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by

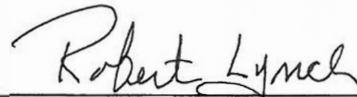
Marybeth Davis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English

Longwood University

Department of English and Modern Languages



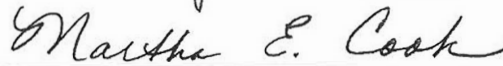
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Re-examining Vonnegut:
Existential and Naturalistic Influences on the Author's Work

By
Marybeth Davis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Vonnegut's Black Humor: Incorporating French Existentialism into American Naturalism

Few writers are as prolific as American author Kurt Vonnegut. His career as a novelist has spanned five decades beginning with the publication of Player Piano in 1952 and has lasted through 1997 when he completed his most recent novel, Timequake. Prior to quitting his job as publicist for General Electric in 1950 to pursue writing full time, his work consisted of short stories published in magazines, but over fifty years later his canon now includes fourteen novels, two short story collections, three self-titled "autobiographical collages," and one play.

Most of the episodes in Vonnegut's novels come directly from personal experience, and numerous critics have recounted the intersection of his biography and literary accomplishments. These autobiographical leanings in his work present themselves in various ways. The opening chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five, a typical Vonnegut novel, relates how the author's life intertwines with the story about to be read, making it difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins.

Vonnegut repeatedly mirrors the structure of his life in the lives of his characters and forces his own family and background into the fictional worlds of his novels, thinly veiling true identities and locations. For example, the Hoenikker family of Cat's Cradle consists of three children and parallels Vonnegut's own family: an older sister with two younger brothers. Also, in both Breakfast of Champions and Hocus Pocus, the protagonists' wives are mentally unstable like Vonnegut's mother who battled depression and eventually committed suicide. The author frequently uses the settings of Rosewater, Indiana, and Ilium, New York, which fictionalize his childhood hometown near Indianapolis and his early adulthood residence of Schenectady, New York, where he

worked for General Electric. Vonnegut also incorporates the recurring character of aging science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, who serves as the author's double and reminds the reader of the authorial presence: the author attributes sketches of science fiction stories to Trout that parallel the author's inclusion of fantastic elements in his novels and resemble his earliest short story plots.

Foremost among the events about which Vonnegut writes is his personal experience as a prisoner of war during World War II in Germany where he witnessed the firebombing of Dresden. The senselessness of the death and destruction of this event provoked Vonnegut to write as a cathartic release to cope with its horrors. This episode remains on the periphery in his earlier novels, and not until the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five does Vonnegut devote an entire novel to the Dresden firebombing. Even as he writes about this experience, Vonnegut incorporates science fiction elements such as time travel and aliens to distance himself and his audience from the tragedy that occurred.

The universal problem of pain that human beings endure and inflict upon one another surfaces in each of his novels, but Vonnegut presents this pain with a touch of the absurd, leaving his reader with the question of whether to laugh or cry in response. In spite of the inclusion of fantastic elements, Kathryn Hume argues that these grave concerns give a serious quality to Vonnegut's work (233). Although his writing extends over the entire second half of the twentieth century, Vonnegut's greatest impact occurred during the 1950's and 60's. His reflections on death and pain were appropriate to that stage of American history, the cold war era, when the country was recovering from

World War II and beginning the Vietnam War, and he found a receptive audience in the youth of the 1960's.

Because of his irreverent treatment of serious matters and his overwhelming popular success, Kurt Vonnegut's work almost begs not to be taken seriously. His first three novels appeared as paperback originals, reinforcing his popular success and his critical neglect. Not until the publication of Cat's Cradle in 1963 did any of his books appear in hardcover. An illusory writer whose popularity belies the depth of the themes of his novels, Vonnegut consciously challenges traditional categories of literature. Rejecting the notion that quantity equals quality, he prefers to write books that are narrow and deep rather than wide and shallow; accordingly, the typical length of one of his novels ranges from one hundred fifty to two hundred pages yet addresses serious issues such as death, war, and apocalyptic destruction.

As a writer, he mixes fantasy with reality, humor with seriousness, and concerns about the future of the human race with resignation about human limitations. In spite of (perhaps because of) his status as what Leonard Mustazza calls "a celebrity-writer, a pop icon, an inspiring and trusted voice to rebellious youth," Vonnegut was not given early critical consideration (xxi). Not until the publication of Slaughterhouse-Five in 1969 did critics begin to pay attention to this writer who defied conventionality.

Though initially dismissed as a science fiction writer, over time Vonnegut has proved himself worthy of critical attention. Robert Group recognizes him as "the first major writer since George Orwell and Aldous Huxley to bridge the gulf between science fiction and traditional fiction" (184). Mustazza's introduction to The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut offers a concise history of Vonnegut criticism, and an overview of that

history shows earlier critics searching for labels with which to categorize his fiction. Attempts to define Vonnegut's work continued although his novels and short stories do not quite fit the categories to which they are assigned. Karen and Charles Wood dispel Vonnegut's classification as a science fiction writer in their discussion of how his works transcend the genre and conclude that Slaughterhouse-Five is "the mature fusion of two types of literature into a new form" (154). Just what this new form should be called has been the subject of several analyses of Vonnegut's work.

The first critical review of Vonnegut appeared in The New Republic in 1966. Written by C.D.B. Bryan, this essay labeled him a gentle satirist in the vein of Aristophanes; this designation, Mustazza claims, "initiated a debate about Vonnegut as satirist with which much of the subsequent academic criticism would grapple" (xii). Robert Scholes pioneered Vonnegut criticism and established the tone that other critics would adopt when he labeled him a "black humorist" in 1966. Black humorists use humor to highlight the horrors and excesses of the world in order to make people mindful of the existence of pain, not necessarily to abolish it. In so labeling Vonnegut, Scholes aligns him with other noted black humorists such as Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon. In fact, much of the subsequent criticism groups Vonnegut with these two contemporary writers.

The 1970's was a banner decade for Vonnegut criticism. Critical analysis striving to define Vonnegut's writing peaked during this time, and the amount of attention his work received helped to establish him in both the literary and popular mainstream. Among the writers who examined Vonnegut's novels was Tony Tanner, whose 1971 City of Words analyzes Vonnegut's deft juxtaposing of the real and the

fantastic and explores the relationship between his experiences and the art he creates. Eight critical book length treatments of Vonnegut's work were published in the 70's alone: Peter J. Reed's Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., David H. Goldsmith's Kurt Vonnegut: Fantasist of Fire and Ice, Clark Mayo's Kurt Vonnegut: The Gospel from Outer Space, Jerome Klinkowitz's The Vonnegut Statement, Stanley Schatt's Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Giannone's Vonnegut: A Preface to His Novels, James Lundquist's Kurt Vonnegut, and finally Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald Lawlor's Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut. Each of these books challenges the idea that popular fiction is unworthy of critical analysis and insists on a serious treatment of Vonnegut's themes and stylistic approach.

Although attention to Vonnegut's work waned in the 80's, critics continued to examine his novels. From 1987-1990 five book length studies were published including Kurt Vonnegut: A Comprehensive Bibliography by Asa Pieratt, Julie Huffinan-Klinkowitz, and Jerome Klinkowitz, William Rodney Allen's Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut, Lawrence Broer's Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Leonard Mustazza's Forever Pursuing Genesis: The Myth of Eden in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, and Robert Merrill's Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut. Because earlier analyses had already proved Vonnegut worthy of critical attention, these writers were not limited to defending the author against academic disapproval. Through close examination of Vonnegut's novels, their studies enhance scholarly understanding of the author's overall style and recurrent themes.

Recent criticism has shied away from this enigmatic, paradoxical writer. Although Vonnegut continued to write through the end of the twentieth century, critics

perhaps tired of his thematic repetitions and recycling of characters. A re-examination of his work from a different perspective may revive the dialogue, opening new avenues for discussion of a writer recognized as one of the major voices of post-World War II American literature.

The difficulty in handling Vonnegut's work lies in his use of paradox, including paradoxical literary philosophies. Kathryn Hume highlights this Vonnegut trademark, arguing that in his novels "we find a realistic base (needed for relevance) and a fantastic distortion" (233-34). The most obvious example of this technique comes in Slaughterhouse-Five, where the author juxtaposes the very real firebombing of Dresden, Germany, during World War II with time travel and aliens. This pattern also appears in each of his other novels with the exceptions of Mother Night and Bluebeard. Not only does Vonnegut blend reality with fantasy, he also combines cynicism with optimism. Leonard Mustazza acknowledges Vonnegut's "cosmic pessimism and individual optimism" and explains, "although these statements appear contradictory at first glance [. . .] this paradoxical view of human beings [. . .] finds its way into every single thing that Vonnegut has written" (xxv). This use of paradox extends from Vonnegut's writing style to his personal philosophy.

Over the years, critics have noticed two antithetical tendencies in Vonnegut's work: one toward existentialism and another toward determinism. These two labels recur frequently in Vonnegut criticism with little or no explanation as to how they apply to his novels. The majority of criticism presupposes Vonnegut's existentialist leanings; and, while no critic has labeled Vonnegut a naturalistic writer, several have identified deterministic tendencies in his work. Vonnegut's label as an existentialist writer tends to

be implicitly assumed rather than argued and proven, and critics such as Lawrence Broer and Mustazza who use this label mention it only in passing. Few if any delve into lengthy discussion of how this label applies to the novelist or in what ways his novels provide the justification for the label. One notable exception is Hans van Stralen's "Slaughterhouse-Five, Existentialist Themes Elaborated in a Postmodernist Way," where the author argues in detail how the novel can be seen in relation to Albert Camus' existentialism.

Another example of criticism that assumes Vonnegut's existential influences is Peter Reed's description of The Sirens of Titan as "existential science fiction" because of the protagonist's incorporation of fantasy as a means of understanding his reality (57). Robert Group's article on Vonnegut in The Dictionary of Literary Biography contains many references to Vonnegut's existentialism as follows: (1) "His existential theme is revealed through what has been called the extended joke conceit" (185); (2) Player Piano portrays "an existential vision of mankind adrift (literally and figuratively) in a purposeless universe" (185); (3) Vonnegut's influence is "a mixture of wistful humanism and cynical existentialism" (189). Lawrence Broer acknowledges the protagonist's "awareness of existential responsibility" in Deadeye Dick (149). Mustazza recognizes that "Vonnegut owes much to the existentialists" for his "comic vision of mankind" and calls for man to "escape into new fairytales" as a means to endure the world (xxvii). In each of these instances, the evidence for Vonnegut's existentialism lies in the use of fantasy as a coping mechanism for his characters.

Although in the minority, other critics have explored how determinism plays a role in Vonnegut's work. David Bianculli explains that Galápagos is the culmination of

Vonnegut's previous twenty years of work and refers to other deterministic remarks in Vonnegut's earlier novels, concluding that in Galápagos, "Nature, not man, will ultimately rule the planet" in a Darwinistic paradise (277). Marc Leeds highlights what he calls Vonnegut's philosophical or religious determinism of "the structures in which we find ourselves" (100). Kathryn Hume argues, "Vonnegut's characters face ineluctable pressures exerted against their core identity" (224). Each of these examples focuses on the powerlessness of Vonnegut's characters in his fictional world.

In spite of the critical insistence on Vonnegut's existential or deterministic philosophy, little work has been done to develop either of these ideas, and strictly through critical repetition, Vonnegut's work has become more closely associated with French existentialism than with the determinism of American literary naturalism. Instead of accepting that existentialism is the primary influence on Vonnegut's work, as has been suggested by the frequency of the label, critics must also acknowledge the influence of determinism on his novels and admit the unresolved tension between existentialism and determinism in his books; additionally, critics must recognize a connection between Vonnegut's determinism and the naturalistic impulse of early twentieth-century American literature.

Attempts to classify Vonnegut according to traditional categories, especially the label of existentialism, have limited scholarly understanding of his work. Examination of the research on both existentialism and naturalism in general, as well as that applied to Vonnegut in particular, provides a better understanding of his unique hybrid of the two philosophies. The Sirens of Titan, Cat's Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five are the vehicles for this study, which focuses primarily on Vonnegut's treatment of free will and

determinism in the texts. These three novels, written within a decade (1959, 1963, and 1969 respectively), are perhaps his best known and will probably be his most lasting work because they are most representative of his style and recurring themes.

Both existentialism and naturalism espouse a view of the universe as hostile or indifferent, but they differ in their stance on the individual's freedom. The primary tenet of existentialism rests on the assumption that man has free will. Existentialist writers emphasize the uniqueness and isolation of the human experience and stress freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. To naturalistic writers, however, people are trapped by their circumstances, and, under this assumption, the individual cannot be held responsible for his or her actions.

