Fantasies and Foma:

Utopian Concepts in

the Literature of Marcuse and

Vonnegut

by

Ryan Morse

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Approved: _____
Asa Timothy Spaulding, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: _____
Joel Best, Ph.D.
Committee member from the Department of Sociology

Approved: _____
John Montaño, Ph.D.
Committee member from the Board of Senior Thesis Readers

Approved: _____
Donald Sparks, Ph.D.
Chair of the University Committee on Student and Faculty Honors

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ABSTRACT

The following analysis examines two popular figureheads of the counterculture during the late 1960's and early 70's, Kurt Vonnegut and Herbert Marcuse. While the two varied in terms of their actual careers and the work they produced, they were largely adopted to fill similar roles in by the youth movements of the time. To narrow the discussion, the focus will be placed on their attitudes towards utopia, both as a concept and a reality. First, their ideas of practical utopias will be considered, either as a possibility or an impossibility, as well as what is obstructing the realization of such a society, either at the present or as a potential reality. Also analyzed will be their attitudes regarding the value or theoretical utopias and fantasies on an individual level or a larger cultural level. While not in total agreement, the two mirror each other in many respects, and even utilize some of the strategies suggested by the other in their own work.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Creating a Culture Out of Chaos

The America of the 1960's and 70's was a dichotomy of sorts. On one hand, it was a period of unparalleled socioeconomic upheaval for a variety of demographics, revolting against the historical majority and the government, or the "Establishment." Yet, it was also a period of blooming diversity and innovation in the arts, pushing previously established boundaries of acceptable behavior. One aspect of this counterculture, dubbed the "New Left," established this artistic expression as a means of protest and assertiveness as well as a revolutionary measure, intended to motivate and reeducate developing radical forces. This new political demographic also informed itself through more conventional means, establishing a primarily socialist theoretical doctrine to form the basis of their discontent. Those who fell under the blanket of the counterculture movement were actually splintered into multiple factions, often with goals contradictory to that of other groups. While some organizations went off into isolation, creating communes as centers for freedom of expression and utopian speculation, others adopted more activist roles, attempting to better the community through direct action and education.

Virtually every movement within the larger counterculture movement actually consisted of at least two groups, both with similar agendas but that often differed in both their form and methods. This included the Black Panthers and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of the civil rights movement, the Red Stockings and the National Organization for Women in the feminist movement and the Hippies, Yippies and Diggers of the youth movement. While these groups coexisted, they did sometimes clash on key issues such as degrees of radicalism and means of protest, such as violence versus non-violence. While some groups staged non-violent marches or sit-ins, others like the Black Panthers made an active show of their violent potential, patrolling their neighborhoods with arms visibly displayed and even occasionally engaging in gun battles with the police.

None of these groups existed in a vacuum, and their policies and behaviors often influenced one another, either positively or negatively. For example, both the Yippies and Diggers were largely activist organizations, but in different arenas. The Diggers taught by example, opening up Free Stores in the Haight-Ashbury area during the sixties, hosting free concerts and providing free meals every day. However, for the most part, they only preached to the converted, and did not try to sell their ideas to a larger, outside audience. The only real influence they had upon mainstream society was as a result of the media's coverage of their anti-capitalist policies. The Yippies, a group which stemmed from the Diggers, were much more involved in actively petitioning the conservative elements of American society. They adopted a very theatrical approach, even nominating a pig for the presidency. The group's actions

were less community based than their predecessors and instead focused their activities on gaining media attention and raising awareness for their cause. While they were largely an anarchistic organization, they were often referred to as having communist leanings and were subpoenaed by the House on Un-American Activities on two separate occasions. The hearings, of course, had little effect on the Yippies, as their power lay in their ability to "blacklist" groups and individuals, something that the Yippies desired very much. If anything, the hearings only helped them.

While the New Left and the Counterculture movements in general did not spawn from any particular ethos or prophet, they did share some common philosophical threads that guided them. First, the various movements had a tendency to gravitate towards socialism, and, if not that, at the very least, humanism, in the sense that they equated all human life, rather than creating artificial divisions based on race, gender or nationality. Emphasis was often put on concepts of peace and unity between peoples, and the "enemy" was usually defined as of an internal source, such as the government, corporations or some collaboration of the two. They also looked upon traditionally stigmatized bodies differently, redefining what it meant to be "other" or "enemy." This all spread from the unprecedented media coverage of the Vietnam War, allowing the public to see just what it looked like for the first time. It was not pretty, and the evil that they once combatted with such zeal now looked all too human. The youth made this movement themselves, and elevated those people and principles that supported their ideology.

This humanism is most visible in the movements' treatment of stigmatized groups, such as women, racial minorities and supposed enemies abroad, especially in Vietnam. What the groups tried to do was reveal the human nature of those who were considered "other," hopefully creating peace through empathy. This was aided largely by the unprecedented media coverage of the war, filling the world in on many of the inhumanities and atrocities that occur as a result of such a conflict. Similarly, a lot of the youth movements, the commune movements especially, operated under a type of primitive socialism based on group ownership and leadership, a decidedly non-capitalist concept.

The Role of Utopia

As in many tumultuous times, popular audiences sought release through the arts and literature when too few practical alternatives presented themselves. Many authors created fictional utopias or dystopias from the perspective of their particular demographic. This strategy was particularly popular amongst feminists, who wrote a variety of novels that created societies that had either benefited from a more equal distribution of power amongst the sexes or were destroyed by the continuing dominance of masculinity and a paternal government. Ursula K. LeGuin, a popular science fiction writer as well as a feminist activist, created several utopias and dystopias of this nature in her stories. One such novel, The Left Hand of Darkness, creates a society of gender confusion, where sexuality is not only equal but fluid. Others followed suit, including The Female Man by Joanna Russ, which took several

looks at different concepts of femininity from the viewpoints of four women experiencing inter-dimensional travel.[1]

A common point of contention surrounding protest literature, especially that of utopian speculation, or other works of art and fiction that are intended to make a political statement, is that they act counterproductively by placating the masses. The thought here is that readers or viewers will find their consciences appeased by merely observing, finding comfort in the fact that at least they, unlike their peers, are aware of the problem, and knowledge is power. Similarly, others say that those who produce these fictions are wasting time and energy that could instead be spent on more active forms of protest and revolutionary action.

On the other side of the debate are those that believe these forms of revolutionary media actually inspire those who wish to create change by giving them an end goal to work towards, and exposing a wider audience to their particular social concerns. For them, the course is much more difficult to navigate without a destination, which these utopias provide, however fictional they are. Likewise, dystopian fictions convert the undecided or ignorant by creating a bleak rendering of the future if things go unchanged, usually through an accessible form of media as well, such as books or movies. For those who adopt this methodology, protesting through art is not at all passive, but rather a very active form of creating and maintaining revolutionary forces.

Regardless of their topic or intent, these fictional or hypothetical utopias and dystopias tended to reflect the fears or concerns of the larger public, whether it is

inequality or big government. In general, it is difficult to discern whether an author does this intentionally to sell books to their contemporary audience or the literature actually reflects common concerns of the time it was written. Regardless, looking at these various proposed utopias and dystopias can offer an interesting level of insight into the fears of a particular generation, ways they wish to deal with them, and what they think will happen if they are not dealt with.

Marcuse

"Ironically, the very era during which we were encouraged by Herbert Marcuse to think about the radical potential of utopian thought has itself survived in our historical memory as utopia – a place that is no place." – Angela Davis[2]

While not a writer of fiction, Herbert Marcuse was one of the most influential theorists of the counterculture and utopian theory. A native German and a staunch socialist, Marcuse was deemed "The Father of the New Left[3]," despite not being directly affiliated with the movement. From the late sixties to his death in 1979, Marcuse was either employed as a professor at Columbia University, Harvard University, Brandeis University, the University of California or working as a guest lecturer in Germany or to the various campus movements in America. The sixties also marked a peak in his popularity. Following his publication of his most popular work, <u>One Dimensional Man</u>, in 1964, Marcuse was in high demand and very active, also publishing several other popular works, including <u>An Essay on Liberation</u> in 1969

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and delivering some of his most famous speeches. The two most popular of these orations were given in Germany and later transcribed and translated into English. The first, Counterrevolution and Revolt, dealt primarily with the practical reality of the current state of the counterculture and its revolutionary potential under traditional Marxist and neo-Marxist standards. The second, The End of Utopia, takes the rare stance of defending utopian possibilities, providing a rational argument of the possibility, or even probability, of an actual, practical utopia.

