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Kurt Vonnegut, Authorship and the Purpose of Literature: A Study of Kilgore Trout

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KURT VONNEGUT, AUTHORSHIP AND THE PURPOSE OF LITERATURE:

A STUDY OF KILGORE TROUT

An Abstract of a Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The works of Kurt Vonnegut demonstrate the author's lifelong interest in the purpose of literature and the role of the author in a postmodern society. Through the use of his most frequently recurring character, the science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut questions the ways in which an author's works influence readers and ponders the relationship between society and art.

These themes are explored in detail in the four novels which feature Kilgore Trout most prominently: *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake*. A study of these novels reveals a progressive personification of the Trout figure, as he follows a path of realization and redemption that mirrors the one Vonnegut himself experienced as a writer and a humanist. These novels represent the key moments in Trout's journey, as he evolves from a hack science-fiction writer into a heroic savior. Trout's relationship with Vonnegut is one that reflects Vonnegut's struggles with his status as an author, as he was simultaneously praised and criticized throughout his career.

An analysis of the four Troutean novels demonstrates the various roles played by Trout: deus ex machina, prophet, mouthpiece, proxy, savior and hero. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* Trout acts as a catalyst that provokes action in others through his writing, providing emotionally damaged characters such as Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim with a means of dealing with trauma. Halfway through his writing career Vonnegut decided to free Trout, yet even after "liberating" Trout in

Breakfast of Champions Vonnegut chose to resurrect Trout in his final novel *Timequake*. *Timequake* brings together all of the humanistic themes Vonnegut presented throughout his career and redeems Trout as an author. The parallel journeys of Vonnegut and Trout as they struggled to define themselves as writers and find a purpose for their works thus illuminate aspects of the humanistic agenda Vonnegut promoted and advanced in his literature.

This Study by: Danielle M. Benesh

Entitled: Kurt Vonnegut, Authorship and the Purpose of Literature: A Study of Kilgore Trout

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

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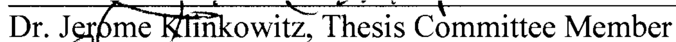
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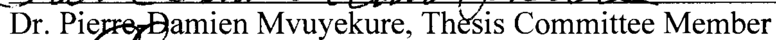
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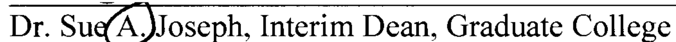
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CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF KILGORE TROUT FROM *GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER* TO *BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS*

Kilgore Trout is arguably the most well-known character created by Kurt Vonnegut. Not only does this antiquated, out-of-print hack science-fiction writer appear in person in at least four novels, his short stories and novels are alluded to in almost all of Vonnegut's novels written after *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in 1965. The four works in which Trout features prominently – *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake* – follow Trout and his Creator as they question the purpose of writing and authors in our postmodern world. Trout first appeared as Vonnegut's career as a short story writer was coming to an end and when critics were labeling his novels science-fiction in order to discredit them as "literature." Trout is the manifestation of Vonnegut's authorial frustrations: he is everything Vonnegut was accused of being and the ghost of the future Vonnegut imagined for himself if he continued to write as he had before.

And yet, even as Vonnegut heaped cynicism, poverty, anonymity and lack of talent upon the head of his scapegoat, something changed in his perception of this particular character as he began to play a more important role in Vonnegut's novels. In the two early novels which feature Trout, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the science-fiction writer serves as more of a catalyst, provoking others to act primarily through his fiction. As Vonnegut's writing becomes more intimate

and humanistic, Trout "assumes a real-life identity, independent of his creator" (Broer 84). This change is noted most clearly in *Breakfast of Champions*, the novel in which Vonnegut names Trout "the only character I ever created who had enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of another human being" (*BOC* 240). Vonnegut sets his sentient creation free at the end of *Breakfast of Champions*, but "revives" him in his last novel *Timequake* in order to make him a hero and respected author.

The following work will analyze four of Vonnegut's works which prominently feature the character of Kilgore Trout in order to demonstrate the changes in use and function of this figure as he reoccurs within the Vonnegut canon. The novels *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions* and *Timequake* are all significant moments in the history of this character and, when viewed as part of a larger schema which spanned more than thirty years of Vonnegut's career, provide insights not only concerning Trout but his creator. As will be demonstrated in the body of this work, Trout plays an integral part in promoting and disseminating Vonnegut's humanistic agenda not only through the science-fiction works attributed to him but through his presence as a stand-in for Vonnegut himself. He plays this role so well that in the two later novels he becomes an independent being and comes to personify Vonnegut's realizations about the possibilities inherent in works of art.

The Introduction of Kilgore Trout: *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (Rosewater)*, Vonnegut raises the issue of authorship and the value of writing as an art form. The main character Eliot Rosewater is obsessed with science fiction, even though he openly admits that "science-fiction writers couldn't write for sour apples" (*Rosewater* 27). Despite their lack of skill, Eliot argues that science-fiction writers are "poets" who have more to offer the public than the "talented sparrowfarts who write delicately" (27-28). The value of works of science fiction lies in the fact that these authors are "the only ones who'll talk about the *really* terrific changes going on" and are "more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing well" (27). These arguments are personified in the stories and character of Kilgore Trout, Eliot's favorite science fiction writer.