Predominantly a twentieth-century philosophy concerned with the nature and perception of human existence, existentialist thought is embodied in Jean-Paul Sartre's assumption that existence precedes essence. A Handbook to Literature explains, "The significant fact [of existentialism] is that we and things in general exist, but that these things have no meaning for us except as we can create meaning through acting upon them" (Harmon and Holman 203). Arriving at a concise definition of existentialism challenges any researcher. Philosophers like Albert Camus and Karl Jaspers begin with Sartre's assumption and adapt his thought for their own purposes, but each existentialist writer shares certain common beliefs: existence cannot fully be understood or explained, individuals must take responsibility for their actions, and no standard exists for religious or moral matters.

Existentialism theoretically allows for a hopeful future with limitless options of reforming human nature and society, but the only hope lies within each individual's

choices and actions. This combination of freedom and responsibility is the source of existential angst. Camus illustrates this point using the myth of Sisyphus, who is doomed to the continuous labor of pushing a cumbersome ball uphill only for it to roll back down. The task is his punishment, but he accepts it readily. Anguish may be a universal element of life, but man finds his identity and power in suffering stoically. Critics use this key similarity between Vonnegut's characters and Camus' philosophy as support for Vonnegut's existential leanings. In fact, Jess Ritter associates Vonnegut's protagonists with Camus' Sisyphus, saying they are "satisfied that recognition of the absurd is a sufficient point of departure" (37).

Because existential precepts are far-reaching, many writers have adapted these ideas, and literature has become a significant means of existential expression. Prominent existentialist writers include such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European authors as Eugene Ionesco, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Simone de Beauvoir, Samuel Beckett, and Albert Camus. During the 1940's and 50's, existential writers Sartre and Camus gained wide currency in America, and their existential beliefs influenced many American writers including Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, but a clear distinction must be drawn between French existentialism and its particularly American offspring, black humor, the genre to which Kurt Vonnegut's novels belong.

When American literature has approached existentialist, crisis literature, it becomes primarily literature of the absurd. The philosophical basis for the "absurd" is a form of existentialism that focuses on the meaningless anguish of existence. Black humor is closely related to this type of literature and is distinguished by its bitter, sardonic tone and its use of morbid situations for comic purposes. It lacks the nihilism of

Kafka, Camus, and Sartre, and humor offers the little hope present in the works; examples include Edward Albee, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth.

Robert Hipkiss, while finding similarities between existential thought and post World War II American literature, also makes a distinction between the existentialists and what he calls the absurdists: "The absurdists see man's institutions as corrupt, as do the existentialists, but the absurdists also find man's freedom very limited [. . .] man's instinctive drives [are] responsible for forming his intellectual rationalizations, his free choice [is] largely illusion" (2-3). Max Schulz also identifies black humor as both an offspring of existentialist thought as well as a deviation from fundamental existential ideas: "With black humor, choice poses the primary difficulty [. . .] [Characters in a work of black humor face the] moving forces of life which converge collectively upon the individual" (6-7). And Richard Lehan argues while the existentialist "rejects the teleological belief that history is being directed toward some predetermined end," the black humorist questions how much power the individual holds to effect change (146).

Although these critics notice and identify the divergences post-World War II American literature has from continental existentialism, they do not put forth an argument as to the causes of the departure. Because of the deterministic nature with which black humorists portray life, this type of writing can be seen as an extension and adaptation of the naturalistic vein in American literature; in fact, only the continuation of the naturalistic impulse in American literature can account for black humor's departure from the fundamental existential belief in free will.

Existentialism flourished in continental Europe during the mid-twentieth century; naturalism, on the other hand, profoundly impacted American literature at the turn of the

twentieth century. Its most notable practitioners include Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Frank Norris, but, as indicated by Donald Pizer, the shadow of naturalism falls over the whole of twentieth-century American literature and represents itself in varying degrees of adherence to the philosophy.

Naturalistic writers begin with the assumption that everything real exists in the physical world, and as such, the movement finds its roots in science. A Handbook to Literature clarifies this concept well:

From Newton it gains a sense of mechanistic determinism; from Darwin (the greatest single force operative on it) it gains a sense of biological determinism and the inclusive metaphor of competitive jungle that it has used perhaps more often than any other; from Marx it gains a view of history as a battleground of economic and social forces; from Freud it gains a view of the determinism of the inner subconscious self. (338)

As part of the literary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries influenced by Emile Zola, naturalistic writers theorized that fiction could objectify human life with a type of scientific inquiry. Naturalistic writers viewed human beings as the products of determinism, whether biological, where they are ruled by animalistic instincts engaged in an endless struggle for survival, psychological, where they are ruled by subconscious impulses, or socioeconomic, where they are ruled by social and economic forces beyond their control. While existential anguish may be mental or metaphysical, naturalistic anguish is based solely on the individual's struggle against physical circumstances.

Because the naturalistic writer is concerned with the physical world, he or she objectively presents the fictional material in a realistic manner, and as such naturalism has long been associated with the realistic movement of the late nineteenth century. But John Conder sees the fundamental question of naturalism as whether or not the writer views the plight of man as having free will. Central to establishing an author's place in literary naturalism is the status of freedom in his or her work.

The style of Vonnegut's writing in no way matches a strict adherence to the realistic portrayal of life typically present in a naturalistic work, but this distinction alone should not exclude him from a comparison to the naturalistic writers' philosophy. A strict adherence to the time period and style of the naturalistic writers omits writers such as Eugene O'Neill who continued to be influenced by naturalism even while writing well into the mid-twentieth century, past the heyday of American literary naturalism. Conder applies the concept of naturalism to such texts as Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, which he argues uses deterministic concepts to define a naturalistic vision of man in a broader sense, that man, though unique in nature, is still a part of it.

Naturalism can be seen as the application of principles of scientific determinism to literature. According to Conder, "Determinism plays a central role in American literary naturalism" (17). Loosely defined, determinism contends that given a certain set of conditions only one outcome can occur. All occurrences result from prior events and circumstances. A person's inner life has little bearing on his or her actions because he or she is controlled by external forces rather than asserting his or her will. Naturalism views people as products of their environment, their economic status, their society, and their biological heredity.

Instead of Sartre's existential mantra, "existence precedes essence," a naturalistic writer would argue that existence determines essence. While existential writers explain that a person's actions are an assertion of his or her free will and ultimately determine his or her character (or essence), naturalistic writers insist that a person's physical circumstances determine his or her actions. In other words, people have minimal free will. Determinism thus maintains that people react to stimuli in the environment and physical conditions as opposed to existentialism, which believes that people first act on the physical world. With determinism, all events are caused because nothing contains its own origin. Imagine a row of dominoes. Knocking over the first domino anticipates the chain reaction that follows.

Like the dominoes, all events and people are connected in the physical world; a person cannot be disconnected from his or her biological heredity, socioeconomic status, or psychological make-up. Existentialism, on the other hand, argues that man is an isolated creature who is self-contained and self-sufficient. His actions have consequences for himself alone.

Because determinism is so interrelated with naturalism, a discussion of the background of naturalism set in contrast to Vonnegut's work is appropriate. The issue of free will versus determinism repeatedly surfaces in his fiction without ever being satisfactorily resolved. He deals with the question of free will directly in Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, and Timequake and indirectly in The Sirens of Titan, Cat's Cradle, Mother Night, and Galápagos. Ultimately, Vonnegut questions man's power in an otherwise hostile, indifferent world.

Vonnegut as well as the other American novelists labeled under the term “black humor” cannot be divorced from the roots of naturalistic fiction. The currents of this movement had not quite finished resonating within the American consciousness, and their effects are seen couched within what have been considered existentialist visions of post-World War II literature.

The idea of “modernized naturalism” comes from Donald Pizer’s book, The Theory and Practice of American Literary Naturalism, where he examines the evolution of American literary naturalism during the twentieth century. Paul Civello, too, argues, “as naturalism moves forward through time—that is, as it is ‘re-presented’ in modern and postmodern texts—it is transformed markedly” (2). Pizer has done extensive research into the continuation of naturalism in the American literary landscape and argues that the naturalistic impulse has survived throughout the twentieth century in American literature. According to Pizer, later practitioners in the naturalistic vein include Norman Mailer, William Styron, and Saul Bellow.

Each new generation of writers has echoed traditional naturalistic impulses and introduced their generation’s preoccupations and concerns. Pizer argues that naturalism has persisted through American fiction by transforming itself to fit each new stage. He draws comparisons between contemporary works like Joyce Carol Oates’ them (1969) and Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893); Norman Mailer’s Executioner’s Song (1979) and Dreiser’s An American Tragedy (1925); and Robert Stone’s A Flag for Sunrise (1981) and Norris’ The Octopus (1901). He explains that although the style and focus have changed, the fundamentals have remained:

Limited and deprived characters still struggle to stay afloat in a world of violent destructiveness, and the novels in which they appear still shape themselves into symbolic expressions of major flaws in the American experience. As in much naturalism of the past, the naturalistic occasion is still that of a closed social and moral world and of a figure seeking some way out. (185)

For post-World War II black humorists, this way out is through the existential means of imagination and fantasy. Kurt Vonnegut's novels, representative of post-World War II American literature, confirm this statement and can be examined in light of the influence of French existentialism on American naturalism.

Vonnegut resists tidy classifications in many ways. He combines fiction and reality, history and fantasy, pain and humor. The suffering of Vonnegut's fictional world is both existential and physical. At the root of existential thought is a search for the meaning of existence evidenced in Vonnegut's work through his often-repeated question, "What are people for?" The author examines man's search for purpose in spite of the nagging doubt that a purpose will ever be found.

Those critics who label Vonnegut existential rightfully call attention to the imaginative world that he juxtaposes with the physical world and emphasize his focus on the imagination as a means of functioning, but they also mistakenly ignore the fact that in his novels the material world rivals the fantastic for importance. The writer struggles to understand a world where people flagrantly hurt others with little regard for the consequences. Why do people use their power to act in such vicious ways towards others? He argues that, because of naturalistic determinism, people are not in control of

their actions; instead, they simply react to the biological, physical, social, and economic environment in which they have been placed.

Vonnegut's comments during an interview with Robert Scholes enlighten this discussion: "Well, something that's bothered me about the current black humor, some of it, is that the author seems to regard it as shameful that human beings excrete and have sex lives, you know [. . .] mock people for their bodily functions" (101). Through his work, Vonnegut makes it clear that he understands both needs of human beings: the animalistic drives to eat, excrete, and procreate as well as the higher purposes of creation and self-expression. People contain both very distinct yet vital identities within one single organism. Living in a physical world, human beings must do certain physical things to exist, but existence must also have some purpose above and beyond the mere physical. The author blends the two philosophies of existentialism and naturalism through his dualistic view of man as both a mental and a physical creature where both halves are equally important and interact with the other to determine man's experiences.

Although both existentialism and determinism present an antagonistic world, they differ in man's response to his surroundings. The existential writer portrays action as a subjective assertion of a character's self, while the naturalistic writer objectively depicts characters reacting to stimuli they cannot control. Existentialism and determinism appear to be in complete contradiction, but Vonnegut introduces both concepts with such frequency in his novels that the tension between the two philosophies is another paradox of his fictional world.

Many critics recognize Vonnegut's juxtaposition of incongruent elements but do not also acknowledge his blending of philosophies. Vonnegut certainly has existential

leanings, but to label him as a pure existentialist does disservice to the other influences that affect his philosophy. Just as labeling his works science fiction diminishes recognition of his use of satire, labeling Vonnegut's novels existential also undermines focus on the naturalistic tendencies he incorporates as well. Despite the critical inattention to the naturalistic tendencies in Vonnegut's work, these similarities are not anomalies; instead, Vonnegut has transformed the naturalistic impulse present in earlier twentieth-century literature to fit the concerns of his day, and his work reflects the residual effects of American literary naturalism mingled with continental existentialism.

The Sirens of Titan: Struggling for Purpose

Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre were widely read in America after World War II, and the influence of existentialism became evident in American literature written during that time, notably in the work of Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and Wallace Stevens. This existential influence is also apparent in the work of Kurt Vonnegut, beginning with his second novel, The Sirens of Titan (1959). Critics such as Peter Reed and Jean Kennard argue that this novel corresponds with existential thought by examining man's search to impose meaning on his existence, and Vonnegut certainly focuses on man's quest for significance throughout this book. Unfortunately, the critical focus on Vonnegut's existential influences has overshadowed the deterministic nature of the book, and a re-examination of The Sirens of Titan in light of determinism shows how Vonnegut uses this story to establish the tension between existentialism and naturalism present in his later books.

