

**So It Goes: Genealogy of Humanism in Kurt Vonnegut with Special
Reference to *Slaughterhouse-Five***

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Abstract

In this paper, we have focused on the humanistic perspectives of genealogy of *vonnegutian* humanism, which passed from generations to Vonnegut Jr. as a legacy. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he has expressed his concern over freethought, which he inherited from his ancestors and became his guiding principal for life. This freethought gave birth to his Humanism, which was the primitive concern why Vonnegut Jr. negated religion in his life and passed his freethought missionary to others through his writings. Here in this novel, he questions religion, sufferings of man and enunciates that there is no God in the Heavens who promises Heaven and makes people suffer on Earth. He says man is the centre and everything he himself can reward, judge and punish the wicked and can make the moment everlasting. Moreover, stresses the fact that man is bound to things which happen around him and cannot do anything to prevent and uses a panacea, *So It Goes*, the story of life goes on.

Key Words: Kurt Vonnegut, humanism, freethought, panacea, genealogy, religion

The German-American Community in Indianapolis, largely a product of mid-nineteenth century immigration, had a strong heritage of freethought (open evaluation of religion based on the use of reason). Especially, Clemens Vonnegut's writings and ideas deeply affected his family and the literary achievements of his great-grandson, Kurt Vonnegut, specifically the younger man's ideas concerning religion, science, and ethics. The junior Vonnegut's own Midwestern brand of freethought, in the form of what scholar Todd F. Davis called a "postmodern humanism," displayed a deep sense of skepticism about the irrationalism of his time while simultaneously championing an ethical responsibility to ourselves and each other, devoid of supernatural influences. Yet, true to his form as a freethinker, Kurt forged his own humanist identity. Clemens Vonnegut was born November 20, 1824, in Munster, Westphalia. He studied in German public schools and apprenticed as a mercantile clerk. He came to the United States in

the early 1830s, on assignment from his employer, J. L. de Ball and Company, which sold specialty fabrics. His year in New York convinced the young Vonnegut that America would be his permanent home, and he later traveled to Indianapolis with his friend Charles Volmer to start a new life. He founded the Vonnegut Hardware Store in 1852 and was considered one of the city's most respected citizens. Vonnegut also translated noted freethought orator Robert Ingersoll's *Open Letter to the Clergy of Indianapolis* into German for publication.

However, his involvement with the Freethinker Society of Indianapolis, especially as its first president from 1870-1875, may be his most profound humanist legacy. From its inception in 1870 to its dissolution in 1890, the Society worked towards two goals: education and advocacy. Education came in the form of lectures and talks, often given by Vonnegut or other society members on topics relevant to freethinkers, such as socialism, women's suffrage, science, theology, and American government. Alongside these lectures, the society also devoted resources, both financial and instructional, to schools and extra-curricular services for youth. The leadership of the society, particularly Vonnegut, believed that the success of their organization, hinged on educating the young in freethought and secular ideas. Their secular Sunday school, held at the German-English School at 216 East Maryland Street, boasted strong attendance through most of the year. Giving educational lectures, as mentioned above, became one of the most important aspects of the Freethinker Society, especially in its peak years. These lectures served the group in two ways: first, they provided communal experiences often lost on those without religious belief, and second, they allowed members to have vibrant conversations that related to the promotion of freethought ideas. Vonnegut and other members of the society also gave lectures on religion, politics, philosophy, and science. After the end of the Freethinker Society in 1890, Clemens Vonnegut continued his activism more than any former member, mostly through writing. *A Proposed Guide for Instruction of Morals*, published in 1900, enunciated Vonnegut's philosophy of freethought both in theory and practice. This treatise also displayed a rhetorical flourish that Kurt would cite as an influence.

Vonnegut is of the view that, no religious creed has any real proofs. It rests simply on assertions. However, that does not mean that humanity cannot be moral. In fact, Vonnegut argued the opposite: True virtue is its own reward, which is not enhanced but rather misled by belief. Belief deprives us of the joys of this world by teaching us that we must detest them, and instead of them we must hope for a heaven. Belief forms the germ for persecution of those who differ from us in their religious convictions.