His teachings fit well into the revolutionary attitude of the time period, especially to the audience of young, ideological student activists that hungrily consumed his theories. The students from his days as a professor also became prominent members of the movement, most notably Abbie Hoffman and Angela Davis, who quickly became figureheads of a variety of different revolutionary groups. Hoffman went on to be a founding member and veritable figurehead of the Yippies, while Davis was active in the Communist Party and an associate of the Black Panthers. While the pair did not always agree and followed different paths, both have frequently cited Marcuse as a source of both inspiration and motivation. Marcuse's theories may not have been spawned by the time, and the New Left was not birthed by what he taught either, as his nickname would suggest. However, it would be little wonder if they fell on deaf ears in any other time. They fed the counterrevolution, and he in turn became very popular based on their support, allowing him to reach the peak of his popularity at the end of his life.

However, Marcuse's theories and writings have largely fallen out of both the public and critical eye, possibly because his teachings were considered to be radical, even for the time, and as advocating violence, a misconception that will be addressed

later. This trend is particularly surprising when the ease to which many of Marcuse's theories can be applied to more modern social phenomenon, such as the ever widening class divide and the Occupy movements. Those few who do study Marcuse still typically only apply his work to the past, to the decade in which he was most prominent.

Kurt Vonnegut

While the student movement was engrossed in <u>One Dimensional Man</u> and its criticism of capitalism, many members of the counterculture also found solace and support in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. The publication of <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u>, which was undoubtedly his most successful novel, in 1969 created a renewed interest in his earlier work and gave birth to a rising demand for more from the author. Furthermore, Vonnegut's works seeped into more mainstream audiences, gaining popularity across most demographics. Initially overwhelmed by this sudden explosion of fame, Vonnegut originally considered retiring, before embracing his role as a literary figurehead and a favorite of the counterculture, giving speeches and lectures, as well beginning work on his next novel, <u>Breakfast of Champions</u>. His name alone was enough to put the latter on the best seller list, although it did not receive the warm reception of its predecessor amongst critics. Vonnegut himself was even criticized by the audience that had made him rich, as several claimed he was a hypocrite.

Yet, while he was not always warmly accepted by both critics and more extreme fans, he picked a perfect time in which to peak, or perhaps the time picked

him. Either way, his writing catered to the desires of his audience, and he even saw his own work as a reflection of many of their values[2]. While <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u> is now considered to be one of the greatest modern American novels, it seems unlikely that such an anti-war novel would have been as warmly accepted even ten years earlier. One of the leading Vonnegut scholars, Jerome Klinkowitz, points out that "some critics have argued that Kurt Vonnegut toiled in obscurity for twenty years because it took so long to devise a way of writing about the destruction of Dresden, the ostensible subject of <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u>. The truth is that America was not ready for a novel such as <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u> any earlier than when it finally did appear.[4]" It seems fairly obvious that the emergence of the counterculture greatly facilitated the boom in Vonnegut's popularity, especially following the growing controversy of the Vietnam War. His novels that were published before <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u> contained many of the same moral and social themes displayed after this increase in popularity, indicating the climate had more to do with his success than any change in content or quality on the part of the work itself.

It was, however, true that Vonnegut did not necessarily embody all the ideals promoted by the counterculture, or even those in his own novels, in his actual life. Vonnegut and his wife were stockholders in IBM, Phelps Dodge, Texas International Drilling and Dow Chemical, the maker of napalm during the Vietnam War[5]. Several times he clashed with fans, who felt that he did not live up to the ideals contained in his novels. Vonnegut himself recalled an incident where a fan objected to one of his speeches. "He said, 'I can't imagine you wrote those books,' and I had, I swear to God I had, but I was not the man he thought should have written those books.[6]"

The literary world did not, and has not, accepted Vonnegut as warmly as his audiences. While Slaughterhouse-Five was a heralded success, his other novels were usually written off, either relegated to the sci-fi bin, "which critics regularly confuse with a urinal," or written off as pandering to the youth for their direct, simple style of writing. [6] Vonnegut himself contributed his style to his days as a reporter, often dismissing the opinions of critics, but personally took their denigration to heart. Despite this negative reaction, and the fact that he remained largely removed from the literary canon till his death in 2006, Vonnegut's novels and collections of short stories continued to sell and were well received with the general public. The last thing he ever published, a collection of stories entitled "Armageddon in Retrospect," surprised many by joining Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions as Vonnegut works that have topped the best seller list.

Comparing Two Minds

When looking at the work of the two side by side, it is difficult to see many similarities. Marcuse's prose is heavy and difficult to navigate, but delves deeply into not only actions but the philosophy of those given actions. While his writing is often cryptic, he also made it applicable to his audience, using real world examples rather than abstract metaphors and hypotheticals. As far as his content, his work is overwhelmingly hopeful, placing great faith in the future and the ability of humanity to create change.

Politically, his work is very liberal, calling for the overthrow of repressive conservative values and regarding concepts such as individual freedom and happiness

as of greater importance than self-restraint and resolve. The latter he argues are merely tools of capitalism, intended to repress the individual and make him functional member of the society rather than content.

Vonnegut writing style is, obviously, very different, due to the fact that he is writing fiction rather than political philosophy. However, his style of writing also differs greatly, as his language is simple and precise, and not at all difficult to comprehend. This style often contributed to the criticism he received from "serious" literary critics, as he was accused of being too simplistic in his writing and pandering to the youth. Vonnegut responded to this criticism in <u>Palm Sunday</u>, saying, "Literature should not disappear up its own asshole, so to speak."

His content is rarely as sunny in its disposition as Marcuse. His characters are heavily flawed individuals, yet usually are morally sound at the very least, making it hard to apply the term "anti-hero" to any of them. The protagonist in <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u>, Billy Pilgrim, has arguably lost his mind, although there is some debate about whether or not his delusions could be real. However, his greatest motivation is spreading the Tralfamadorian message, which he himself uses to help deal with the destruction of Dresden that he witnessed. <u>Breakfast of Champions</u> actually contains two protagonists, which essentially are just Pilgrim's personality split in two. The first is Kilgore Trout, who is socially inept, but experiences a change of heart by the end of the novel and ends up becoming a great speaker and champion of the human spirit by the time of his death. The other half of the equation, Dwayne Hoover, is completely insane, and goes on a violent rampage at the conclusion of the novel. However, he is not evil. Instead, he is merely a victim of "bad chemicals." In a word, Vonnegut's characters and writing is very human.

As far as their backgrounds go, both Vonnegut and Marcuse shared some similarities. Both were of German ancestry, although Vonnegut was born in America and Marcuse in Germany. Both were also active on the Allied side during World War II. Marcuse emigrated from Germany in the face of Nazism, of which he was highly critical. He also was of Jewish heritage, which, coupled with his outspoken opposition to Hitler, put his life at great risk. In America, he fought in what ways he could, despite being too old to enter into actual combat. He was a member of the U.S. Office of War Information before transferring to the Office of Strategic Services, a precursor to the CIA. Vonnegut was much more directly involved in the war, fighting as an infantry scout in the Army. He was captured in Leningrad and taken to a POW camp in Dresden until it was firebombed by the Allies, the source of inspiration for Slaughterhouse-Five.

While their backgrounds are in so many ways similar, the quality of their experiences was also very different. Marcuse was drafted into the German army during World War I, but did not see any action, instead working in the horse stables. Afterwards, he participated in the socialist Spartacist uprising in post-war Germany. His Ph.D. work at the University of Freiburg and early study with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger gained him the reputation as one of the most promising young theorists at the time, and he did not suffer from the same questions of legitimacy as Vonnegut. Of course, he did suffer oppression at the hands of the Nazis, and his colleagues were suspicious of his socialist teachings and ties, but he managed to escape both relatively unscathed.