Vonnegut sets The Sirens of Titan in a zany future, a time where personal space travel is a possibility, chrono-synclastic infundibulas trap adventurous space travelers, and robot aliens control the rise and fall of all Earth's major civilizations. Amidst this madness, Malachi Constant searches for personal meaning. As the book opens, Constant visits Winston Niles Rumfoord, a man with the ability to predict the future because of his entrapment in the infundibula. Constant hopes that Rumfoord will give his life meaning by providing him with a mission to complete.

At this visit, Rumfoord tells Constant that he and Beatrice, Rumfoord's wife, will travel to Mars and have a child together: a son named Chrono. This child, Rumfoord predicts, will acquire a good luck charm of unbelievable importance. Rumfoord also tells

Constant that from Mars he will travel to Mercury back to Earth and eventually to Titan, a moon of Saturn. Both Constant and Beatrice reject Rumfoord's predictions, but in spite of their defiance, all occurs according to Rumfoord's prophecies. Constant and Beatrice do travel to Mars, and Constant sexually assaults Beatrice during the trip. As a result, Beatrice has Constant's son.

During this trip to Mars, Constant enlists in the Martian army, a force created by Rumfoord to attack Earth and prepare the way for his newly invented religion, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Throughout his adventures, Constant is at the mercy of the disembodied Rumfoord. After leaving Mars, Constant does travel to Mercury, back to Earth, and eventually to Titan. Upon arriving on Titan, Constant learns that Rumfoord himself is controlled by the Tralfamadorians, an alien race whose messenger, Salo, is stranded on Titan, awaiting a replacement part for his vehicle serendipitously provided by Chrono. As the book closes, Rumfoord disappears from Titan as a result of a solar storm, Beatrice dies, and Chrono joins the Titanic bluebirds, leaving Constant alone with Salo. As Salo leaves Titan to complete his mission, he drops Constant back on Earth where he dies at a bus stop.

Through the story of Malachi Constant, Vonnegut emphasizes two contradictory themes: (1) human beings must find significance for their existence within themselves and (2) unseen powerful forces control the actions of human beings. Critics who label Vonnegut strictly existential focus primarily on the first theme, man's search for significance, but the second is just as important to Vonnegut's work. Every character in The Sirens of Titan falls under the power of forces greater than him- or herself, and these

controlling forces echo the deterministic elements of earlier naturalistic works, particularly the novels of Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane.

These contradictory themes also correspond to Albert Camus' explanation of the relationship between human beings and the absurd world in which they live. In his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus argues that in spite of their lack of control over their surroundings human beings can still impose meaning on their world by recognizing the absurdity of life; this recognition, he says, is what makes life tragic and Sisyphus heroic:

That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. (377)

Like Camus, Vonnegut, also argues that man lives in an absurd world, but Vonnegut's solution differs markedly from Sisyphus' stoic response to this absurdity. Instead of advocating a callous approach to this absurd world, Vonnegut argues in The Sirens of Titan that people must create meaning in their lives through relationships, humor, and the imagination. Thus, Vonnegut ambivalently approaches both existential and naturalistic philosophy in his novel. At times he seems to adhere strictly to one system of thought; however, he ultimately subverts the reader's expectations by incorporating elements of the other, resulting in a continuous tension between existentialism and naturalism.

The emphasis on deterministic forces that govern people's actions begins with Rumfoord's entrapment in the chrono-synclastic infundibula. Rumfoord is an eccentric American aristocrat who takes his chances in space travel but unfortunately encounters

the infundibula on a trip to Mars. This force traps Rumfoord and his dog Kazak as wave phenomena in a continuous orbit around the solar system and materializes them on Earth at regular intervals, once every 59 days. The entrapment of Rumfoord and his dog in the chrono-synclastic infundibula reinforces the book's deterministic elements. Rumfoord is powerless to change his condition. Not only do he and his dog appear on Earth every 59 days, they encounter other planets at regular intervals as well: they live continuously on Titan but appear on Mars every 111 days and on Mercury every 14 days.

Rumfoord's explanation of the nature of time also emphasizes the deterministic elements in the book. According to his account, the future is pre-written, and individual actions only work to further solidify this future. The analogy Rumfoord draws is that time is like a roller coaster. People can see all the dips and turns ahead of them, but they are unable to change their path. His vision of time underpins a naturalistic view of history: impersonal forces set in motion before a person's birth predetermine his or her fate and continue long after his or her death.

Both Beatrice and Constant are also powerless to decide the course of their lives. In hopes of thwarting Rumfoord's predictions, Constant sells his holdings in Intergalactic Spacecraft, which owns *The Whale*, the only known ship capable of transporting people to Mars. Beatrice, on the other hand, buys Constant's stock, hoping that if she controls this ship, she will also control who travels on it. These maneuvers actually backfire. Beatrice smugly watches the spaceship launch, while entertaining the very Martian agents who will take her to Mars. Ironically, Beatrice proudly feels that she has mastered her own fate and that she is in charge of her destiny, but in fact her actions to elude the destiny her husband offers to her lands her into that same path.

Constant's sale of Intergalactic Spacecraft causes him financial ruin, bringing him to a point of hopelessness where he accepts any offer of escape. After losing all his assets and watching his corporation fail, Constant again searches for purpose in his existence. This time he turns to a letter left for him by his father before his death. In this letter, Noel Constant advises his son that in the case of financial difficulties, he should accept any offer of escape that comes his way, no matter how absurd. Immediately after Constant finishes reading this letter, Wiley and Helmholtz, the same Martian agents that trap Beatrice, approach Constant and offer him a position in the Martian army. Constant sees this offer as a means of escape and willingly accepts the assignment. This incident echoes Donald Pizer's argument that naturalistic novels portray an individual in a closed social environment seeking a way out.

In this way, Beatrice, Constant, and Rumfoord resemble other major characters from naturalistic novels who cannot sense their own entrapment such as Maggie from Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893), Lily Bart from Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth (1905), and Clyde Griffiths from Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925). While echoing the concerns of these traditional naturalistic writers, Vonnegut parodies their techniques by placing his characters in the middle of a chain of deterministic forces; traditional naturalistic characters, on the other hand, are typically at the receiving end of the chain. On one hand, Vonnegut's characters manipulate the world around them; on the other, another character manipulates them. Tony Tanner explains:

It is man's status as agent-victim which preoccupies Vonnegut; once one of his characters comes to see this double aspect of human life and action

he usually, like Malachi, becomes “hopelessly engrossed in the intricate tactics of causing less rather than more pain.” (183)

Boaz, Constant’s commander in the Martian army, also decides to find a place where he can isolate himself so that he can do some good without doing any harm. This dual role of human beings in Vonnegut’s book reinforces the importance the author places on human relationships.

For example, Rumfoord manipulates Beatrice and Constant throughout the novel. Even though he reveals several future events for his wife and Constant, Rumfoord does not reveal all that he knows of the future. Beatrice and Constant are part of Rumfoord’s plan to create an army on Mars composed of humans lured from Earth with promises of riches. Rumfoord’s revelation of key future events actually causes those events to occur. Had Beatrice and Constant not been obsessed with avoiding a trip to Mars, that trip would never have taken place.

Rumfoord’s manipulation of Beatrice and Constant continues when they arrive on Mars. There the two are separated. Beatrice works in Phoebe, the Martian city, and Constant becomes Unk, a private in the Martian army, a force organized by Rumfoord for an eventual attack on Earth. To ensure Martian loyalty to his plan, Rumfoord requires surgical amnesia for each soldier to erase any memory of Earth. He also has an antenna implanted in each soldier’s head. Whenever a soldier disobeys a direct order, an excruciating pain emanates from the antenna warning him to obey. In this way, the Martian commanders require Unk to ~~kill~~ his best friend, Stony Stevenson. Because of a recent memory erasure, Unk does not recognize his friend, so he obeys the command.

After this incident, Unk tries unsuccessfully to escape from Mars with Beatrice and his son; instead, Rumfoord sends Unk to Mercury for three years while the Martian invasion of Earth blows over. This attack is really a suicide mission in the guise of war. The Martian force is ill prepared to challenge the armies of Earth, and this inequality contributes to Rumfoord's ultimate goal. Facing all the resources of all the armies of all the nations of Earth, the Martian force fails miserably. Rumfoord purposely ill equips the Martian soldiers to produce guilt in the Earthlings who gratuitously slaughter the ragtag army; ultimately, Rumfoord hopes this remorse will create a receptive atmosphere on Earth for his newly created religion, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. By making martyrs of the Martian army, Rumfoord effects sympathy and remorse in the people who attacked these poorly armed fellow human beings and offers his religion as a means to alleviate their guilt.

According to Rumfoord's religion, a person must deny him- or herself any advantages he or she has over another person—whether a higher socioeconomic background; advanced physical abilities, beauty, or health; or a superior intellect. To offset any personal advantages, all followers of this religion voluntarily handicap themselves. For example, if a person has perfect eyesight, he or she dons thick lenses to diminish that vision. When Malachi returns to Earth, the followers of this religion welcome him as the prophesied space wanderer, the ironic Messiah of Rumfoord's new religion. Rumfoord displays this space wanderer as a role model for how a person with advantages over others should not act. Constant's example illustrates Rumfoord's belief that God does not favor one person over another.

But even Rumfoord, the ostensible mastermind of all the events in the book, is revealed as being a pawn of the larger scheme of the Tralfamadorians. Once Constant, Beatrice, and Chrono arrive on Titan, the Tralfamadorian messenger Salo reveals that all human history, including the story of Malachi Constant, has been precipitated by the Tralfamadorians as a means to deliver his replacement part, Chrono's good luck charm. All of Rumfoord's maneuverings ultimately brought about the Tralfamadorian plan.

Like Beatrice and Constant, Rumfoord despises the idea of being used, as he explains, "It may surprise you to learn that I take a certain pride, no matter how foolishly mistaken that pride may be, in making my own decisions for my own reasons" (285). Rumfoord, like the other characters, tries to exert his own will in spite of being controlled by others: "All I can say," said Rumfoord from the cocoon, "is that I have tried my best to do good for my native Earth while serving the irresistible wishes of Tralfamadore" (298). Rumfoord's dual role of manipulator and manipulated confirms Tanner's comment about the sense of American literature during the second half of the twentieth century:

There is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous. (15)

Jean Kennard further explains the dual role of each character in this novel: "Each man is seen to be both a suffering victim and an agent of another's suffering" (109).

How a person reacts to this revelation determines his or her character. When Rumfoord realizes the Tralfamadorians are controlling him, he chooses to manipulate other people. Constant and Beatrice offer the best solution: people are all in the same situation, so they should love whoever is around to be loved. The compassion of Constant and Beatrice has no power to change the physical circumstances of the world around them; instead, it effects an internal change in their characters. This dualistic vision of human beings blends both naturalistic and existential ideas. On one hand, like the naturalistic writers, Vonnegut acknowledges the lack of control people have over their circumstances; on the other, like the existential writers, Vonnegut shows that people determine their character through their response to physical circumstances.

Even though Vonnegut echoes the determinism of traditional naturalistic novels, the controlling forces he includes in The Sirens of Titan depart from the observable, measurable forces—such as heredity, socioeconomic status, and psychological processes—of these earlier American novels. As the fantastic elements of the chronosynclastic infundibula and the Tralfamadorians illustrate, Vonnegut's characters are at the mercy of more arbitrary and accidental powers than the forces in traditional naturalistic novels, and this departure suggests Vonnegut's connection to Sartre and Camus' absurd vision of the world.

Traditional naturalistic novels are based on the idea of a logical, scientific, ordered universe where observation produces truth. Naturalistic novels of the classic phase (turn of the twentieth century) follow a logical cause and effect relationship, and readers easily understand the physical circumstances that contribute to a person's predicament; not so in Vonnegut's spin on naturalistic works.

Vonnegut denies such cause and effect in The Sirens of Titan. While the reader can trace back McTeague's fall in Frank Norris' novel of the same name (1899) or Hurstwood's in Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1900), the predicament of Malachi Constant is not easily understood. Although the author acknowledges that forces beyond a person's control run his or her life, no logical observation of those forces helps to understand them. In other words, no meaning exists strictly in the external world. This idea echoes the existential statement at the opening of the novel in which the narrator explains that human beings can only find true meaning for life by looking within themselves.

