flowers didn't ask to be flowers, and I didn't ask to be alive. At the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I had the feeling that I had produced this blossom. So I had a shutting-off feeling, you know, that I had done what I was supposed to do and everything was ok. And that was the end of it. I could figure out my missions for myself after that.

(*Wampeters* 281)

After *Slaughterhouse*, Vonnegut was released from the Dresden fire. He still wrote about it, but he had gone through the catharsis and his later writings take a new focus. He still writes of Dresden sometimes, and often is asked to speak about it. Joseph Campbell explains the significance of being on the other side of the fire:

You come to what was missing in your consciousness in the world. Then comes the problem of either staying with what you have

and letting the world drop off, or returning with that boon and trying to hold on to it as you move back into your social world again.

(129)

Not only did Vonnegut return from the fire, he returned as the spokesman for a whole new generation. Vonnegut's cathartic experience had moved him away from focusing on the concern for what technology and science might do to our world to a focus on individual responsibility. If the overwhelming question has repeatedly been, "What is man for?" the answer is simple. Man is to be loved and cherished as a worthwhile member of society, but in that role, man must learn to question, with a very resounding "Poo-tee-weet?" There is a reason the famous Vonnegut line ends with a question mark, and there is a reason that it is the final word in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. There is simply nothing more to say about a massacre. It is not that man must just stop and listen; he must also think and act. The ultimate Dresden lesson is that each man holds the button to the bomb, and each man has the ability to put out the fire. "Poo-tee-weet?"

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