Vonnegut was not as fortunate. While his parents came from money, they were hit hard by the Great Depression, and his mother committed suicide as a result. While

intelligent, his accomplishments paled in comparison to his brother Bernard, a famous scientist who invented cloud seeding, and he suffered from a lifelong sense of inadequacy stemming from the, somewhat imagined, disapproval of his father. While the elder Vonnegut did push his son towards the sciences, he also framed his first publication and displayed it proudly in his home, well before his son had found any real success. Vonnegut also suffered from a much harsher experience in the war, both in his active combat role and his role as a witness to one of the worst civilian massacres in the history of war. His past was also riddled with other difficulties, including the death of his beloved sister Alice and her husband, after which the Vonnegut family adopted their three children and raised them along with three of their own, creating enormous financial pressures for the struggling writer in his earlier years.

This difference in background has undoubtedly contributed to their differences in style, which have in turn contributed to the illusion that Vonnegut and his work are pessimistic. While the title of "black humorist" was stamped on the author, he himself rejected the title[8], and a closer study of his work reveals a much more optimistic attitude than many of his critics would allow. While obviously not as optimistic as Marcuse, his work reflected many of the same concepts and theories which the latter preached so enthusiastically. Their works are actually both rather optimistic, but are simply of a different nature. Marcuse teaches while Vonnegut shocks and guides, but both expressed a dissatisfaction with the inequalities and chaos that was so prevalent during the time at which they experienced the most popularity.

Marcuse also suffered from a similar perception issue. Many saw him as advocating violence and violent uprisings, stemming from his unpopular political

background and his unfortunately titled, <u>The Problem of Violence and the Radical</u> <u>Opposition</u>, in which it seems he advocates a violent overthrow of the Establishment. In that speech, however, he warns that "to seek confrontations for their own sake is not only unnecessary, it is irresponsible.[9]" What he is instead preaching is that it is equally irresponsible to champion a doctrine of non-violence, as it merely reproduces the monopoly that society has on violence through institutionalized violence. He does advocate the use of "violence of liberation" if the need presents itself, but with violence being defined as acts of resistance that could be ruled illegal by the existing powers.

A simple reading of the two authors makes it difficult to picture the two of them as incredibly similar, as both their styles and subjects are different. Marcuse is a political theorist and Vonnegut a fiction author. The simple fact is that they were only thrown into the same arena because the counterculture selected them as representatives. They spoke to many of the same or similar audiences during their careers, but it would be a great stretch to claim that they were agents in creating the counterculture. Instead, the culture idolized them because they echoed what the counterculture was already saying. What makes it interesting is the fact that two men whose work was so different could be so attractive to the same groups, and what about their theories and visions made them so appealing.

Argument

The concept of utopia, or a perfect society, seems an ideal lens through which to view these misperceptions of violence and pessimism, as it is difficult to find a more optimistic historical model for the end of human events. Utopian and dystopian fiction also tends to contain a certain historical element, one that reflects the concerns

of the time and place in which they were written. George Orwell's classic dystopian novel, 1984, probably would not have gained the success that it did if it were not for the fact that it was written immediately following World War II, where Hitler and fascism redefined the meaning of an authoritarian society. Likewise, a string of similar fiction rode each wave of feminism into prominence, and, more recently, fictional ecological utopias and dystopias reflect the growing fears regarding pollution, a shortage of resources and climate change. This argument will reveal that their opinions and theories were not random, but followed expressed common concerns of the time and wrote in a way that either suggested a solution or warned about a result.

Obviously, the differences in the nature of their writing makes a head-to-head comparison difficult, as one writes fiction and the other very directly states his opinion. The unique methods used by the Vonnegut, who utilized much more autobiographical information than most fiction and often allowed the author's voice to interject in the story, do lessen the difficulty of such a comparison, however. To narrow this analysis further, this argument will also focus specifically on the authors' opinions of two specific elements of utopian theory. The first will be regarding the quality of conceptual utopias, or utopias that exist only in theory without regard to their realistic possibilities. These include the utopias that exist in fiction, such as Herland or Huxley's The Island, that were discussed earlier. The second focus will be on the historical possibility that society can culminate in a realistic utopia. This includes those discussed by more theoretical thinkers, such as Buckminster Fuller, who discuss whether or not a perfect society can actually exist and, if so, the shape that it may take. Furthermore, whether or not utopia is possible, it is important to look at what they believed was limiting its realization or relegating it to an impossibility. It

seems that only two such possibilities exist for either argument. Either it is a result of institutional failure, the lack of the correct organization of variables such as government, law and the human rights that would create a utopia, or a deeper human inadequacy, or individual failure, that makes such perfection unmanageable. The discussion will not touch much on their stances regarding "type" utopias, such as feminist, ecological, technological, pastoral, etc., as they are concerned less with the existence of a utopia within a realm of possibility or on the potentially beneficial and damaging effects of utopian speculation. The scope of the discussion will also be analyzed through a historical lens, analyzing how their work reflected the time period in which they were active and how it was reflected upon that society.

Most would agree that Marcuse has a remarkably positive outlook on the nature of humanity, and argued that humanity possessed the radical potential to mold the world in a near-perfect manner. What will be much more interesting will be the look inside the philosophies of Vonnegut, who did not adopt the straightforward philosophy of Marcuse. What will result will be the fact that Vonnegut was not a "black humorist" or even a pessimist, but was merely a man who recognized the need for change and marveled at the misunderstood beauty of human fallibility. While it easy to read pessimism in novels like Slaughterhouse-Five and Breakfast of Champions, both of which are unbelievably bleak on the surface, it is much more consistent with the personality of the author to realize that they are purposefully cruel in what is an attempt by the author to shock the conscience into action. No, he does not share Marcuse's belief that humans can achieve perfection, but that does not lend to the idea that the human race is doomed, or tumbling into decline either. He, like Marcuse, saw the upheaval of the sixties and seventies as a chance for potential

change and as an opportunity to greatly improve the human condition. The radicalism and revolutionary spirit that was so rampant amongst the New Left utilized utopian thought as a conduit for social change, although the camp was split on the possibility that any of these theoretical utopias could ever exist. Marcuse and Vonnegut are split in a similar fashion, and the same currents of hope underlie their respective philosophies.

Chapter 2

Herbert Marcuse

Herbert Marcuse was, in essence, a philosopher, and dealt heavily in the way things actually were and the way they could and should be. While an ardent socialist, his own theories deviated from the traditional Marx and were certainly not Maoist either. Marcuse had an incredibly contemporary philosophy, molded to the political and cultural atmosphere of the time. Marcuse encouraged the various sit-ins, teach-ins and "love-ins" as new, effective forms of resistance against the Establishment, despite the fact that the student opposition was not a "ready revolutionary force" by traditional Marxist standards. He also did not believe that the student movement and other groups associated with the New Left would ultimately lead to a revolution, but merely contained the "seeds of a successful revolutionary force." In fact, he identified the severely underprivileged of the American slums, or the lumpenproletariat by traditional Marxist standards, as the closest thing to a revolutionary force at the time, evidenced by the various revolutions occurring in Africa and Asia at the time. Marcuse had a tendency to touch on such contemporary material, as well as other concepts that many philosophers of his caliber would not touch, which certainly helped gain him a new level of popularity amongst the masses. One such example is his very open stance about the possibility of utopia, which was made even more radical by the idea that it was not only a possibility, but an inevitability.

On Practical Utopias

Marcuse saw a practical utopia as a logical end to the course of human history, and likewise believed that the material capacity for such a society already existed. The overwhelming technological changes that originated with the Industrial Revolution and had continued up until that point put civilization in a uniquely historical situation, where mankind had the ability "to turn the world into hell" or "to turn the world into the opposite of hell…the end of utopia." He argues this in his speech on the topic, <u>The End of Utopia</u>, and differed from traditional Marxists in their view of this end, however, as he did not believe that such a society would be the conclusion of a natural, historical progression. Instead, Marcuse's utopia would exist outside the historical continuum, result from difference rather than progress, and would require a "new definition of socialism."

His argument, and all utopian arguments, are made difficult because of this reality. It is impossible to make a historical argument of something that has never existed and cannot exist if the course of human history continues in an unaltered progression. Such a utopia would require the negation of the Judeo-Christian morality, of the repressive quality of the present society and an elevation of human beings above their needs, rather than the production of a new way of acquiring them. While he outlines this departure from the historical course of human events in <u>The End of Utopia</u>, he develops it much further in <u>An Essay on Liberation</u>. The essential quality of this departure lies primarily in a change in the socialization of mankind, or in the

words of Marcuse, a change in the "biological dimension" of mankind. Of course, Marcuse is not speaking of the actual biology, as far as skin and bones, but the aspect of human behavior that results from decades of exposure to a society and the education which results from the lessons handed down by friends, family, authority figures, coworkers, and the like. This reeducation would take various forms, several of which Marcuse specifies.