Because of the influence of modernism and postmodernism on the author's novels, Vonnegut's brand of determinism differs markedly from the turn of the twentieth century variety; instead of presenting the plot chronologically with cause and effect clearly visible, the narrator withholds information from the reader, revealing key points at the last moment. Thus, the determinism of The Sirens of Titan more closely resembles an onion than a straight line or even Rumfoord's analogy of a roller coaster presented earlier in the book itself. Each layer of determining force is peeled back to reveal yet another controlling factor stronger than the first. This technique reinforces Vonnegut's theme that in spite of his search to uncover the purpose for his existence, man's knowledge about life remains limited.

Vonnegut's technique in The Sirens of Titan also expresses the paranoia of the cold war era during which this story was written. Tralfamadore ultimately controls all events in the story of Malachi Constant. In order to get a replacement part for Salo's malfunctioning space ship, the Tralfamadorians focus and modulate impulses from their planet directed toward Earth in order to dictate human history. According to Salo, many

of the wonders of the world such as Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, and Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero, are actually Tralfamadorian messages.

This idea echoes Donald Pizer's sentiment that the resurgence of naturalism in mid-twentieth century American literature "was far more 'cosmic' in tenor, as befits a phase of American history when the euphoria of the immediate postwar years was replaced by the fear and mistrust of the Cold and Korean wars, the McCarthy era, and the birth of an international atomic age" (169). The Tralfamadorian influence on Earth's history thus serves as a metaphor to emphasize deterministic forces outside human control or even human comprehension.

This unique layout emphasizes Vonnegut's point; in spite of a gnawing existential need within each person to find purpose and meaning in his life, Vonnegut denies his reader a solution to this quest by showing that people can never get to the original cause. Some knowledge is possible, but complete knowledge is unachievable. The only thing that peeling back another layer reveals is how many more layers of information there are. Unk's letter to himself also emphasizes this point. Unk learns much about life on Mars, but the more he learns, the more questions he has. He does not learn his name is Malachi Constant, or that he is a pawn in Rumfoord's plan, or that he has killed his best friend. In spite of his perpetual search for the meaning of his life, he does not uncover these vital pieces of information.

Salo's background also illustrates this important idea. According to Tralfamadorian legend, a race of beings similar to humans ruled his planet, but these creatures constantly searched for some higher purpose in life. Like Constant, these creatures never uncover the purpose for their lives. Unable to come up with a meaning

themselves, they invented machines to discover that purpose, but the machines could not find one either. As a result, these early Tralfamadorians created machines to kill themselves off, and these machines eventually rule the planet.

The minor characters of The Sirens of Titan also have little control over their destinies and no means by which to uncover the purpose for their existence. The vast majority of the army of Mars has antennae inserted into their skulls to ensure obedience and loyalty. The followers of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent also recognize the predetermined nature of life on Earth. This religion advocates a rejection of reliance on accidents and luck as a predictor of how much interest God has in the individual. According to Rumfoord, the two chief teachings of this religion are as follows: “Puny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty, and Luck is not the hand of God” (180).

These two fundamental teachings contradict Malachi Constant’s earlier statement that “somebody up there likes [him]” (20). In spite of Constant’s attribution of his good fortune to some greater power that favors him, the true source of his wealth comes from forces present at his birth. His father, Noel Constant, built a billion dollar industry out of stock trades chosen using the first chapter of Genesis as his guide. Out of sheer luck, Noel Constant’s money continued to grow, eventually making him the richest man in America. After his death, Noel’s fortune passed to Malachi, who spent the inheritance with reckless abandon. This parody of random deterministic forces working on people to direct their lives is not too far from Vonnegut’s true suspicion: in spite of an individual’s search for significance, that person has little power over his or her actions.

While using Constant's good luck ironically and mocking the idea of a benevolent force that intervenes in the affairs of men, Vonnegut also reinforces the deterministic idea that a person's fate follows from a prearranged course set up at birth. As Rumfoord acknowledges, "'The most significant accident that happened to you [Constant] was your being born'" (254). Rumfoord's statement reinforces this concept but rejects that God does the choosing; rather, he claims, random deterministic forces decide a person's existence. He explains that on the day Constant was born the richest child in America, many other people were born in very unfortunate situations and their entire lives followed from that beginning.

In The Sirens of Titan, Vonnegut supports the naturalistic idea that a person's socioeconomic, biological, and psychological environments determine his or her destiny, but he also harshly criticizes anyone who uses his or her strengths to take advantage of a weaker person. In order to level the playing field for human beings born disadvantaged, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent encourages its followers to wear handicaps so everyone is equal. People with greater than average strength wear weights; those with better looks disfigure themselves.

In a 1973 interview for Playboy, Vonnegut acknowledges that Darwin's theory of natural selection is most likely correct: weaker people usually succumb to the stronger. But Vonnegut concludes that this should evoke sympathy with others instead of a competition to destroy them: "I'm not very grateful for Darwin, although I suspect he was right. His ideas make people crueler. Darwinism says to them that people who get sick deserve to be sick, that people who are in trouble must deserve to be in trouble" (238). Instead, Vonnegut argues that an awareness of deterministic forces and people's

lack of control over their circumstances should generate sympathy for other people's plights.

In The Sirens of Titan, an outside force controls every character's actions, but this inclusion of deterministic elements does not negate the influence of existentialism on this novel or on Vonnegut's entire body of work. Instead, it creates a tension between the two philosophies that continues in his later books and is never satisfactorily resolved.

Vonnegut constantly subverts his own anticipated meaning, and the tension between existentialism and naturalism remains unsettled. This imbalance illustrates Vonnegut's acceptance of both a world of naturalistic forces that determine one's actions and an individual's existential power to overcome those forces by escaping into fantasy through imagination.

The environment after World War II made existentialism popular for many American writers. Although the majority of Americans viewed this war as justified and necessary, several writers, including Vonnegut, felt haunted by the brutality they witnessed as soldiers in the war. This same feeling of helplessness and disillusionment pervades the Earthlings of Vonnegut's novel after the Martian invasion. Involvement in this massacre shatters the people's visions of right and wrong, good and evil. The masses outside the Rumfoord estate in The Sirens of Titan seek meaning for their lives and turn to Rumfoord to provide it for them.

The plight of the individual man in search of meaning extends to all of mankind through the crowds outside the first materialization as well as the masses who follow Rumfoord's new religion that seems to offer answers to this ubiquitous question: "The riot [outside the Rumfoord estate on the day of the materialization], then, was an exercise

in science and theology—a seeking after clues by the living as to what life was all about” (44).

Each major character also asks about the purpose of life at least once during the book. For example, when Malachi Constant first appears, the narrator explains he is searching for some purpose for his existence. Malachi’s name, the narrator tells us, means faithful messenger, and a restlessness inside Constant tells him that there is more to his life than his playboy existence. Constant has been waiting his entire life to fulfill a purpose, and he accepts Rumfoord’s invitation hoping that he can offer the answer.

Jean Kennard explains that Vonnegut illustrates this existential search not only through the main plot, but also through the minor characters of Ransom K. Fern and Noel Constant (107). For example, Ransom K. Fern asks that “‘If the letter [from Noel Constant to his son after his son’s financial loss] seems to cast the vaguest light on what life might be about, I would appreciate your telephoning me at home’” (85). The letter offers no such clues; instead of providing a purpose for human existence, Noel himself asks about the meaning of life. Once again, Vonnegut frustrates the existential slant of his novel.

This search for the meaning of life in The Sirens of Titan parallels the existential quest for man’s purpose, but in spite of this similarity, Vonnegut’s novel diverges from existentialism on the question of morality. Sartre’s existentialism contains a moral component where the value of something is determined by one’s choosing it. In the deterministic view of life underpinning black humor and naturalism, all actions, even those typically considered good or evil, follow necessarily from controlling forces working on people to bring about their actions. In this way, good and evil are merely

products of a person's background and environment, not reflections of a person's character; they are not subject to moral value judgments. Based on this similarity between black humor and naturalism, Jeffrey Foster concludes, "Black humor, then, owes more to the naturalism of Darwin [. . .] than to the existentialism of Sartre" (49).

As a representative of black humor, Vonnegut's The Sirens of Titan shows characters at the mercy of external forces that determine their actions; therefore, they have no choice or responsibility for those actions. In fact, Malachi Constant's only crime, according to Rumfoord, is attributing his good fortune to God, not luck. Of course, the paradox in Vonnegut's novel comes from his advocacy for empathy to the human plight. If, according to Vonnegut, human beings must sympathize with other human beings and desire to cause less pain to other people, then the writer does make a moral judgment on people who take advantage of and hurt their fellow human beings.

Existentialist writers and thinkers hold to the belief that human beings are self-creating or self-fashioning. Vonnegut's spin on this idea is that human beings have free will in the sense that although they are subjected to certain sociological, biological, economic, or psychological conditions, ultimately they have choices as to how to respond to those conditions. According to Vonnegut, existence does not necessarily precede essence, as Sartre says; instead, a person's essence is determined by many factors present at his or her birth and therefore outside of his or her control.

In this novel, free will exists, but it is not easily exerted. For example, the letter Unk writes to himself is an act of free will where he fights against his physical limitations, specifically the antenna implanted in his skull. Again and again, Vonnegut illustrates that this fight is possible, though difficult. Both Unk and Stevenson are

regarded as heroic because of their overcoming the controlling forces through an exertion of their will. In fact, number seventy-two on Unk's list of things he discovered about life on Mars explains, "The more pain I train myself to stand, the more I learn. You are afraid of the pain now, Unk, but you won't learn anything if you don't invite the pain. And the more you learn, the gladder you will be to stand the pain" (125). Like Camus' Sisyphus, Unk/Constant discovers meaning in his life by interacting with pain. Of course, Unk does not gain complete knowledge of his situation, and again this paradox reinforces the tension between existentialism and naturalism.

The search for the meaning of man's existence permeates the book, but Vonnegut never satisfactorily answers the question he raises, "What are people for?" The only solution he offers is for people to accept the deterministic forces that control their existence while sympathizing with other people who are in the same deterministic universe. This sentimentality is reminiscent of Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, where the reader understands that Maggie is a product of her socioeconomic environment and pities her because of her powerlessness. Like Vonnegut, Crane does not judge the powerless Maggie; instead, he only makes a moral judgment on those unable to sympathize with her plight. Donald Pizer argues that naturalistic fiction emphasizes human worth: "These writers [Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris], I believed, were expressing a sense of the worth of the human enterprise whatever the limitations placed on human volition by the immediacies of social reality" (6). Like Crane, Kurt Vonnegut also advocates pity for his powerless characters.

Constant eventually learns this lesson and teaches Beatrice and Chrono the importance of loving other people. Beatrice's final entry in her book about the true

purpose of life reinforces this idea: “The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody [. . .] would be to not be used for anything by anybody” (310). At this point in the novel, Beatrice recognizes her limited knowledge of the forces that control the world around her, and this recognition compels her to focus on those things she can comprehend, the people in her life. Through this statement, she explains that human beings exist for one another. Constant agrees: ““A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved”” (313). The lesson that Vonnegut offers through The Sirens of Titan has both naturalistic and existential roots: it does not matter whether people are determined to act a certain way or whether people are free to choose for themselves; regardless of who controls life, the purpose of mankind is to love one another.

Cat's Cradle: Undermining Science and Faith

While several critics have examined Kurt Vonnegut's The Sirens of Titan in light of existentialism, little work has been done to make this same connection to Cat's Cradle (1963); instead, critical interpretations of this book traditionally label it either satire or apocalyptic fiction. And for good reason—the book does incorporate both satire and apocalyptic fiction, as well as several other genres. However, this critical monopoly undermines attention to any philosophical influences on Cat's Cradle. A re-examination of the novel in light of existentialism and naturalism reveals that Vonnegut's outrageous story of unbridled scientific inquiry continues the tension between the two philosophies set in motion by The Sirens of Titan.

The basic plot of the novel revolves around John, a journalist nominally involved in writing a book about Felix Hoenikker's life on the day the atomic bomb, his creation, was dropped on Hiroshima. Unfortunately, John begins writing this book after Hoenikker's death, so he must rely on the second-hand accounts of the scientist's children to reconstruct the events of that day. As he works on the novel, John reveals Hoenikker as a monster of scientific inquiry because of the devastation to humanity caused not only by his atomic bomb but also by ice-nine, his final invention.

Though John only sporadically attempts to write this book about *The Day the World Ended*, coincidences keep bringing Hoenikker's family into his path. A different writing project brings John to Ithaca, New York, Hoenikker's hometown. This coincidence forces John to resume his project, and he interviews a coworker of the late Hoenikker, Dr. Asa Breed. During this interview, John learns of the possibility of ice-nine, though Breed denies the existence of this substance.