*“Subject to eternal,
Immovable laws,
We all must fulfill*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:4 April 2019

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*The circles of our existence.
Man alone is able to do
What's seemingly impossible.
He discriminates,
Chooses and judges;
He can make the moment last.
He alone may
Reward the good,
Punish the wicked,
Heal and save,
Join to utility all
That's erringly rambling."*
- Kurt Vonnegut, in *Fate Worse Than Death*

Vonnegut saw morality as the wellspring of the intrinsic quality of human character which ought to be nourished and cultivated early, continually, and carefully. In subsequent pages, Vonnegut explained how such "cultivation" is achieved. Public education, family instruction, physical fitness, and social activities presented the means by which individuals perfected a moral life without the supernatural. Vonnegut's morality was clear, traditional, based on the family, and demonstrated a moral life without the need of God. While Clemens Vonnegut presented his philosophy clearly, the events surrounding his death were anything but. Clemens Vonnegut's death in 1906 created somewhat of a mystery for his family, and later his great-grandson. It was said that he died in the snow . . . or so the story goes. Kurt Vonnegut recalls this story in his autobiographical work, *Palm Sunday*. This story bewildered Kurt, whose own freethought can be traced to his great-grandfather and his own extended family. However, like many other family stories, this one stretches the truth a little. Clemens did not die by the side of the road but was rather found unconscious. True to his iconoclastic nature, Vonnegut wrote his own eulogy back in the 1870s and asked for its recitation when he died. In it, he railed against the creeds of Christianity:

I do not believe in the atonement to the blood of Christ or in the sin of incredulity. I do not believe in a punishment in a future life. I believe neither in a personal God nor a personal devil, but I honor the ideal which man has created as the tenor of all virtues and perfections and has named God.

Until the very end, Vonnegut believed in the power of humanity to throw off the shackles of religion and embrace the values of inquiry and human-based ethics. Nearly a century later,

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Kurt Vonnegut (born November 11, 1922, in Indianapolis) wrote that his great-grandfather's freethought was his own ancestral religion and that he was pigheadedly proud of the heretical nature of his family. Kurt Vonnegut, a future honorary president of the American Humanist Association, carried the torch of freethought for his grandfather, and in some respects, introduced his ideas to a new generation. In many of his works, Kurt would openly criticize religion, spirituality and faith, so much so that it even ruined one of his marriages. Nevertheless, echoing his grandfather in a 1980 speech at the First Parish Unitarian Church, Vonnegut declared, "Doesn't God give dignity to everybody? No—not in my opinion. Giving dignity, the sort of dignity that is of earthly use, anyway, is something that only people do. Or fail to do."

Kurt's connections to freethought go deeper than his great-grandfather. His father, renowned architect Kurt Vonnegut, Sr., married Edith Lieber, of the illustrious Lieber family. Hermann Lieber, successful art-dealer and co-founder of the Freethinker Society of Indianapolis was Edith's great-great uncle. Growing up, young Kurt received his religious instruction not from his parents, but from his nanny and housekeeper Ida Young. She would often read him Bible passages, exposing him to her interpretation of Christianity. Biographer Charles J. quotes Vonnegut as saying these church attendances were merely a "theatrical event." (*So It Goes* 17) The often-contradictory nature of his upbringing influenced Kurt's complicated position towards religion and spirituality.