One particular method of this radical reeducation would be linguistic therapy, or the freeing of words from their meanings created by the Establishment. The example Marcuse uses is of the concept of obscenity, a term frequently applied to the behaviors of the radical opposition at the time. "Obscenity is not the picture of a naked woman who exposes her pubic hair but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals rewarded in a war of aggression. Obscene is not the ritual of the Hippies but the declaration of a high dignitary of the Church that war is necessary for peace.[10]" This free education was already taking place in the student movements on university campuses, but Marcuse stressed taking it to a national level, freeing the world from a corrupt system of language.

This theory directly intertwines language with the biology of mankind, revealing it to be both a source of subjugation and of liberation, simultaneously corrupting the vision of the populace and bubbling with potential to remove the very veil that it put on them. While the concept of the obscene was historically used to repress, to define "enemy" as "other," both foreign and domestic, Marcuse saw the potential to use it to reveal the true "enemy," as well as free the "other" from such

negative associations. Vonnegut seeks to do the same thing in his literature, looking at those who were demonized by the government and other forms of propaganda and humanizing them, revealing them to be members of the same species, albeit one on the other side of some non-existent barrier.

While it is important to free words from negative associations, it was also important to redefine needs in Macuse's utopia. The "need" for an ever increasing number and variety of commodities will be eliminated, and the "need for peace, which today is not a vital need of the majority, the need for calm, the need to be alone, with oneself or with other whom one has chosen oneself, the need for the beautiful, the need for 'undeserved happiness' will all become biological human needs.[11]" These new needs will also take precedence over the actual biological needs, which will be overcome by the automation of the labor process. These new needs and the self-sustaining nature of the primary biological needs would theoretically negate Adam Smith's model of economics and morality. By making competition for resources unnecessary, denizens of Marcuse's utopia would be freed to pursue personal peace and happiness.

For Marcuse, technology plays a key role in liberating the populace from this "survival-of-the-fittest" mentality. Unlike many utopian theorists and authors, Marcuse saw continued and increased technological advances as an essential component of a utopia, and a notable improvement over traditional Marxism, in that it had the potential to completely free man from his labor. He saw in technological advance the eventual point where machines would be able to take over the labor of the

workforce, freeing the population from the restrictions of the labor, and creating the potential for "unearned happiness." One notable fictional depiction of a similar society can be found in <u>Woman on the Edge of Time</u>, published in 1976, where machines have virtually eliminated all manufacturing needs. However, most futuristic depictions of overpowering technology in the future are decidedly dystopian.

Vonnegut himself actually speculated a similar society in his first novel, <u>Player Piano</u>, but placed a radically different spin on the complete automation of the manufacturing process. The only real difference between Marcuse's utopia and Vonnegut's dystopia is the system of government, a socialist society for the former and a capitalist society for the latter. Since Vonnegut's work is all done by machines, the only portion of the population that have jobs are the engineers to make and maintain the machines. The vast majority of the population is occupied by the unemployed masses, who are only charitably supported by the upper class.

While the problem can be traced to the sociopolitical makeup of the society of society in <u>Player Piano</u>, the author was never enthusiastic about the prospects of technology[5]. However, the problem of political makeup does not present itself in Marcuse's society, as the gains of the automation are evenly divided amongst the population in order to keep everything equal. Instead of a vast amount of wealth being possessed by a small percentage of the population while the majority scrapes by, each member has a proportionately sized piece of the pie with which to carve out their own little niche in the pursuit of happiness. Such a change would, of course, necessitate the change in biology mentioned earlier, in order to validate the radical idea of unearned

happiness and general equality. Furthermore, society would have to produce the technological advances that could allow the entire labor process to be managed by machines, something that has yet to happen.

Prospects of Utopia

While it is clear that Marcuse believes that a utopia could someday exist, he also made it very clear that this time was not at hand when he was writing. The technology was not there, nor was there a ready revolutionary force present which could create such a change in any sort of stable fashion, if at all. Therefore, the utopia that Marcuse is proposing is purely theoretical, and such a concept has had its supporters and its detractors. Those against theoretical utopias and their speculation that time spent wishing is time wasted, and these people should be actively trying to improve and change the world that they already exist in rather than try to create one that does not exist. While Marcuse does recognize some merit to this argument, he believes that to do so is better than to merely accept the inadequacies of a society and march on quietly. On more than one occasion in his writing, he concludes that "if it harms us to have illusions, it is just as harmful, perhaps more harmful, to preach defeatism and quietism, which can only play into the hands of those that run the system[12]". At the very least, Marcuse encouraged the New Left and the student movements because they were not falling into the systematic defeatism which had plagued so many before them, and were doing something to try to create change, even if they were not doing all the right things.

Theoretical Utopias

According to one of his favorite students, Angela Davis, Marcuse "identified Diggers and Provos as seeking rebellion and 'uniting sexual, moral and political rebellion,' as encouraging new sensibilities, as exhibiting a 'non-aggressive form of life: a demonstration of an aggressive non-aggressiveness which achieves, at least potentially, the demonstration of qualitatively different values, and transvaluation of values[13]." The various movements and groups were idealistic for sure, and often they valued significantly different ideals. Groups created small-scale utopian camps, attempting to create communes in search of a better system, or were more active in trying to improve their communities, like the Diggers, who established Free Stores and Free Shelters in the San Francisco area during the sixties. Others still were more ambiguous in exactly what they were defending. The more stereotypical hippies brought about Flower Power and the sexual revolution, but lacked in many defined ideals. What they did represent was a drastic shift in values, one that focused on peace and nature over industrialization and capitalism. These ideas alone were a form of resistance in themselves, and a means of motivation.

> "Flowers, by themselves, have no power whatsoever, other than the
> power of men and women who protect them and take care of them
> against aggression and destruction." –Marcuse[14]

The same concept here applies to the theoretical utopias, as they alone are also powerless, but they can be used as a rallying cry as a motivator for actual social change. The famous image of a hippie girl placing the flower in the barrel of a soldier's rifle illustrates the power of symbols and images to overcome physical

violence. Again, however, Marcuse does not advocate mere illusion as a means of bringing about radical change. It is merely a jumping off point for further change.

Institutional Obstacles to Utopia

If it is consistent that Marcuse both believes that theoretical utopias can have positive implications and that a practical utopia is indeed possible, the next question becomes what exactly is inhibiting this civilization from transcending the standard course of human history. As it stands, it is clear that the technology does not exist to create Marcuse's utopia, and the means of reeducation are also not prevalent enough to create widespread changes in the secondary biology of the average citizen. What is inhibiting these changes? To Marcuse, the blame lies with the government and other systems of domination, such as the church and the instruments of capitalism. This institutional failure impedes social change by repressing it as a means of self-preservation. If the Establishment were to allow these radical displays to go unchecked, the system would collapse and all that has been invested in it would disappear as well. Therefore, the "Fathers" at the head of the Establishment cope with radicalism through a combination of force, repression and, in some cases, allowance.

Since the system is designed to protect itself and to survive, it cannot and will not allow radical change to occur naturally. Furthermore, it will reward those who maintain it, furthering their investment in the system. This process is referred to as "surplus repression" by Marcuse, which involves unevenly distributing resources in a

disproportionate manner to those who succeed within the guidelines of the society and withholding them from those who do not. This perceived scarcity of resources also creates competition for them, investing people in its success from the very beginning do to an apparent lack of assets. Their education, experiences and peers all reinforce the same values of the society, and they are pressured by authority figures inside and outside the home to succeed within the constraints of the system.

From this argument, it is true that people are also impeding the realization of a practical utopia by Marcuse's standards. However, they are not the source of this obstacle, but the obstacle is derived from their existence within the flawed system. They unconsciously reproduce the established order through their everyday actions, the way they speak and their very existence as laborers of the system and purchasers of commodities. The assumption is that the people can create and exist inside a utopia, as long as it is organized correctly. Obviously, Marcuse and a significant portion of the population agreed that the system at hand was not organized in such a manner but also that it could be improved. Through the combined thought and action of a truly revolutionary force, of which Marcuse believed he was only seeing the first steps, he theorized that people could not only change the world, but perfect it.