Ice-nine comes from Vonnegut's fanciful idea that there are many varieties of ice, all with different freezing points. For example, the ice-nine variety of Cat's Cradle crystallizes water at 114.4 degrees Fahrenheit. According to Breed's explanation, this seed of ice-nine can infect any water it contacts, setting off a chain reaction that solidifies whatever it touches. In spite of Breed's denial, John later learns that ice-nine does exist and that Hoenikker distributed this final invention to his children prior to his death.

Through various coincidences, John eventually arrives on San Lorenzo, an island nation ravaged by disease and poverty. This island is also home to Bokonon, a self-proclaimed holy man who, like Rumfoord in The Sirens of Titan, creates a religion to help people cope with the crippling effects of their physical circumstances. This trip once again draws John into Hoenikker's world: the scientist's three children are all on San Lorenzo to celebrate the inauguration of the middle son, Frank, as the country's new president. Ice-nine also resurfaces on this island when Papa Monzano, the island's dictator, ingests a chip of it to commit suicide; through him, the sea becomes infected, setting off a string of events that eventually brings life on Earth to a halt. John temporarily survives this devastation, and together with a few other survivors, he lives out his final days seeking the meaning of life on Earth.

Through this story of Felix Hoenikker and Bokonon, Vonnegut creates a tension between naturalism and existentialism, two very different ways of interpreting man's relationship to the physical world, ambivalently introducing both philosophies while advocating neither. Because of his scientific manipulation of the physical world, Hoenikker represents the deterministic aspects of naturalism; Bokonon, on the other hand, represents the existential search for meaning in a world one cannot control. The

narrator lives between these two worlds, writing a book about Hoenikker while being drawn ever closer to the world of Bokonon. The struggle of the novel parallels John's inner conflict between Hoenikker's rational, scientific view of the world and Bokonon's belief that people impose their own meaning on the world around them. Eventually, the two worlds collide, and John faces a crisis of both science and faith in the destruction that follows.

Vonnegut uses the exaggerated Hoenikker to examine the danger of unchecked scientific inquiry and of a deterministic worldview. As brilliant as Hoenikker may be, the scientist lacks vision to understand the destructive power of any of his creations. The scientist is curious about the world around him, but his curiosity does not extend beyond the physical. To him, truth is merely what can be seen and observed. He lacks human relationships, even within his family: he has no friends, barely knows his own children, and once even tips his wife for serving him coffee. Hoenikker's tampering with water, the foundation of all life on Earth, emphasizes his disconnection from humanity. In this way, Hoenikker represents pure scientific research without conscience.

Hoenikker also faces no moral dilemma in inventing the atomic bomb; he simply creates because he can. In response to a fellow scientist's comment on the day of the testing of the atomic bomb that "Science has now known sin," Hoenikker replies, "What is sin?" (21). This statement connects Hoenikker to turn of the century naturalistic writers, such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris, who observed behavior as merely the product of a person's physical circumstances and placed no moral judgment on anyone for his or her actions. However, Hoenikker differs from these naturalistic writers because he also lacks empathy with other human beings. The

devastation his invention causes poses no challenge to his ethics because he has none. In this way, he parallels the Tralfamadorians of The Sirens of Titan, who manipulate all of human history yet have no personal connection to them.

This concern about unchecked scientific inquiry re-emerges in Vonnegut's commencement address to Bennington College graduates of 1970. Earlier in his life he "thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked, and then make it work better. [. . .] Scientific truth," he suggests, "was going to make us *so* happy and comfortable" (159-160). But, Vonnegut concludes, "What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everyone there" (161). Advances in American science created the atomic bomb, giving the United States a great advantage over the Japanese in World War II; however, according to Vonnegut, the atomic bomb was an abuse of science by a stronger country attacking a weaker one.

Vonnegut also explores this theme in The Sirens of Titan through the massacre of the Martian army by the overpowering armies of Earth. In both Cat's Cradle and The Sirens of Titan, this abuse results from a stronger power taking advantage of a weaker one. This theme of unfair domination of one nation over another based on advanced scientific weaponry continues in Vonnegut's next novel, Slaughterhouse-Five, which centers on the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, during World War II. This theme also recalls Vonnegut's criticism of an application of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection to society, otherwise known as social Darwinism. As shown in the previous chapter, Vonnegut rejects the conclusion that people who succeed deserve to succeed and people who fail deserve to fail. Instead, he argues that recognizing people are at the

mercy of forces greater than themselves should effect empathy on behalf of others.

Robert Hipkiss explains, “Vonnegut expresses at once the need to be kind, and to try to be moral, while at the same time viewing the universe as deterministic and human choice as based on rationalization” (120). In this way, Vonnegut echoes the concerns of traditional naturalistic writers of the turn of the twentieth century. This theme also reinforces Vonnegut’s preoccupation with man’s status as both an agent of pain and destruction in the form of war and weaponry and a victim of pain and destruction caused by the brutality of others.

But these naturalistic concerns do not dominate the text. Vonnegut uses Bokononism to counterbalance the deterministic forces that rule the physical world. Unlike, Hoenikker, Bokonon understands a mental reality, one more powerful than the surface physical reality. For example, in seeking to explain man’s purpose for existence, Bokonon rejects superficial, objective connections between people such as nations, companies, or states; instead, he argues that God organizes people in karasses, teams assembled by God to do his work. The members of these teams, John explains, may be unaware of their part in God’s work, and that work may also be outside the scope of human comprehension. Although Vonnegut recognizes human limitations in the face of scientific developments, he does not look to scientific, objective inquiry—the origin of these devices that threaten human existence—for salvation. Instead, like the existentialists, Vonnegut advocates an inner search for meaning in spite of the absurd conditions of the world.

Bokononism illustrates this existential search by explaining the human need to impose meaning on physical reality through imagination. According to *The Books of*

Bokonon, God created all living creatures out of mud, but man was distinct from these other creatures:

Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. 'What is the purpose of all this?' he asked politely. 'Everything must have a purpose?' asked God. 'Certainly,' said man. 'Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,' said God. (177)

By his very nature, man must go on a quest for awareness, even if this quest is self-delusional. Another of Bokonon's sayings reinforces this fundamental difference between man and the animals: "Tiger got to hunt, / Bird got to fly; / Man got to sit and wonder, 'Why, why, why?' / Tiger got to sleep, / Bird got to land; / Man got to tell himself he understand" (124). Thus, Vonnegut presents his own "chicken or the egg" question: Is it man's nature that dictates his personal search for meaning (naturalism), or does his personal search for meaning dictate his nature (existentialism)? In Cat's Cradle, Vonnegut presents but never answers this question, leaving an unresolved tension between the two philosophies.

Instead, he suggests that this question cannot be answered. According to Bokonon, any person claiming to possess complete knowledge about how the world works is foolish. This knowledge may exist, but any human endeavor to attain it will almost certainly be incomplete; instead, the best people can do is create personal structures of meaning for the world around them. Bokonon's encounter with the Episcopalian woman at the beginning of the novel illustrates this point:

The lady claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly. She could not understand why anyone should be puzzled about what had been or about what was going to be. [. . .] She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing. (13)

Just as the layering of determining forces in The Sirens of Titan reveals man's limited knowledge and lack of control, the undercutting of religion and the man-made constructs of reality in Cat's Cradle demonstrates that man can understand very little of the world around him.

Because John connects the worlds of Hoenikker and Bokonon, he also reinforces the tension between existentialism and naturalism in the novel. Cat's Cradle begins with John stating that he has been driven by outside forces:

Somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there. (11)

John repeatedly tells the reader that powerful forces have converged on him to determine his actions, and the plot relies on unexplained coincidences that manipulate each character's movements.

Bokononism appeals to John because it makes some meaning out of these coincidences. Inherent in Bokononist belief is the idea of "zah-mah-ki-bo," meaning "Fate—inevitable destiny" (126). When Frank discusses John's zah-mah-ki-bo, John explains: "He made me feel as though my own free will were as irrelevant as the free will of a piggy-wig arriving at the Chicago stockyards" (128). John's fate depends on

circumstances outside his control, including both material processes reminiscent of those present in earlier naturalistic novels and cosmic, absurd forces similar to Sisyphus' rock.

This concept of inevitable destiny also connects Cat's Cradle to The Sirens of Titan. Though discussing the nature of time, Rumfoord's predictions of the future emphasize Beatrice and Constant's lack of control over their own actions. John, too, understands that he can do little to determine the course of his life. But, unlike Beatrice and Constant, John becomes passive and a mere observer of what fate holds for him.

Not only does this inclusion of fate connect the two novels, it also connects them to naturalistic novels of the classic phase where people are not responsible for their actions. If an outside force controls all the actions of every character, as John suggests, no one can be held responsible for their actions. And, in fact, Vonnegut does simply portray the actions of the characters in Cat's Cradle rather than cast judgment on what occurs in this novel.

As John explains at the opening of Cat's Cradle, the controlling forces of the novel are both "conventional and bizarre" (11). Not only does John repeat this sentiment throughout the book, the events of his life also reinforce the power of external forces. John just so happens to be sent on two assignments in the vicinity of Hoenikker children or acquaintances. He also just so happens to be asked by Frank Hoenikker to become president of San Lorenzo, which saves him from the fate of the rest of the people on the island, certain death by ice-nine. These unexplained cosmic forces parallel the absurd, all-controlling, deterministic forces at work in The Sirens of Titan, such as the chronosynclastic infundibula and Tralfamadorian manipulation.

Another example of the absurd deterministic forces in Cat's Cradle is the environment of San Lorenzo, which dictates the despair of its people. The people of San Lorenzo suffer from diseases they cannot control; in fact, they are "at a loss to treat or even name [them]" (87). Julian Castle and his son go to the jungle to help the natives who are dying of bubonic plague; despite Castle's efforts, little change occurs. The impersonal deterministic force of disease overwhelms his ability to oppose it. In fact, the absurdity of this situation turns Castle to humor as a coping mechanism. Charles Harris explains: "At the height of the epidemic, Castle wanders into the dark and begins shining a flashlight 'over all the dead people stacked outside.' Turning to his son, who had followed him, Castle giggles, 'Son, [. . .] someday this will all be yours'" (112). This gallows humor mirrors Bokonon's sardonic response to the economic conditions of San Lorenzo.

But Vonnegut not only examines the comprehensible, observable conditions that control human life, he differs from the traditional naturalistic writers by also including incomprehensible forces that direct human life: "Everybody was bound to fail, for San Lorenzo was as unproductive as an equal area in the Sahara or the Polar Icecap. At the same time, it had as dense a population as could be found anywhere, India and China not excluded" (94). How the people survive is unexplained, leaving the reader to question the possibility of such a condition, and this is Vonnegut's point. People struggle in his world, not only against understandable—and presumably controllable—conditions, but also against absurd, impossible, and incomprehensible forces.

As in The Sirens of Titan, Vonnegut again creates tension between existentialism, man's need to impose meaning on his world, and determinism, man's powerlessness to effect change. The image of Bokonon at the end of the book illustrates this paradox:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (191)

This image suggests defiance of outside forces while still succumbing to them. Like Albert Camus' Sisyphus, Bokonon's defiance is meaningless except to himself; his wish suggests the absurdity of the world, his acceptance of this absurdity, and his exertion of his own existence in spite of the absurdity. Bokononism represents the existential escape from the physical limitations of the world, yet the closer John gets to Bokononism, the more willing he is to accept his powerlessness in the face of forces that control his life.

Thus Vonnegut's vision simultaneously echoes and departs from the traditional existential view of the world. Vonnegut responds in his interview with Robert Scholes, "I got to thinking about this existential business, and Camus and the myth of Sisyphus and all of these things, and it seemed to me that the French go on and on so about bearing things but they never give you much in their works to make things more bearable" (108). The tools Vonnegut offers as coping mechanisms in Cat's Cradle—just as he does in The Sirens of Titan—are laughter, human relationships, and imagination.

A complete resignation to the determining factors of one's life should lead to a fatalistic view of life; however, Vonnegut does not recommend a nihilistic response to this deterministic universe. Sherman Krebbs, the artist who watches John's apartment while he is out of town, demonstrates this point. Vonnegut satirizes nihilism in Krebbs's ridiculous destruction of John's apartment; the artist kills John's cat and writes nonsense poetry on his walls.