In many of his letters, his complex inter-relationships between the sacred and profane often appeared. While Vonnegut would often reassert his freethought, ("Trained in agnosticism and the social sciences, I find superficial and obvious explanations for whatever whenever possible...."), he nonetheless appealed to ecclesiastical ephemera, at least in metaphor. In a November 28, 1967 letter to the Massachusetts Draft Board #1 (at the height of the Vietnam War), Vonnegut wrote this about the relationship between the God concept and war:

This attitude toward killing [war through drafting soldiers] is a matter between my God and me. I do not participate much in organized religion. I have read the Bible a lot. I preach, after a fashion. I write books which express my disgust for people who find it easy and reasonable to kill. We say grace at meals, taking turns. Every member of my large family has been called upon to thank God for blessings which have been ours. What Mark is doing now [his son, seeking conscientious objector status] is in the service of God, whose son was exceedingly un-warlike. (*Letters*)

Notice the phrase, "my God"; the distinction between the "God" of common American experience and Vonnegut's conception stresses his humanism. Much like his great-grandfather's

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use of a God as an ideal in his 1906 eulogy (see above), Kurt Vonnegut used the language of Christianity metaphorically as an explication of his personal disgust of violence.

His most popular novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), also reinforces Kurt's strong denunciation of war and a belief in a common humanity. Specifically, "so it goes" is a phrase that Vonnegut peppered throughout the novel, often after horrible events or even banal ones. This phrase shows no matter how bad things get, no matter how high one can get, the world (and indeed the universe) goes on. As an example, this passage from the novel, describing the protagonist Billy Pilgrim's memory of a sculpture of Jesus, is fairly apt:

A military surgeon would have admired the clinical fidelity of the artist's rendition of all Christ's wounds—the spear wound, the thorn wounds, the holes that were made by the iron spikes. Billy's Christ died horribly. He was pitiful.

So it goes. (48)

"So it goes" becomes the novel's panacea; a means for the narrator to deal with the grim realities of war without the comfort of religious beliefs. In some respects, it can be seen as a mantra for humanism.

Reminding his metaphorical religiosity again, Vonnegut did have a radically humanistic view of Jesus Christ, even though he did not identify as a Christian. Writing in one of his last books, *A Man without A Country*, Vonnegut outlined his view of Jesus as a character of moral and historical importance. "How do humanists feel about Jesus?" wrote Vonnegut,

"I say of Jesus, as all humanists do, 'If what he said is good, and so much of it is absolutely beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not?'"(80-81)

Later in the book, Vonnegut calls Jesus the "greatest and most humane of human beings" and waxes mournfully about modern Christians' inability to emphasize the Sermon on the Mount, specifically the beatitudes. For some reason, Vonnegut continues, "the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!" To Vonnegut, Christ should be seen as a moral ideal, not a prophet or a savior, much the way his great-grandfather saw the meek and mild carpenter from Nazareth. Thus, Jesus becomes an icon of humanism, rather than a figure of religious devotion.

True to his roots, Kurt Vonnegut carried his humanism through to the end of his life. In an address he meant to give on April 27, 2007 (he died on April 11; his son Mark gave the

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address in his stead). In this address, written for Indianapolis's "Year of Vonnegut" celebrations, Kurt espoused his continued commitment to humanism:

Am I religious? I practice a disorganized religion. I belong to an unholy disorder. We call ourselves "Our Lady of Perpetual Consternation." We are as celibate as fifty percent of the heterosexual Roman Catholic clergy. Actually—and when I hold up my right hand like this, it means I'm not kidding, that I give my Word of Honor that what I'm about to say is true. So actually, I am honorary President of the American Humanist Society, having succeeded the late, great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in that utterly functionless capacity. We Humanists behave as well as we can, without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an Afterlife. We serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community (*Armageddon in Retrospect* 51-52).

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is basically an anti-war book. This book is based on historical context which centres on the bombing of Dresden on the nights of Feb. 13 and 14 in 1944 during World War II. Hundreds and thousands were killed at locations like Dresden, which were non-military in nature but served as methods of weakening Axis morale. Vonnegut himself was present at Dresden when it was bombed and is a way of releasing emotional turmoil caused by war. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, much like other Vonnegut books, has his strong disgust of war and the ironies of contemporary society in attempting in vain to answer the question "Why war?"