Chapter 3

Kurt Vonnegut

Practical Utopia

Kurt Vonnegut's writing is, by its very nature, much less analytical and more speculative than Marcuse's, as he is writing fiction. It also exists that the mere facts of his fiction are not consistent with the actual message behind the writing. Despite clear differences between the work of Vonnegut and the work of Marcuse, they were thrown into the same sphere, mostly because they were chosen to be the prophets of the counterculture by the counterculture. They were two contemporary authors, albeit in very different spheres, that embodied the morals of the counterculture and also peaked in their respective careers at the time that the counterculture was also at its peak, lending them to comparison. While it could also be argued that their work had an effect on the movements themselves, it seems more plausible that the movements chose these two because they provided a popular literature that mirrored their own ideals already.

Considering this, it seems fairly clear that Vonnegut did not believe that practical utopias could possibly be realized, and, Marcuse's specific utopia was ripe with additional means of repression. While his later works tended to gravitate away from the science fiction, a seemingly conscious decision, his earlier work was rife with fantastical elements and both utopian and dystopian speculation. His most popular short story and lone mention in most literary anthologies, <u>Harrison Bergeron</u>, was published in 1962 and describes a repressive dystopia where everyone's natural talents

are restricted by the Handicapper General. This office uses weights, masks and other handicaps in order to bring everyone to the same level, but only succeeds in reducing everyone to the lowest level.

Dystopian themes are not uncommon in the literature of Vonnegut. In fact, they make up a significant portion of his work, especially his more well-known short stories. Welcome to the Monkey House, published in 1968, is the story of a type of dystopia which sociologist Andreu Domingo referred to as a "demodystopia[15]," due to massive overpopulation as a result of advanced medical technology. It also explores the complications of government mandated medicines as a means of dealing with social control, as all citizens are required to take birth control to keep the population in check. The same theme occurs in Player Piano, mentioned earlier, although is a dystopia of a very different type. The source is again technology, however, which runs directly contrary to Marcuse's more hopeful vision for the potential for technological advances to liberate the populace rather than enslave it.

The two novels written during the prime of Vonnegut's career, directly coinciding with the rise of the counterculture, are not typical dystopias, in that they lack a fantasy element and are set in the present and the past, rather than the future. However, the societies portrayed in both novels, looked at from a purely fictional perspective, contain a great deal of elements typically found in dystopian fiction. There is a great deal of social inequality found in Breakfast of Champions, typified by dominance of the lower class by the upper class. Further racial and gender inequalities also exist.

In Slaughterhouse-Five¸ more typically dystopian elements present themselves. The majority of the characters in the novel are either directly or indirectly harmed by

an all-encompassing war that claims the lives of millions. Again, the theme of technology as damaging is present, as most of the technology in the novel is used for war or torture. This includes the technologies of the distant past, such as the torture devices collected by Ronald Weary's farther, and futuristic technology, such as that used by the Tralfamadorians. They even claim that the universe is destroyed when they test a new type of fuel. The pages are ripe with technology as a destructive force, and the general viciousness of war itself. What makes the prose particularly biting is the fact that it is actually portraying a current or recently past society, making reality appear dystopian. Nothing about Vonnegut's concepts of the past, present or future is utopian.

Vonnegut clearly did not believe that a practical utopia was possible. He himself said that, if such a utopia would exist, it would be one where people learned to inhabit primitive societies again[16]. Such an idea is a far cry from that imagined by Marcuse, a society made possible by complex machines that take over the labor process entirely freeing up the average man to pursue needs such as peace and companionship. Instead, Vonnegut sees machines as a hindrance to an improved society, as they tend to remove people from one another. One of the few exceptions to this rule is his view on television, which he believed could be an instrument of peace, although this view was not always consistent[17]. Regardless, it seems fairly consistent, by Vonnegut's standards, that he believes technology to be a source of isolation rather than unification.

Theoretical Utopias

The views of the two gravitate closer together when the conversation shifts toward theoretical utopias, where unrealistic, futuristic and often idealized societies are proposed as a form of activism. Either these societies are the perfect realization of changes believed by the writer-activist to address what they believe to be the leading social problem facing society, or they are dystopias, where these problems have been taken to some new radical extreme and the vast majority of the populace is miserable as a result. Such stories are meant to be motivational in nature, the idea being to reveal the theoretical cheese at the end of the maze or to motivate a population into action through fear of what the world might become. The criticism of such visions has always been that they encourage passivism by making mere speculation a form of activism rather than actual action. Such critics believe that an audience's consciences will be mollified by these theoretical utopias, as they will finish reading of one and feel that they have done their part without actually doing anything.[18]

It has already been established that Marcuse shared, in part, this very fear, but recognized that such speculation was a great deal better than defeatism and blind acceptance of the state of the world, not matter how unfair and intolerable it may be. Vonnegut's fiction seems to take this even further. There is no wonder about whether or not he thought this was good to some degree[19], but seems to also believe that such ideology can be used to solve the problem of loneliness, the antagonist in a vast majority of his work. Things with Vonnegut are never so simple, and he often

contradicts himself. However, the same, singular thread of decency runs throughout all his work.

While often accused of pandering to the youth and contemporary youth movements, these same themes can be found in earlier works of Vonnegut, much before they pledged their support of his work. One of his most popular novels, <u>Cat's Cradle</u>, even established a vocabulary for theoretical utopias and the utilitarian use of these ideas. These utopias fall under the category of "foma," or harmless untruths, which can be used to unite a population and even sustain them through periods of misfortune. The foundation of foma can be found in the tenants of Bokononism, a religion expressly founded on lies. In the novel, the citizens of San Lorenzo persist under an oppressive regime and through extreme poverty in a state of general peace and harmony due to these various foma found in the texts of Bokonon. The narrator himself becomes very interested in the religion and experiences what can only be called a conversion by the end of the book. The focus of the religion and the novel is the actions of one's karass, specifically that of the narrator's, and how those actions bring about some sort of gains desired by a higher being. A karass, in essence, solves this ever present problem of loneliness by associating a large group of people that have virtually no connection to one another through some goal of fate.

The real world implication of such an idea is the notion that "foma" can actually help solve loneliness in the real world, where people can unite around ideas regardless of their truth value. These theoretical utopias become the foma, or the rallying point, for a variety of movements and groups that all have a comma goal in

mind, and give them something to look forward to or to hope for. Granted, such a group falls under the definition of a granfalloon, or false karass, under the definitions of Bokononism, but the religion itself admits that all its teachings are lies anyway, making any karass a granfalloon.

The same idea continues to appear throughout Vonnegut's work. An avowed atheist, he was a huge fan of The Sermon on the Mount, going as far as to say that if it weren't for that speech, he would not want to be a human being[20]. Granfalloons in his writing other than religion include nationality, culture, ethnicity, gender and so on. The problem with American society in particular and modern society in general appears to be, for him, that there were far too many competing granfalloons, leading to anomie, or Durkheim's theoretical normlessness. Without a uniting culture to bind them to the rest of their society, individual members of a social body become separated and feel loneliness and a lack of belonging, leading to any number of damaging problems. In Slaughterhouse-Five, these problems present themselves in the damaging lies that individual characters tell themselves in order to cope with the harsher realities that present themselves.

This idea is especially present in the two novels written at his peak in popularity and the peak of the counterculture as well. In the former, the vast majority of the characters experience this normlessness due to a lack of a shared culture. The lack of a culture is not portrayed as desirable either, as Pilgrim's mother, "like so many Americans…was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops[21]." The characters try to seek out a culture, find some way out of

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the normlessness, the anomie, that is so pervasive throughout the novel and many of Vonnegut's other novels, but only find more fantastical visions, more ways to briefly appease their own private turmoil. Whether it's Pilgrim's defeatist hallucinations or Wild Bob's delusions of grandeur, these lies do not unite these lost souls but instead alienate them in their own little vision.