Only through Bokonon does Vonnegut offer a satisfying solution to man's limitations: to live within the constraints one is placed in, to laugh at the absurdity of the human condition, and not to take life too seriously. Bokonon does these things by creating a playful religion told through calypsos, incorporating whimsical sacred rites such as foot rubbing. Vonnegut advocates illusions as a coping mechanism for the pain of this world, but these illusions must not harm other people. Krebbs's nihilistic response does not satisfy because he responds to pain by creating more pain; similarly, Vonnegut criticizes Hoenikker's manipulation of the physical world because his creations bring about death and destruction. Instead, Vonnegut is primarily interested in breaking the cycle of man as agent-victim. Bokononism satisfies this condition because Bokonon, like Boaz in The Sirens of Titan, seeks to create less rather than more pain in the world

Another point of tension between naturalism and existentialism in the text is in the economy of San Lorenzo. The fictional island of San Lorenzo is a very poor nation that barely survives economically. Because they cannot produce a better physical reality for their people, the founders of this society instead produce a better mental reality by creating a new religion. Lionel Boyd Johnson becomes the persecuted holy man in the jungle, known later as Bokonon, and Earl McCabe rules the country and outlaws

Bokononism. This way, every citizen becomes important to the overall scheme of capturing Bokonon. Over time, this silly drama becomes reality, and the hook that was once simply a prop to heighten excitement was actually put to use in executions. Through this drama, Vonnegut illustrates his recurrent theme of man's need to impose meaning on his life and for his existence to serve a purpose.

All Bokonon can offer is lies, but these lies are comforting. When they cannot escape from the physical circumstances of their existence, the people of San Lorenzo tell themselves lies in order to survive, and their perception becomes their reality. Thus, Vonnegut illustrates that human survival is as much dependent on mental perception as it is on physical well-being. These lies illustrate both the human need for meaning and the power of the human imagination. While recognizing man's need for purpose, Vonnegut also undercuts man's attempts at finding that purpose by questioning any attempt he makes at creating meaning by calling Bokonon's solution lies.

Bokononism illustrates Vonnegut's understanding that religion is simply a manmade construct to help humans cope in this physical world. Lawrence Broer explains the implication of this solution:

Rather than truth, the cynical Bokonon, whose social utopianism had failed to alleviate the suffering of San Lorenzans, encourages the population to turn away from thinking about things as they are and to live in harmony with seemingly harmless, comforting lies called "foma" that make their remaining darkening moments less terrifying. The Bokononist faithful do not have to worry about reality because reality is too terrible to

contemplate, and because, says Bokonon, “everything happens as it was meant to happen.” (63)

Thus, the people of San Lorenzo live in a sort of drama, a work of art that calls upon them to act out certain roles and forget about their physical limitations and material misery.

The religion, John insists, is all shameless lies, but these lies are necessary to the mental well-being of the people that need it to cope. In order to cope in a world where they have no real escape, people rely on faith. Bokononism offers people this remedy: like existentialism, it gives man purpose. Bokononism has no power to effect physical change, only internal change, and even that power is undercut by the Bokonon’s own assertion that all mental constructs of reality are merely functional lies. Like existentialism, Bokonon’s religion allows man to impose his own meaning on the external world around him. But this meaning is illusory at best and reinforces the tension between existentialism and naturalism in the text.

What critics have always attributed to Vonnegut’s existential influence, the power of imagination in his books--present in Cat’s Cradle through Bokononism, can also be seen as the influence of naturalism on his books. The deterministic socioeconomic forces that brought disease and hunger to the people of San Lorenzo precipitated their need for imposing existential meaning on their world.

Even though Bokononism parallels existential thought by allowing man to impose meaning on his external world, the fictional religion also emphasizes naturalistic thought about the necessity of religion. For example, Sigmund Freud’s view of religion as an attempt to control the sensory world out of psychological necessity underscores the

naturalistic, objective study of religion. Karl Marx's ideas on religion share the same core concern: "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions" (42). Even while recognizing religion as an artifice, Vonnegut still advocates the need for it, and his novel precariously balances between naturalistic and existentialist views about the purpose of life.

Bokononism particularly underscores the tension between existentialism and naturalism in this book. As Freud and Marx's work suggests, McCabe and Johnson cannot alleviate the physical suffering of the islanders, and these conditions necessitate the illusion offered by Bokononism:

McCabe and Bokonon did not succeed in raising what is generally thought of as the standard of living [. . .] The truth was that life was as short and brutish and mean as ever [. . .] But people didn't have to pay as much attention to the awful truth [. . .] They were all employed full time as actors in a play they understood, that any human being anywhere could understand and applaud. (119)

Vonnegut continues the tension between naturalism and existentialism in the book by also examining the power of the existential imagination. On the day the atomic bomb is dropped on Japan, Hoenikker is playing the children's game of cat's cradle with a piece of string. In his game of cat's cradle, Hoenikker uses imagination to see something that is not physically there. Newt later paints a picture reminiscent of these black strings: "the scratches formed a sort of spider's web, and I [John] wondered if they might not be the sticky nets of human futility hung up on a moonless night to dry" (113). Newt calls

this seemingly incoherent pattern a cat's cradle, and he says it means whatever the observer determines it to mean. From this image comes the novel's title, and this image reinforces Vonnegut's questioning of the nature of reality in this book. Is reality what exists in the physical world, or is reality the meaning man imposes on the physical?

In this case, Newt criticizes the existential idea of perception having much impact on reality: "No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look at all those X's. [. . .] No damn cat, and no damn cradle"(114). According to Newt, a person's perception has no connection with his or her physical reality. Newt also applies this idea of the cat's cradle, the human power of self-delusion, to marriage: "From the way she talked [. . .] I [John] thought it was a very happy marriage.' Little Newt held his hands six inches apart and he spread his fingers. 'See the cat? See the cradle?'" (122). Newt also applies the idea of the cat's cradle to religion. Newt, as Vonnegut's mouthpiece, rejects both the physical reality and the existential perception of these strings, thereby reinforcing the tension between naturalism and existentialism in the text. In Cat's Cradle, neither the mere physical nor the mere imagination is powerful enough to have meaning in and of itself.

Through this novel, Vonnegut offers no real answers to the problems that people face. He seems to offer various solutions; however, he undercuts these solutions through cynicism, humor, and the absurd. And his book arrives at no real answer to the question, "How, then, should a person live?" His readers expect an answer since Vonnegut raises the question, but the author frustrates the reader's expectations by questioning everything that he introduces.

In Cat's Cradle, the struggle of the individual against their physical environment, typical of turn of the twentieth century naturalistic writing, is replaced by the struggle of the individual against their physical limitations. For it is being alive that actually traps human beings. Even Bokkononism recognizes this fact by explaining that people are merely mud in search of meaning. The last rites of Bokkononism state that man is simply glorified mud. Before Papa Monzano dies, Dr. von Koenigswald recites these phrases with him: "I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around. [. . .] The only way I can feel the least bit important is to think of all the mud that didn't even get to sit up and look around.'" (149). This mud, including man, is the same mud at the mercy of the overwhelming power of ice-nine. But people are not trapped so much in their physical environment as they are trapped within themselves. Their bodies, the physical part of themselves, are subject to many physical things outside of their control, including disease, economic status, and death. Freedom, therefore, is only found within themselves; the mind is the only escape mechanism they have.

Vonnegut recognizes man as both an agent and victim of pain; however, it is man's ability to choose his position that concerns the author. He criticizes Felix Hoenikker for his lack of insight into the consequences of his creations, yet he also acknowledges Hoenikker's insatiable desire to manipulate the world around him. Hoenikker, therefore, serves as a metaphor for man's entrapment by his psychological processes. Thus Vonnegut is primarily occupied with the principal struggle of man as being a prisoner of his life.

The focus of his inquiry is the duality of man: an external, physical body bound by laws of nature and science and an internal consciousness of man seeking

understanding, meaning, and purpose, bound only by the limits of his own imagination. In Cat's Cradle, as in The Sirens of Titan, forces outside a person's control work to determine the course of his or her life, but within that world a person determines his or her response to that control in how they treat other people. As John May explains, "Despite the *foma*, one still feels certain that Vonnegut like the Bokononists holds at least one thing sacred. And that is man—'just man' [. . .] Not the man of pretenses who brings the world to destruction, but the man who realizes his extreme limitations" (129).

Through Cat's Cradle, Vonnegut echoes the concern of The Sirens of Titan and sets the stage for the themes of his next novel, Slaughterhouse-Five. In each of these novels, people are at the mercy of impersonal deterministic forces, but they can choose their response to these forces. The Sirens of Titan can only offer loving fellow human beings as a coping mechanism; Cat's Cradle offers religion and imagination but undercuts these solutions by revealing them as simply illusions; and Slaughterhouse-Five offers fantasy and imagination in the guise of space and time travel as escape from the realities of World War II and the Dresden firebombing.

Slaughterhouse-Five: Confronting Reality through Imagination

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) is Kurt Vonnegut's most personal book. The author finally addresses the Dresden firebombing in full detail after touching briefly on the subject in each of his earlier books, and through the story of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut attempts to relieve his own anxiety about what he witnessed as a prisoner of war in Dresden during World War II. This book focuses specifically on the death and destruction of that war, but it also uses the war as a symbol of the universality of death. In this novel, Vonnegut again addresses man's status as both an agent and victim of pain, and through this theme, Vonnegut explores the inevitability of traumatic events and also offers methods by which people can cope with them.

Vonnegut uses Slaughterhouse-Five to emphasize the power of the imagination in the face of controlling deterministic forces. As in The Sirens of Titan and in Cat's Cradle, Vonnegut again incorporates both existential and naturalistic elements to develop this theme. In this novel, however, the tension between determinism and existentialism becomes stronger than in Vonnegut's previous novels because Pilgrim himself is living in a deterministic physical world while simultaneously escaping into a world of fantasy through his imagination.

Slaughterhouse-Five tells the story of Billy Pilgrim's war experience, interweaving fantasies of space aliens and time travel with realistic episodes from his life. Pilgrim's fragmented existence begins when he becomes "unstuck in time" (23). Instead of being bound by a linear reality, the protagonist jumps between many different scenes in his life: his birth, a childhood trip to the Grand Canyon and Carlsbad Caverns, his father teaching him to swim, school, marriage, war experiences, and adulthood. His time

travel follows no pattern, and he cannot control where he will arrive next; nevertheless, no matter how bizarre Pilgrim's adventure becomes, his Dresden experience remains the focal point of the book. By combining historical reality with the science fiction imagination, this novel, perhaps more than any of his previous ones, stresses the interconnectedness of both the physical and mental realities of human beings.

In spite of the inclusion of fantastic elements in Pilgrim's story, the reader cannot forget that Vonnegut's Dresden experience was real because the author is present throughout the novel. Vonnegut makes his personal attachment to the story known through an autobiographical introductory chapter concerning his struggle to put his war experience into print. By not separating this information from the main story line in a preface, Vonnegut interweaves the facts of his own experience with the fiction of Billy Pilgrim's story. In fact, Vonnegut himself reappears at various points in the novel as a character in Pilgrim's war experience. After taking the reader on Pilgrim's fantastic voyage through time and space, the narrator returns the book to physical reality as the book closes. At this point, the story again becomes autobiographical with no distance between the narrator and the author.

By combining realistic historical events from the physical world with fantastic experiences from the science fiction imagination, Vonnegut incorporates both naturalistic and existential elements in Slaughterhouse-Five. The realistic events represent a physical, naturalistic world where man is condemned to forever struggle against his physical limitations, while the use of imagination represents a mental, existential world where freedom and escape are possible through human creativity. By blurring the line

between reality and fantasy, the structure of the novel suggests the importance of both worlds to human existence.

Vonnegut uses the backdrop of the bombing of Dresden to explore the physical limits of mankind. John May explains the function of the deterministic tone in Slaughterhouse-Five: “Part of the sameness that Billy notices in his unstuck pilgrimage is the universality of death and the unavoidability of war” (29). By repeating “so it goes” after each death throughout the novel, Vonnegut underscores the fact that death is a certainty human beings cannot escape. Death comes to human beings simply because they are alive. The narrator also uses this phrase to illustrate the human connection to, and insignificance in, the physical world by repeating “so it goes” after the deaths of other animate and inanimate objects: the novel, a bottle of champagne, a dog, body lice, pigs, and cows.

Vonnegut also emphasizes Pilgrim’s connection to the physical laws of nature during his train ride to the prisoner of war camp. At this point, the laws of nature control both Pilgrim’s actions and his circumstances:

Billy coughed when the door was opened, and when he coughed he shit thin gruel. This was in accordance with the Third Law of Motion according to Sir Isaac Newton. This law tells us that for every action there is a reaction which is equal and opposite in direction. (80)

Vonnegut again shows the connection of human beings with other physical objects by commenting, “This [the Third Law of Motion] can be useful in rocketry” (80). Through this image, Vonnegut emphasizes that human beings are subject to the same laws that govern the rest of nature.