An article from *The English Journal* 1974, an educator Rita Bornstein cites several objectives for a war-peace studies course, including "to examine and evaluate traditional and human values and beliefs concerning war and peace" and "to analyze and react to war literature and discuss the role of literature in meliorating human problems". Her actual goal for the course is to study the melioration of war. As a goal for a classroom setting, this one is certainly unique, ambitious, and inspiring. However, textbooks for this kind of study were largely non-existent in 1974, and still are in 2008. Hence, Bornstien and other educators have turned to literature as a source for anti-war curricula.

Kurt Vonnegut, being an iconoclast in his novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is also fairly well known along with other examples of prolific prose, for handling war issues. Vonnegut himself fought in World War II, and earned a purple heart, but was later known as a pacifist. *Slaughterhouse-Five* certainly carries its own fair share of anti-war rhetoric, but it also insightfully deals with all of the problematic complexities of both pro and anti-war stances. I say 'insightfully' because it seems—and I believe that Vonnegut would see this as well—that any

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extremist perspective ultimately leads to fallibility, and ultimately leads to a kind of war—involving a battle of different opinions. Vonnegut tackles these issues in the novel as well as in his later writings, and in his own particular way his style seemed, and still seems, to influence people, possibly even more than some anti-war marches may have.

The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death the very subtitle of the work, is a subversion of war mongering philosophy. Vonnegut uses the word “crusade”, which refers to the holy wars, where children were sacrificed during 13th century, famously conducted ‘in the name of the church.’ Interestingly, Vonnegut’s own crusade against war is secular, sarcastic, and surprisingly sane. Still, it is strange to attempt to use a book to stop a war—it certainly breaks the old code of “art for art’s sake” and—if stopping wars is indeed Vonnegut’s aim at all—upholds the old cliché that “the pen is mightier than the sword.”

It is fact that only by becoming “unstuck in time”, Billy Pilgrim or anyone else can escape war, it seems to Vonnegut or his Tralfamadorian philosophers, who assert that “Only on earth is there any talk of free will”. From the perspective of the Tralfamadorians, war is inevitable, as are all things including the destruction of the earth—and it is only by thinking outside of unpleasant moments that one can escape them. And yet the book mentions that Vonnegut appreciates Lot’s wife for looking back on the destruction of Sodom and Gamorrah, even though she turns to a pillar of salt for doing it because it is so “human.” Hence, the Tralfamadorian concepts of escapism, while offering one means of exiting the horrors of war, are not the same as the more human views of looking back as Vonnegut offers us, the readers. According to some critics who investigate Vonnegut’s anti-war stance, “The status of the Tralfamadorians is therefore the most important issue in any discussion of *Slaughterhouse-Five*”. Critic Willaim Rodney Allen writes,

“A major reason *Slaughterhouse-Five* had the enormous impact it did was because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its anti-war message to a most receptive audience”.

The fact that Billy Pilgrim’s son becomes a Green Beret in Vietnam seems to complicate the issue still further. Indeed, Pilgrim does not want his son to fight in the war after he has experienced the horrors of it, yet his wishes are empty and his son still deserves his father’s love.

In any event, *Slaughterhouse-Five* paired with Vonnegut’s other writings gives readers insight into his philosophies and what he was attempting to accomplish in his writing. Vonnegut hated war, just as any sane person would hate war. Very few people are actually pro-war, and Vonnegut’s perspectives on World War II show just how willing he was to explore various perspectives concerning war. So, while he considered himself a pacifist, he also saw World War

It just as a war, and decisively wrote to curb injustices. In many ways, reading Vonnegut would enable one to approach the goals set out by Ms. Bornstein and her peace-war studies course: “to discuss the role of literature in meliorating human problems.” So it goes.

Conclusion

Being a prisoner himself, Vonnegut has experienced the actual war experience in Dresden, when he was captivated by German soldiers. He felt the pain as he saw people suffering during the war. No one was spared, mothers losing their sons, wives their husbands, children their father, sisters their brothers and many more casualties. So it goes, Vonnegut has million reasons to write upon, but its life that goes on and here he has mastered his work by writing an anti-war, which will guide millions to come.

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