One of the few exceptions occurs in Billy Pilgrim's original POW camp, where the captured British soldiers are able to unite in their captivity under the banner of patriotism in order to persist in unfavorable conditions. They express great shock when they meet the Americans, who are such a ragged group, such "frowsy creatures," that are also devoid of a shared culture and any real means of coping with their captivity or the war in general. This is more a comment on American culture than British, as the patriotism is more noticeable due to its absence in the Americans rather than its presence in the British ranks. Despite all serving under the same flag, there is not a single notable instance of companionship amongst the American soldiers, who merely drift about with their own survival in mind, if that. The only real notable mention of American nationalism in the novel is that of Bertram Copeland Rumfood, a history professor who shares a hospital room with Billy Pilgrim and uses the philosophy as an excuse for the massacre at Dresden rather than a uniting force amongst the citizens.

Pilgrim himself realizes this value of theoretical utopias and tries to provide his own uniting force and source of comforts to the masses by sharing the knowledge granted to him by the Tralfamadorians with the masses through letters and late night

radio talk shows. In his mind, this knowledge of the nature of time will, in the future, make him an enormously popular leader who will eventually be assassinated by the rabid Paul Lazarro, although all these visions are widely acknowledged to be a result of brain trauma suffered during a plane crash. Even if their theories aren't true, and the theorists have no faith in them, it does not mean that they have no value. In <u>Breakfast of Champions</u>, Rabo Karebekian, a smug elitist, preaches to a crowd in a bar about the inherent nature of mankind. It moves everyone in the audience, including the author, who is present there, even though it is made clear that he does not actually believe it. The intent of the speaker of the does not matter, only the speech.

Pilgrim and others in the novel raise another interesting perspective on this idea of theoretical utopias, which are applied here merely at an individual level. Many characters in the novel use these fantasies as a coping mechanism for a reality that they cannot deal with, but they are largely personalized and do not allow them to connect with other. "Wild Bob" copes with his death through the vision that he was a great leader of soldiers, who are all dead before he appears in the story, and that they will all come visit him in his home after the war where he will host a great feast. This is not the case. Similarly, Ronald Weary deals with his rejection from yet another social group and overall unpleasantness by inventing a story about the Three Musketeers, a group including him and the two scouts he briefly travels with, who save Billy Pilgrim's skin and survive behind enemy lines together. The most prevalent story, of course, is that of Billy Pilgrim, whose head injury allows him to create an entirely separate planet of Tralfamadore with an alien race that have a suitable explanation to all the horrors he experienced in Dresden and even allows him to

couple with the beautiful Montana Wildhack, a possible solution to his loveless and political marriage with Valencia Merble. In these instances, the fantasies are personal, and are largely more dangerous than those in Bokononism, because they separate people, contributing to loneliness and anomie in almost all the characters.

The Problem of Individualism

The following analysis lends that Vonnegut contradicts himself, creating worlds where fantasies, such as theoretical utopias, are both positive and negative. In <u>Breakfast of Champions</u>, Vonnegut distinguishes between good and bad fantasies, stating, "We are only healthy to the extent that our ideas are humane[22]." As a humanist, this sentiment seems to fit well into Vonnegut's philosophy, as it differentiates between fantasies that look to better the world in manner that is also humane and those that elevate the lives of some at the expense of the majority, a frequent theme in dystopias. Here, utopian speculation qualifies as healthy, because it expresses "anger with the way our planet is" and speculates about the way "our planet should be." However, the individual fantasies that are so prevalent in <u>Slaughterhouse-Five</u> are clearly unhealthy, as Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian philosophy produces extreme callousness towards death, even if it values life, and the patriotism expressed by Rumfoord is equally inhumane, rationalizing the deaths of thousands of civilians in an attempt to further the goals of his nation.

Another problem associated with individual fantasies is the fact that people, at least according to Vonnegut, are so different. Their individuality makes it difficult for

any society to be defined as utopian. Even if one looks only at Marcuse and Vonnegut, a difference can be seen in their utopian visions. While Marcuse envisions a socialist society made possible by advanced technology, Vonnegut prefers a society where people learn to inhabit primitive communities again. Yet these two men were largely involved in the same causes at the same time, and preached to the same audiences. More of their peers preferred feminist utopias, ecological utopias and so on. Looking outside their circle, it can only be assumed that even more variations of utopia would be found.

It also expresses that the societies of <u>Player Piano</u>, <u>Cat's Cradle</u>, <u>God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater</u> and <u>Breakfast of Champions</u> are unhealthy due to the fact that they are based upon gross inequalities between different groups in society. All four also give evidence that Vonnegut believes that the capitalist society in which he lived could be considered a dystopia because it is founded upon this same, equally unhealthy principle. In fact, in <u>Player Piano</u>, even the most radical members of the oppressed, less intelligent class express that the standard of the brain for success is better than that of the previous society, where the qualification was only monetary, if only by a little bit. The idea of individuality, a key component of American culture, also appears in his work to be a negative aspect that is possibly the greatest contributor to his great loneliness problem.[23]

The solution to this problem, therefore, would be a shared, healthy lie that encompasses the entire society. In short, the solution for many of the problems in Vonnegut's literature is a unifying culture, a social construct that was not in existence

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at the time he was writing. This is especially obvious in <u>Breakfast of Champions</u>, where there is a great social disconnect between all the characters and survival in a chaotic world seems to be the only driving force behind anyone's actions. Like the culture of Bokononism, or the uniting nationalism of the British prisoners of war, this culture can help unite the decrepit and isolated members of an American society that are searching for some meaning in life, whether or not it is true.

<center>Agreements and Conflicts with Marcuse</center>

Again following a key component of Marcusian philosophy, Vonnegut distinguishes between positive speculation and fantasy and that of defeatism, which only recreates the inequities of society by accepting them. The former is what Vonnegut would call a healthy idea, and the latter an unhealthy one. A way in which he differs from Marcuse is that he does not necessarily attribute a truth value to healthy or unhealthy ideas, instead favoring the result of said ideas on those who internalize them. For instance, while Marcuse would likely denounce Bokononism as pacifying the masses of San Lorenzo, Vonnegut seems to think that it is a way of uniting a community of similarly oppressed people in order to deal with their unfortunate conditions. For him, the connections are more important than the conditions in which those connections thrive. As Bokonon says in <u>Cat's Cradle,</u>

"I wanted all things

To seem to make sense,
So we all could be happy, yes,

<center>37</center>

Instead of tense.
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise."[24]

Vonnegut is decidedly more pronounced on his views of violence than Marcuse, undoubtedly qualifying it is an "unhealthy" idea. While he identifies World War II as a "righteous " war that he had no qualms about participating in, he vocally opposed the war in Vietnam and warned his sons not to participate in massacres. Later in life, he was also very opposed to the war in Iraq and the treatment of the soldiers[25]. Of course, Marcuse's stance on violence has often been exaggerated, as he frequently distinguished between violence of aggression and violence of self-defense, advocating the latter but not the former. He also defined violence as anything that violated the established law of a society done purposefully to disrupt it, including non-violent protests such as sit-ins. Therefore, whenever he calls for violence against the system, he can be calling for something as simple and non-violent as a boycott.

Another way in which Vonnegut follows suit with Marcuse is his therapeutic treatment of a damaging culture in Breakfast of Champions. He actively performs linguistic therapy on the American vernacular by disassociating words from their concepts and starkly stating the actual way things are. For example, rather than being inherently passive, he argues that women are socialized into becoming "agreeing machines," because that is their only means of survival in a society that does not provide them with any alternatives. He does the same with a variety of other social

constructs, such as the death penalty. He even includes a hand-drawn picture of an electric chair, and very matter-of-factly states its purpose, stating, "The purpose of it was to kill people by jazzing them with more electricity than their bodies could stand.[26]" His description is free of judgment on either side of the debate. By removing the political rhetoric, Vonnegut frees the words from the preconceptions and forces the reader to reevaluate their views on various aspects of society.

The Tralfamadorian fatalistic philosophy that is so prominent throughout Slaughterhouse-Five, of course, exemplifies the defeatism that Marcuse warns against, and intentionally so. However, to take this seriously and say it is indicative of Vonnegut's actual opinion would run contradictory to everything else he ever wrote or said. This fatalism is so severe because it is meant to shock the conscience, forcing the readers to feel strongly opposite of what is actually written. Instead, the readers should follow the serenity prayer posted on Billy Pilgrim's wall.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom always to tell the difference.[27]"

While the author writes that Pilgrim cannot change the past, present or future, readers walk away from the book frustrated with this sentiment, realizing that they possess the ability to at least change the present. It is no coincidence that the Tralfamadorians use the same language as the fascist Nazi guards. The same aliens also acknowledge that free will is a concept unique to humanity, an admission that is not meant to dissuade

the exercise of free will. Instead, humanity should be aware of that it is an idea

inherent to human nature, and the two cannot be separated.