As in The Sirens of Titan and again in Cat's Cradle, the human lack of control over physical circumstances recurs throughout Slaughterhouse-Five. After being captured by the Germans, the American soldiers have no control over their surroundings or their own bodies. Their guards lead them to a mass shower where "there were no faucets they could control. They could only wait for what was coming" (84). Earlier, Vonnegut explains that the Germans imprison their captives in train cars where "[n]obody was to get off until the final destination" (70). Vonnegut describes the soldiers on the train as being at their most human, in other words, their most vulnerable.

This loss of control reduces the soldiers to their basest instincts and functions of eating and excreting. The prisoners were functioning at the physiological level of pure survival, yet these soldiers did not merely become hungry animals. Vonnegut explains, "When food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful. They shared" (70). Each soldier recognizes his connection to the other soldiers, and instead of fighting over food, they help one another. This episode also recalls Malachi Constant's statement in The Sirens of Titan: "A purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" (313). It also connects Vonnegut to naturalistic writer Stephen Crane, who encouraged readers of his Maggie: A Girl of the Streets to recognize the human lack of control over circumstances and empathize with other powerless human beings.

Vonnegut's presentation of Pilgrim during his trek to Dresden emphasizes the author's compassion for people because of their powerlessness over deterministic forces. Vonnegut presents an absurd picture of Billy, a chaplain's assistant, trudging through the front lines. When Pilgrim returns to Germany after attending his father's funeral, his

regiment is being destroyed by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge; therefore, Pilgrim cannot obtain a helmet or combat boots. He continues to wear the cheap, low-cut civilian shoes that he wore for his father's funeral. One of the heels is broken off and makes him bob up and down, adding to his clownish appearance.

After capture by German soldiers, Pilgrim obtains a coat that does not fit him. The coat has a fur collar, which resembles a small deformed animal. Because he cannot wear the coat, he uses it as a muff. Vonnegut, as the narrator, explains, "It was Fate, of course, which had costumed him—Fate, and a feeble will to survive" (151). This statement reinforces the deterministic tone of the book. Pilgrim's appearance subjects him to harsh treatment. At the prisoner of war camp, the German guards "found him to be one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War Two" (90). The English soldiers also at the camp think he has lost his dignity as a soldier and as a human being.

As he marches through Dresden with the other American prisoners of war, the residents find him laughable. A surgeon in the city encounters him and finds his attire reprehensible. He accuses Billy of finding war to be a comical thing (151). Even while presenting Pilgrim as practically cartoonish, Vonnegut advocates sympathy on his behalf by acknowledging that he cannot help how he looks. Pilgrim represents Vonnegut's view of all human existence, burdened with weaknesses and lacking any control.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, the many problems Vonnegut introduces stem from Pilgrim's own humanity. This novel reveals that being human actually predisposes people to certain forces outside of their control, including their own human nature. For example, one governing force in Pilgrim's life is psychological determinism. In Sanity

Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Lawrence Broer explores the recurring image of insanity in this and other Vonnegut novels. Pilgrim's marriage to Valencia falls into this category: "Billy didn't want to marry ugly Valencia. She was one of the symptoms of his disease. He knew he was going crazy when he heard himself proposing marriage to her" (107). Billy's actions are automatic responses to internal psychological processes. Vonnegut reinforces this idea when he compares human beings to machines: "Lionel Merble was a machine. Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine" (154). This man as automaton image echoes the radio-controlled soldiers of The Sirens of Titan, and this repeated comparison of man to machine reiterates Vonnegut's idea that man is limited by his very nature and psychological make-up.

Not only are people limited by their physical bodies, the novel suggests that human beings are also limited by their physical circumstances. According to the Tralfamadorians, people are trapped by their environment. Billy understands this idea because he "in fact, had a paperweight in his office which was a blob of polished amber with three ladybugs embedded in it" (77). The blob of amber image, symbolic of man's physical entrapment, resurfaces in the form of several domes in the novel. For example, Pilgrim's small coat with the fur collar that he uses as a muff comes from a dome shaped pile of coats whose owners have died earlier in the prison camp. In the Tralfamadorian zoo, Pilgrim is enclosed in a "geodesic dome." Vonnegut explains: "The atmosphere outside the dome was cyanide, and Earth was 446,120,000,000,000 miles away" (112). Pilgrim has little hope of escape.

Another indication of the deterministic tone of the book is the Tralfamadorian explanation of Pilgrim's entrapment in time. According to the aliens, in addition to his physical entrapment, Pilgrim is also trapped in time:

This was only the beginning of Billy's miseries in the metaphor. He was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe. The far end of the pipe rested on a bi-pod which was also bolted to the flatcar. (115)

This explanation parallels Rumfoord's analogy of time as a roller coaster from The Sirens of Titan and the inevitable destiny of Cat's Cradle.

Just as he does in The Sirens of Titan, Vonnegut overwhelms his reader with how hopeless man's situation is, again echoing the condition of Camus' Sisyphus. Not only is Pilgrim at the mercy of psychological processes that dictate his action; he also is at the mercy of death and time and the Germans and the Tralfamadorians. Pilgrim's entrapment echoes Donald Pizer's explanation that naturalistic works depict "limited and deprived characters who struggle to stay afloat in a world of violent destruction" (185) and justifies giving Slaughterhouse-Five the label of naturalistic novel. However, as in The Sirens of Titan and in Cat's Cradle, Vonnegut displaces observable and measurable deterministic forces present in traditional naturalistic works with incomprehensible, outrageous ones.

The absurdity of Pilgrim's entrapment and absolute impossibility of escape not only parallel the absurd deterministic forces in The Sirens of Titan, the chrono-synclastic infundibula and the Tralfamadorians, and in Cat's Cradle, the overwhelming poverty and disease of San Lorenzo and the inexplicable fate of John, they eclipse them. The deterministic tone of Slaughterhouse-Five is stronger than in either The Sirens of Titan or

Cat's Cradle. The repeated imagery of entrapment, the direct comments of the Tralfamadorians, and the inevitability, and pervasiveness, of death and destruction all reinforce the lack of control people have in a deterministic world.

Vonnegut also uses the Tralfamadorians to further emphasize the absurd deterministic world of the novel. Even though the aliens exist outside the confines of Earthling time, they, too, have no free will to change their physical circumstances. In fact, the only source of information the Tralfamadorians have about the concept of free will comes from their contact with Earthlings. When Billy assumes that Earthlings will eventually destroy the universe with their violent nature, the Tralfamadorians inform him that they know how the universe will end: one of their own test pilots will misfire and blow up the entire universe. In spite of this knowledge, they are powerless to resist or change it. They have no control over what will happen in the past, present, or future, just knowledge of these events.

Much critical discussion about the treatment of free will and determinism in Slaughterhouse-Five centers on the Tralfamadorian ethic. These aliens offer Pilgrim both a glimpse of a fixed and stable universe that cannot be changed by one's actions and a means of escape through the imagination. The emphasis and repetition of the Tralfamadorian philosophy reinforces its significance. While some critics argue that Vonnegut uses the Tralfamadorian deterministic philosophy ironically, Vonnegut actually uses it to combine a deterministic view of the world with an existential solution. The Tralfamadorian philosophy acknowledges the physical, natural world in which people are part of a scheme larger than themselves, but it also offers an existential freedom through imagination.

Exploring Vonnegut's treatment of the Tralfamadorians and their role in the novel helps determine their function in the text. The Tralfamadorians are fatalists in one sense: they accept their lack of control over the future. Ironically, they are optimists in another sense: while accepting their limited control, they can still choose what events to dwell on. These creatures accept a deterministic view of the universe, but they also offer a method of coping. Though this response is emotionally detached, the underlying idea of escaping through the imagination echoes both Malachi Constant's solution of loving fellow human beings in The Sirens of Titan and Bokkonon's creative use of religion to take the people of San Lorenzo's minds off their horrible physical conditions in Cat's Cradle.

Because of their acceptance of death and destruction as natural occurrences in the world, the Tralfamadorians are realists, but, in spite of their acknowledgement that they have no control over horrible things that occur, they structure their mental reality to ignore those "unpleasant moments." For example, they shield their eyes when unpleasant things come along. When Pilgrim learns that the Tralfamadorians know the universe will be blown up by one of their own test pilots, he is confused why they do not stop this event from happening. The Tralfamadorians explain that "the moment is structured that way," so they have no control over what occurs. Their only option in the face of this destiny is to ignore the awful times and concentrate on the good ones (117). Vonnegut's characters show mental rather than physical power to effect change in their lives. Hans van Stralen would agree; he explains, "The tenor of Slaughterhouse-Five is mainly that one has to resign oneself of the grief of the world and that humour and science fiction can pull you through" (7).

In his study, van Stralen examines Slaughterhouse-Five in light of Albert Camus' approach to existentialism, and he takes special care to differentiate between Camus' and Sartre's theories of existentialism. According to van Stralen, Sartre attributes more power to man based on his free will, but Camus finds man more limited in the physical world. Camus, in "The Myth of Sisyphus," shows the limited ability of man to change his external circumstances; instead, he finds dignity in his suffering and creates his identity through his stoic resignation to defeat. Like Sisyphus, Pilgrim accepts what he cannot change, but unlike Sisyphus, Pilgrim is a comical figure.

The Tralfamadorians are also agents of Vonnegut's adaptation of Camus' philosophy. Like Pilgrim (and all human beings), the Tralfamadorians cannot change the past, present, or the future; instead, they change their focus and imagine only the good times. The human imagination makes this new focus a reality, as has been shown in both The Sirens of Titan and Cat's Cradle. Bokononism, particularly, shows the power of the imagination to change perspective into reality, but unlike Cat's Cradle, Slaughterhouse-Five does not question this new reality. In Cat's Cradle, Bokonon himself calls his religion lies; however, in Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut allows Billy Pilgrim's visions of the Tralfamadorians to stand unquestioned. McGinnis explains:

What makes self-renewal possible in Slaughterhouse-Five is the human imagination, which is what the novel finally celebrates. Many critics have failed to perceive how strongly the novel affirms the value of the mental construct and have attacked it either for urging passivity or being hopelessly ambiguous about the Tralfamadorian ethic—which does, of course, deny free will and support Billy's passivity. (66)

McGinnis' comments pinpoint the critical problem with this novel. Critics have focused on either the deterministic elements or the existential elements of Slaughterhouse-Five; however, both philosophies carry equal weight in the novel, again leaving the tension between them in Vonnegut's work unresolved.

The Tralfamadorians are agents of Vonnegut's hybrid of determinism and existentialism. This alien race, Vonnegut's representative of mechanistic people at the mercy of deterministic forces, chooses to focus on the pleasant parts of life since they have no control over the bad parts of life:

There isn't anything we can do about them [unpleasant moments of life], so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments—like today at the zoo. Isn't this a nice moment? [. . .] That's one thing Earthlings might learn to do, if they tried hard enough: Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones.

(117)

The Serenity Prayer repeated throughout the novel is the human way of saying this same thing. Like Bokomonism in Cat's Cradle, this prayer acknowledges a person's lack of control over many physical circumstances but offers a valuable response to those circumstances.

On his office wall, Billy has a framed copy of this Prayer, which begins, "God, Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change" (60). Vonnegut explains, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (60). In a philosophy that emphasizes the physical world, the past, present, and future would be all encompassing, and a lack of control over one's time would reinforce

man's limited power. But, according to the Tralfamadorians, Pilgrim can change his inner existence by focusing only on pleasant memories and events.

This solution is how the Tralfamadorians control perception. They do not advocate making things better or solving problems; instead, they focus on the positive aspects of life. As a prophet for the Tralfamadorian ethic, Pilgrim offers this prayer to help his patients: "A lot of his patients who saw the prayer on Billy's wall told him that it helped them to keep going, too" (60). At this point in his life, Billy has rejected his occupation of making corrective lenses for people's physical eyes to help them see physical reality objectively; instead, he "was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls" (29). As an optometrist, Billy understands the power of vision in creating a person's perception of reality. He creates frames through which people understand the world around them.

Vonnegut himself is a sort of optometrist who frames the story for his readers. These frames do not alter the physical world; rather, they alter a person's vision of that world. In a way, Vonnegut's novel does exactly what the Tralfamadorian philosophy and the Serenity Prayer do: it offers a new perspective on all of the difficulties of life. But in typical paradoxical Vonnegut style, even while advocating that people focus on the positive aspects of life, the author constantly refers to the negative conditions of death and destruction.

Throughout the novel, from the first chapter where Vonnegut recalls a friend's comments about the inevitability of war to the final chapter where the author recounts the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., death is ever present, yet Vonnegut contrasts the pervasiveness of death with happy experiences from life. A

comment Vonnegut makes in the conclusion illustrates his conflicting feelings about the nature of life: “If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that we all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed. Still—if I am going to spend eternity visiting this moment and that, I’m grateful that so many of those moments are nice” (211). This comment reinforces Vonnegut’s suggestion that a person’s perception determines his or her reality. Life is what we choose to focus on. The ambiguity of Pilgrim’s extrasensory experiences outside of time and space also reinforces this idea.

Integral to Vonnegut’s combination of existential and naturalistic philosophies is the ambiguity about Pilgrim’s time and space travels. It does not matter if these events are physically real; they are psychologically real to Pilgrim and therefore serve as methods to cope with the physical circumstances he cannot control. Unlike the narrator’s undercutting of Bokononism in Cat’s Cradle, the narrator of Slaughterhouse-Five recognizes that the physical reality of Pilgrim’s trips does not matter—only the mental escape he gains from them does. Just as the deterministic influence is greater in Slaughterhouse-Five, the existential influence is also much greater in this novel than in either The Sirens of Titan or Cat’s Cradle; this increased existential influence counterbalances the increased naturalistic influence, creating an even stronger tension between the two philosophies than exists in either of the previous books examined in this study.

Also in Slaughterhouse-Five, the inclusion of fantastic events and situations relieves the book of overwhelming sorrow, and this mixture of fact with fiction is what Vonnegut advocates as a solution to overcoming physical limitations. Billy Pilgrim’s

time travel offers a possible escape from the overwhelming hostilities of life, just as Vonnegut's creation of Slaughterhouse-Five offers the author himself a means to cope with his nightmares from the war.

Pilgrim encounters other people who can alter their physical reality through the power of the imagination. Like Pilgrim, Roland Weary can alter his physical reality through his perception. The narrator describes him as being completely unaware of the danger he was in because he constructed his own reality: "He was so hot and bundled up, in fact, that he had no sense of danger. His vision of the outside world was limited to what he could see through a narrow slit between the rim of his helmet and his scarf from home" (41). In spite of his physical limitation, Weary imposes meaning on what he knows of the world, and his perspective alters his reality. From his experience hiding from the German soldiers behind enemy lines, Weary creates a story about the camaraderie between himself and his fellow soldiers, one that Vonnegut explains is not based in fact. While trying to avoid enemy capture, Weary fantasizes that he has become an inseparable part of a band of soldiers who will each fight to the death for the honor of the others. This fantasy keeps him going through what seems to be a hopeless situation.

Similarly, Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater try to make sense out of their lives while in the veteran's hospital: "They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. [. . .] So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction [imagination and fantasy] was a big help" (101). Like McCabe and Johnson's invention of Bokononism in Cat's Cradle to alleviate the mental suffering of the people of San Lorenzo, science fiction offers a means of escaping physical problems in Slaughterhouse-Five.

As in The Sirens of Titan and Cat's Cradle, Vonnegut again explores man's status as both an agent and victim of pain. Even though Vonnegut recognizes the positive uses of the imagination, he also explores the perverse uses to which man has put this same imagination. By highlighting the destructive power, Vonnegut advocates the imagination's proper use; it should be used only as a coping mechanism and not in doing harm to another human being. Man's imagination has also produced many instruments of pain and destruction, evidenced by the details of devices of torture catalogued through Roland Weary's character. May explains how Slaughterhouse-Five illustrates this concept: "Billy experiences personally the bankruptcy of the modern imagination" in the Dresden firebombing (29). This abuse of the power of the imagination in Slaughterhouse-Five recalls the same kind of abuse in Cat's Cradle where Hoenikker uses his imagination to invent instruments of death and destruction. In Vonnegut's work, imagination is advocated, but this use of imagination must be tempered with love of humanity in order to cause less pain.

In spite of this acceptance of the violent nature of man, according to Vonnegut, the only hope for human kind is within the individual. As Tony Tanner explains:

It is certainly hard to celebrate the value of the individual self against the background of war, in which the nightmare of being the victim of uncontrollable forces comes compellingly true. In such conditions [physical] it is difficult to be much of a constructive 'agent,' and Billy Pilgrim doubtless has to dream [existentially] to survive. (200)

Again, Vonnegut blends his existential view with naturalistic concerns. Self-preservation is a human instinct, and therefore a naturalistic writer's concern. Even van

Stralen, who labels Slaughterhouse-Five existential, recognizes the difference between Vonnegut's vision and that of the French existentialist writers: "The emphasis in Slaughterhouse-Five is rather on survival, even more than on Camus' honourable endurance of existence" (7). This emphasis on survival in Slaughterhouse-Five mirrors the concerns of the American naturalistic writers at the turn of the twentieth century, and only a connection between Vonnegut and these writers can account for his departure from his other existential influences. The tension between the two philosophies arises because Vonnegut's naturalistic dilemma in Slaughterhouse-Five requires an existential solution.

Vonnegut recognizes that human beings exist simultaneously in both the physical and mental worlds, and he acknowledges that the only place that man has control is in the non-physical realm, as John May illustrates:

Despite the bleakly deterministic tone set by the very structure of the book, by the proliferation of "apparent" deaths, and especially by the Tralfamadorian gospel of "existence in amber," there is a glimpse of a possibility for man beyond even the somewhat social idea of concentrating on the better moments. (29)

This hope is only possible through existential means. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut acknowledges, along with the naturalistic writers, that man cannot change his physical environment; however, like the existentialists, Vonnegut maintains that man has limitless possibilities of change through his perception and imagination.

Vonnegut's Existential Approach to a Deterministic World

In each of the novels chosen for this study, people are at the mercy of impersonal deterministic forces, but they can choose their response to these forces: The Sirens of Titan suggests loving fellow human beings as a coping mechanism; Cat's Cradle offers religion and imagination but undercuts these solutions by revealing them as simply illusions; and Slaughterhouse-Five presents fantasy and imagination in the guise of space and time travel as a means of escape from the realities of World War II and the Dresden firebombing. An examination of these three signature Vonnegut texts reveals an increasing tension between existentialism and naturalism in Vonnegut's work from 1959 to 1969.

The Sirens of Titan explores the existential search for meaning in life through Malachi Constant, Winston Niles Rumfoord, his wife Beatrice, and other minor characters; while these characters search for meaning, they react to deterministic forces that are all-controlling and unknowable, including a chrono-synclastic infundibula, manipulation by an alien race, and radio-controlled soldiers. In this book, these controlling forces remain unattached from the human beings they manipulate. While acknowledging the human need to find purpose in life while existing in a deterministic universe, Vonnegut suggests through this book that people must accept these deterministic forces and find purpose in life through loving one another.

Vonnegut continues to explore the differences between naturalism and existentialism in Cat's Cradle through two opposing characters. On one hand, Felix Hoenikker represents naturalistic forces of science, economics, and disease that control human beings on a physical level; on the other, Bokonon represents existential escape

from those physical forces through imagination, humor, and religion. Cat's Cradle differs from The Sirens of Titan, however, by introducing even more personal controlling forces. No longer are people at the mercy of detached alien life; instead, people are at the mercy of other human beings when man's very body is challenged by ice-nine, a human creation. In Cat's Cradle, ice-nine becomes a metaphor for science run amok, an exaggerated variation on the very real atomic bomb. In this book, the struggle for survival becomes even more personal because man's fundamental make-up, water, is now at the mercy of scientific forces. Faith and religion balance out this personal threat with a more personal solution than offered in The Sirens of Titan; however, Vonnegut undercuts the power of both the naturalistic and existential forces in this book by making them ridiculous and absurd.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut continues his investigation of deterministic forces and man's power in the face of them. In this novel, death itself is the controlling force from which people cannot escape; therefore, the naturalistic force in this book is even more personal and oppressing than seen in the previous two novels. And once again, the solution for escape becomes more personal as well; here, perception and imagination offers existential escape from this naturalistic force. In fact, the author himself uses writing as a means of fantasy and imagination to alleviate himself of the death and destruction he witnessed in World War II. But in this book, Vonnegut increases the credibility he gives both naturalism and existentialism by not undercutting either as he does in Cat's Cradle, thereby increasing the tension between the two philosophies.

The tension between naturalism and existentialism increases in Vonnegut's work from the publication of The Sirens of Titan in 1959 to Cat's Cradle in 1963 and Slaughterhouse-Five in 1969. Eventually, the very fact of being alive traps his characters in a world they cannot control. For example, in Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut uses caricatures of people at odds with themselves, people like Billy Pilgrim whose wills or consciences are fighting against the bodies that they inhabit. In Vonnegut's writing, the struggle of the individual against their physical environment, which was the subject of traditional naturalistic writers, is supplanted with the struggle of the individual against his or her own physical being. Human beings are not trapped so much in their physical environment as they are trapped within themselves. Their body, the physical part of themselves, is subject to many physical things outside of their control. Freedom is only found within themselves; the mind is the only escape mechanism they have.

The struggle to escape, to seek some way out, as Pizer suggests, is the fundamental distinguishing factor of naturalistic fiction. In Vonnegut's fiction, and perhaps evidenced in other post-World War II American fiction as well, this struggle is no longer man against his physical, social, and economic environment; it is a personal struggle between man's will and his own body. By including such a struggle as prominent in his fiction, Vonnegut recognizes both the limitations of man and a means for resistance within himself. If he cannot shed his environment, then he can transform it through his actions. This struggle is evident in The Sirens of Titan through Constant's eventual understanding that caring for others is the aim of man; the struggle continues in Cat's Cradle where Bokonon imposes religious meaning on circumstances beyond his control; and the struggle becomes even more apparent in Slaughterhouse-Five, from the

author's attempt to make sense of the Dresden firebombing through writing to Pilgrim's use of the Serenity Prayer to cope with his lack of control in the world.

Other Vonnegut novels published between 1959 and 1969 reflect the same concerns seen in The Sirens of Titan, Cat's Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five. For example, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (1965) explores deterministic forces at work in a person's life and the measures of control one has to challenge those forces. The novel begins, "A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people, just as a sum of honey might properly be a leading character in a tale about bees" (7). Economic determinism drives most of the characters except for Eliot Rosewater, who seems disconnected from society in spite of his overwhelming need to help people.

Mother Night (1966) also examines the idea of entrapment and freedom by exploring the theme, "We are who we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (v). Mother Night is Vonnegut's first book to employ a first person narrator, and this technique creates a focused inward examination similar to what The Sirens of Titan advocates at the opening of the novel.

A cursory glance at some of Vonnegut's later books suggests that the writer continues to explore the tension between existentialism and naturalism. In particular, Breakfast of Champions (1973) explores both man's purpose for existence and his level of control over the world around him. The image of man as machine resurfaces in this novel. One character receives a message from God explaining all human beings (except him) are pre-programmed to do or say certain things with little power to challenge this force. Vonnegut explains in his preface where this idea came from: "[I]t is a big temptation to me, when I create a character for a novel, to say that he is what he is

because of faulty wiring, or because of microscopic amounts of chemicals which he ate or failed to eat on that particular day" (4). This comment reveals Vonnegut's emphasis on physical causes for mental processes.

Vonnegut's later novels such as Slapstick (1976) and Jailbird (1979) focus on social concerns, but these concerns faintly echo Vonnegut's emphasis on the individual's responsibility to the rest of society. Like Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five, Deadeye Dick (1982) and Galápagos (1985) examine man's limited control over social systems and offer some small optimistic alternatives for individuals. Hocus Pocus (1990) also mixes personal hope with apocalyptic doom, much like Cat's Cradle. Vonnegut's most recent, and ostensibly his final, novel Timequake (1997) again raises the issues of free will and man's place in a deterministic universe. Obviously, the question of free will occupies much of Vonnegut's work, and closer examination of these novels may reveal a continuation of the tension between existentialism and naturalism begun in The Sirens of Titan.

As critics have noted, Kurt Vonnegut's novels have been influenced by French existentialism, particularly that of Albert Camus. However, the American black humorist departs from a strict application of existential thought, notably in his emphasis on determinism, and this departure can only be accounted for by examining the influence of American literary naturalism on his work. Vonnegut's novels reveal a struggle between a world of one's own choosing and a world pre-determined for those who inhabit it. The author ambivalently resolves this struggle through advocating acceptance of what a person cannot control and challenging people to do what they can to ease the suffering of other human beings. In short, he offers an existential approach to a naturalistic world.

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