Vonnegut even establishes the vocabulary for the role that Pilgrim plays in his

message of morality in <u>Cat's Cradle</u>. Pilgrim is a wrang-wrang, or "a person who

steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example

of the wrang-wrang's own life, to an absurdity.[28]" Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian, fatalistic

vision of time and death is nothing short of absurd, preached by an elderly, demented

optometrist and alien plumber's helpers. The only other character that echoes

Pilgrim's fatalism is the almost equally absurd Rumfoord. He says of Dresden, "It *had*

to be done" and Billy agrees, who insists, "It was all right. *Everything* is all right, and

everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore.[29]" No other

character echoes their sentiments, and for good reason. These wrang-wrangs are meant

to steer the readers towards the actual moral, the true message the author is trying to

purvey. Such acts are not inevitable, and need to be challenged by those who can

change them.

Individual Obstacles to Utopia

The focus then becomes, of course, who can change circumstances and what

obstructs them from doing so. If Vonnegut acknowledges that a practical utopia is

impossible, or at the very least, highly improbable, than it must also follow that there

is a significant obstacle impeding such a society. For Vonnegut, that is largely due to

individual failures, or human fallibility, and not blamed purely on the imperfections

found in human institutions. Robert Scholes echoes this theme in Vonnegut's

literature, arguing that "The cruelest deeds are done for the best causes. It is as simple as that. The best writers of our time having been telling us with all their imaginative power that our problems are not in our institutions but in ourselves.[30]"

Vonnegut's characters are all tragically flawed, a fact reflected in his own views. Billy Pilgrim is truly pathetic, Kilgore Trout is bitter and shuns humanity, Bokonon abandons his followers and Dwayne Hoover is psychotic. How could such a collection ever contribute to a perfect society? The problem does not lie in religion or government, but how people react to those institutions. Vonnegut frequently expressed his displeasure with organized religion, but also his love for the actual teachings of the religion. It is what people had done with religion that made it problematic. The same principle applies to government. Those who had used the institution as a means of furthering their own interests and for the destruction of other cultures are the problem, not the institution itself.

This goes along with the problem of individualism mentioned earlier. In a free society, which one would assume is a necessary quality of a utopia, everyone ends up wanting different things, both of themselves and of their society, making it impossible to create a free society where everyone is happy. In Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut grants freedom to Kilgore Trout, one of his characters, who responds by pleading to his creator, "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" Even though Vonnegut created this entity, he has no idea what Trout wants, or what anyone really wants for that matter. It is likely that he, and all others like him, have no idea what they themselves really want either. The only way for a society to be of one mind

and one goal seems to be if that society is one governed by an authoritarian government, a system which is more characteristic of dystopias than their more optimistic brethren.

Redefining Black Humor

While it is not necessarily relevant to this analysis, the idea that people are inherently imperfect and are unable of creating a perfect society seems on the surface to be rather negative and pessimistic, part of the reason that Vonnegut has earned the "black humorist" moniker. Likewise, most of Vonnegut's fiction and personal quotations reflect serious dissatisfaction with society in general, as he spoke out against numerous administrations, wars and governments. His political views were not always well received, leading one interviewer to call him an old man who "doesn't want to live anymore.[31] Others have called his novels "smug pessimism" and merely a display of "walking his despair around the block.[32]" Even in his positive reviews, he is referred to as "a prophet of doom," albeit a humorous one. Some have come to his defense, often taking a middle of road stance. Hume argued that "Vonnegut's writings are pessimistic, but not to the degree often assumed. Especially since his Dresden book, he has struggled to identify values in human nature and society that he can affirm despite the events of our century.[33]" However, does Vonnegut really qualify as a black humorist? He himself rejected the tag, and whether or not his work can be seen as optimistic or pessimistic has long been a point of contention with his critics. I would like to raise another point in this debate: his pessimism was optimistic.

Vonnegut did not see fallibility as a negative. He was an artist, but one that painted with flaws. His medium was one of defects, and used them in a way that no other has been able to replicate. His characters are distinguished by their mistakes, and much of their character development revolves around the consequences of those mistakes. His characters are very human, but even the author himself doesn't see that as a negative. While comparing the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to that of Dresden, he praises Lot's wife, saying, "But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human. So she turned to a pillar of salt. So it goes.[34]" Even his most famous and arguably most depressing phrase, the dismissive "so it goes," equates all human life, rich or poor, black or white, and does distinguish based on artificial lines of judgment. His biography revealed Vonnegut as a very flawed character as well, simultaneously raging against the Vietnam War while owning stock in Dow Chemical, the sole producer of napalm.

Vonnegut finds values in flaws, and likewise there is value in the very real flaws in society of which he was so outspoken. As Marcuse warns, the true enemy is defeatism and complacency, and expressing discontent with the way things are does not eliminate the hope for improvement. While it may be pegged as pessimism, dissatisfaction is much more conducive to change than blind acceptance. By its very nature it precludes that things can get better, which appears at its core to be a very optimistic notion. Vonnegut complains and depresses not because humanity is doomed, but because it has so much potential which it is not currently achieving. He

not only warned people, but provided advice to them as well, like in his

commencement speech at Bennington College in 1970.

> I know that millions of dollars have been spent to produce this splendid graduating class, and that the main hope of your teachers was, once they got through with you, that you would no longer be superstitious. I'm sorry — I have to undo that now. I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead. Then it might be all right to have babies again.[35]

The message of that speech, of course, if not the fact that it is not alright to

have babies now, but the hope that the audience will go out and make the

world a better place for future generations.

While Vonnegut was often skeptical about the power of the arts to

generate change[36], he also saw it as the duty of the artist to serve for the better

of mankind. He proposed the "Canary in a Coalmine" theory of art, stating that

artists' value lie in the fact that they are so sensitive, so that they can "keel

over like canaries in poison coal mines long before more robust types realize

that there is any danger whatsoever.[37]" Likewise, he especially saw the value

of educating young people, despite being accused of pandering to them by

various critics, because that was the best way to create change. While the

people in power are older and already set in their ways, authors can write for

young people, with the hope "that you catch people before they become

generals and presidents and so forth and you poison their minds with ...

humanity, and however you want to poison their minds, it's presumably to

encourage them to make a better world.[38]"

Vonnegut himself tries to act as that canary, revealing the dystopia of the
contemporary world, and providing warnings of what could happen. He steers readers
away from fatalism through gross exaggeration in the character of Billy Pilgrim and
the philosophy of the Tralfamadorians. He speaks more frankly in <u>Breakfast of
Champions</u>, breaking down the social problems facing his audience to their very
source, their basest language, and forcing the reader to rethink their preconceived
notions of the way things are. This strategy, perceived as pessimistic and dark, only
fits in with his theory of the arts and Marcuse's concept of linguistic therapy. He does
not want the reader to adopt the theory that there is no free will, that the death of all
things can be waived off with a simple, "So it goes." He has to focus on the damaging,
dark corners of modern culture, rather than the positives, to reveal the true nature of
things, the true poison in the air, so that the society can fix their own culture. He is not
a dark humorist, but a disappointed moralist.

Conclusion

While it is difficult to ignore the negatives of the decade that spawned the
counterculture, it should be noted that with them came a new cultural form and
revolutionary spirit that had been previously unseen in the conservative America that
followed World War Two. The same counterculture raised a number of artists and
political theorists to the forefront of the American consciousness that may have been
otherwise overlooked. Vonnegut certainly fit into this mold well, and his popularity

resulted in the discovery of an author that remains one of the most influential modern national authors. He provided guidance and a supporting culture to a generation reeling from the loss of notions of nobility and prosperity that had once united their parents and the members of their generation.

> She believed what so many Americans believed then: that the nation would be happy and just and rational when prosperity came. I never hear that word anymore: Prosperity. It used to be a synonym for Paradise…But nobody believes in a new American paradise. [39]

Echoing the voice of this older, more hopeful generation, but for a younger audience, was Herbert Marcuse. He was able to reconcile the corruption of the present with the optimism of the past and the promise of the future, all while providing a more philosophical background for the upstart movements of the sixties and seventies. Furthermore, he attempted to provide his audience with a realistic, positive vision of the future, and encouraged them to actively attempt to obtain it. Vonnegut did not provide such a concrete vision, but instead stressed decency and unselfishness, with the hope that such a change would provide humanity with a better world anyway. Both men, regardless of the prospects of their theoretical and practical utopias, provided readers of all generations with a candid account of a host of repressive conditions present during a time where such offenses were rampant and often overlooked.

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Appendix

Footnotes

1. These ideas were not exactly novel, as the idea of feminist utopias in literature dated back to the times of Charlotte Perkins Gillman, who wrote <u>Herland</u>, a novel detailing an indigenous society populate by only women, in 1915. While these authors and others tried to reveal the potential of a more gender neutral society or a society where the distribution of power was either reversed by gender or not dependent on gender, others created dystopias to warn their readers about a future where such inadequacies were not repaired. Arguably the most famous piece of the genre written during the seventies was that of Marge Piercy's <u>Woman on the Edge of Time</u>, which imagines two futures, one in which the patriarch is overthrown and society is essentially egalitarian and peaceful, and another in which the patriarch soars to new levels of dominance thanks to advances in medical technology.
2. Abromeit, John, and W. Mark Cobb, ed. *Herbert Marcuse: A critical reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 43. Print.
3. Marcuse himself rejected this title.
4. Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Kurt Vonnegut's America*. Columbia: The University of South   Carolina Press, 2009. 41. Print.
5. Shields, Charles J. And So It Goes. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011. 298. Print.
6. "And he said, 'I can't imagine you wrote those books,' and I had, I swear to God I had, but I was not the man he thought should have written those books." Shields, Charles J. *And So It Goes*. New York: Henry Holt And Company, 2011. 298. Print.
7. "I think I'm unjustly punished for my clarity" – Shields, Charles J. *And So It Goes*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011. 298. Print.
8. "Bruce Friedman did that. He put that label on me. I don't know what he means. It's just a convenient tag for reviewers. Out I go into the ashcan with Terry Southern and Jack Barth. But those people hated their parents. I like

mine." Saal, Rollene W. *Pick of the Paperbacks."* Saturday Review, 53. March 1970. 34. Print

9. "To seek confrontations for their own sake is not only unnecessary, it is irresponsible." Marcuse, Herbert. *"The Problem of Violence and the Radical Opposition." Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*; trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 84. Print.

10. Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. 8. Print.

11. Marcuse, Herbert. *"The End of Utopia." Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*; trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 63. Print.

12. "If it harms us to have illusions, it is just as harmful, perhaps more harmful, to preach defeatism and quietism, which can only play into the hands of those that run the system. Marcuse, Herbert. *"The End of Utopia." Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*; trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 81. Print.
"An opposition is required that is free of all illusion but also of all defeatism, for through its mere existence defeatism betrays the possibility of freedom to the status quo." Marcuse, Herbert. *"The End of Utopia." Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*; trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber (Boston: Beacon, 1970), 71. Print.

13. Abromeit, John, and W. Mark Cobb, ed. *Herbert Marcuse: A critical reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 47. Print.

14. Cooper, David (ed.), *The Dialectics of Liberation*. Harmondsworth/Baltimore: Penguin, 1968. 180. Print.

15. "Dystopias that are brought about by demographic change or that make population matters a salient concern I will call demodystopias." Domingo, A. (2008), "Demodystopias": Prospects of Demographic Hell. Population and Development Review, 34: 725–745. doi: 10.1111/j.1728-4457.2008.00248.x

16. . "I couldn't survive my own pessimism if I didn't have some kind of sunny little dream. ... Human beings will be happier — not when they cure cancer or get to Mars or eliminate racial prejudice or flush Lake Erie — but when they find ways to inhabit primitive communities again. That's my utopia." – Allen, William Rodney. *Conversations*

with Kurt Vonnegut. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1988. 81. Print.

17. "The inventiveness which we so regret now may also be giving us, along with the rockets and warheads, the means to achieve what has hitherto been an impossibility, the unity of mankind. I am talking mainly about television sets…Thanks to modern communications, the people of every industrialized nation are nauseated by war by the time they are 10 years old." Vonnegut, Kurt. "Avoiding the Big Bang. " New York Times 13 Jun 1982, E23.

18. "My real feeling is that human beings are too good for life. They've been put in the wrong place with the wrong things to do. They're shrewd and terribly resourceful machines, and one sign of their resourcefulness, I think, is their human-wide tendency to not give a shit anymore. They're shrewd enough to perceive that, if you do give a shit, you'll wind up getting your heart broken." "Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut." Charlie Reilly and Kurt Vonnegut. *College Literature* , Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter, 1980), p. 27.

19. "I like Utopian talk, speculation about what our planet should be, anger about what our planet is." Bellany, Joe David, ed., *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974). P. 206.

20. "If what Jesus said was good, what can it matter whether he was God or not?" Vonnegut, Kurt. *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorkian.*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999. 10. Print.

21. "like so many Americans…was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops." Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: The Dial Press, 1969. 49. Print.

22. We are only healthy to the extent that our ideas are humane. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions*. New York: The Dial Press, 1973. 16. Print.

23. The standard response to such a condemnation of the individual over the culture is inevitably met with the mention of Harrison Bergeron, the lone Vonnegut short story that appears in most English anthologies. While it is true that Vonnegut clearly does not favor the "dumbing down" of society, producing equality by lowering each individual to the lowest level, the focus of the story is on those who do not question the unjust rules and instead follow them blindly. Of course, this has long been a matter

of contention, but the amount of weight the author places on the dialogue between Harrison's parents and on staying in line in order to preserve society points to this emphasis. Harrison's speech is also problematic to any alternate reading, as he declares himself Emperor, and begins handing out orders after picking his empress from the crowd, offering those who obey him positions as dukes and earls. Surely, one cannot argue that Vonnegut is advocating feudalism. It is quietism that he is condemning, not equality, although the methods used here to achieve it are certainly not ideal.

24. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1963. 127. Print.
25. "They are being treated, as I never was, like toys a rich kid got on Christmas." Vonnegut, Kurt . "Cold Turkey." *In These Times*. (2004): n. page. Web. 30 Apr. 2012.
26. "The purpose of it was to kill people by jazzing them with more electricity than their bodies could stand." Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions*. New York: The Dial Press, 1973. 159. Print.
27. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: The Dial Press, 1969. 77. Print.
28. "A wrang-wrang, according to Bokonon, is a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example of the wrang-wrang's own life, to an absurdity." Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1963. 78.
29. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions*. New York: The Dial Press, 1969. 254. Print.
30. Merrill, Robert, ed. *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Boston: G.K Hall and Co., 1990. 37. Print.
31. Suicide is often a theme in Vonnegut's fiction, especially in Breakfast of Champions, often referring to himself or his mother. He attempted suicide in 1984 and his mother killed herself in 1944.
32. Hume, Kathryn. *Kurt Vonnegut and the Myths and Symbolism of Meaning*. Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 24, No. 4, Extratextual Influences on Belles Lettres (WINTER 1982), pp. 429
33. "Vonnegut's writings are pessimistic, but not to the degree often assumed. Especially since his Dresden book, he has struggled to identify values in human nature and society that he can affirm despite the events of our century." Hume,

Kathryn. *Kurt Vonnegut and the Myths and Symbolism of Meaning*. Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 24, No. 4, Extratextual Influences on Belles Lettres (WINTER 1982), pp. 429

34. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: The Dial Press, 1969. 28. Print.

35. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1974. 151. Print.

36. During the Vietnam War, every respectable artist in this country was against the war. It was like a laser beam. We were all aimed in the same direction. The power of this weapon turns out to be that of a custard pie dropped from a stepladder six feet high. Hoppe, David. Aggressively Unconventional: An Interview with Kurt Vonnegut, Utne Reader. May/June 2003.

37. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1974. 103. Print.

38. Scholes, Robert. "A Talk with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," The Vonnegut Statement: Original Essays on the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut. Delacort Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1973: 90-118. Reprinted in Allen 1998: 120. Print.

39. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast of Champions*. New York: The Dial Press, 1973. 2. Print.