Trout first appears in the Vonnegut canon in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, setting him on a path of realization that will twist and turn in various ways until his final appearance in *Timequake*. When Trout first appears in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* he is a hack science fiction writer working in a trading stamp redemption center, writing short stories that he is never paid for and which are published only in pornographic magazines. It is Trout's short story *2BR02B* that serves as a catalyst for Eliot's altruistic behavior, propelling the action of the novel as Eliot attempts to give away his inherited fortune and answer the question "What in the hell are people *for*?" Trout is brought in by Eliot's father as part of a competency trial and offers a plausible explanation for Eliot's "insanity": that Eliot was performing "the most important social experiment of our time"

by finding "reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*" (*Rosewater* 210).

The novel tells the story of Eliot Rosewater, son of Senator Lister Ames Rosewater and heir to the charitable and cultural foundation known as the Rosewater Foundation. Eliot became President of the Foundation at the age of twenty-nine according to the charter governing the inheritance of the Foundation, which dictated that control of the institution was "to be handed down throughout all eternity to the closest and oldest heirs of the Foundation's creator," Senator Rosewater (*Rosewater* 16-17). This same charter "called for the immediate expulsion of any officer adjudged insane," a clause which the ambitious lawyer Norman Mushari discovers while researching the confidential files relating to the Foundation. Mushari decides to invoke this clause and represent the next person in line for inheritance because "it was common gossip in the office that the very first President, Eliot Rosewater, the Senator's son, was a lunatic." As Mushari digs deeper and deeper into the Foundation's confidential files he finds "document after document [which] proved that Eliot was crazy as a loon" (18-19).

One of the documents Mushari finds which proves Eliot's "insanity" is addressed to the next heir of the Foundation, to be delivered after Eliot's death. The letter details the sordid history of the Rosewater fortune, which was established by greedy men who found that the Founding Fathers of America "had not made it the law of the Utopia that the wealth of each citizen should be limited," thus making it possible that "a handful of rapacious citizens came to control all that was worth controlling in America" (20-21). The first Rosewater to amass a significant fortune, Eliot's great-grandfather Noah, made

his money as a Civil War profiteer and married a woman with a vast inheritance in order to increase his own wealth. Noah bought control of any and all institutions which would impede his own businesses and bribed government officials, having learned that "no thief, no matter how fast he stole, could more than mildly inconvenience anyone" in capitalist America (21).

The fortune amassed by Noah was passed to his son Samuel, who became a "king-maker" for the Republican Party and bought newspapers and preachers. Samuel's son Lister then inherited the Rosewater assets and became a congressman, eventually establishing the Foundation and leaving it to his son Eliot. Unlike his ambitious forefathers, Eliot became "a drunkard, a Utopian dreamer, a tinhorn saint, an aimless fool" (23). Eliot was raised in luxury on the Eastern Seaboard, where he accidentally killed his mother in a boating accident at the age of nineteen. Running from one tragedy to another, he volunteered for the Infantry at the outbreak of World War II and was sent to fight in Europe. There he took part in an attack against a clarinet factory in Germany presumed to be housing S.S. troops, killing three people. It was not until the attack was over that Rosewater discovered that the supposed S.S. troops were really unarmed firemen, one of whom was a boy of no more than fourteen years old. These traumatic events, in particular the killing of the German firemen, result in a nervous breakdown and Eliot is sent to an American hospital in Paris. There he met his wife Sylvia, eventually returning to America to assume his role as heir of the Rosewater fortune.

An alcoholic beset by trauma, Eliot begins to read nothing but science-fiction novels, particularly the works of Kilgore Trout. In a drunken speech given to a convention of science-fiction writers Eliot explains why he only reads science-fiction:

> "You're the only ones who'll talk about the *really* terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. You're the only ones with guts enough to *really* care about the future, who *really* notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents and catastrophes do to us." (27)

Eliot declares that these authors are poets, "since they were more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing well." The most important of these writers, in Eliot's estimation, is Trout, who he names society's "greatest prophet." Eliot predicts that in ten thousand years all of history's generals and presidents will be forgotten, but Trout will be remembered as a hero for writing the novel *2BRO2B* (27-28).

Trout's novel describes "an America in which almost all of the work was done by machines, and the only people who could get work had three or more Ph.D's." Having overcome serious diseases and plagued by overpopulation, the government constructs Ethical Suicide Parlors where volunteers sacrifice themselves "because so many people felt silly and pointless, and because it was supposed to be an unselfish, patriotic thing to do, to die." Before he is put to death one of the characters asks if he will see God, telling his "death stewardess" that "I want to ask him something I never was able to find out down here .... What in the hell are people *for*?" (29-30)

The humanistic message contained in this work sets Eliot on a path of altruistic "insanity." He trades away almost all of his wardrobe and sets off for firehouses across the country, writing to his wife that "there is this feeling that I have a destiny far away from the shallow and preposterous posing that is our life in New York" (42). He comes to the realization that his destiny lies in helping the residents of his ancestral home of Rosewater, Indiana and he vows to "*care* about these people." Eliot explains to his wife that seeing the people of Rosewater has given him a purpose:

> "I look at these people, these Americans, … and I realize that they can't even care about themselves any more – because they have no use. The factory, the farms, the mines across the river – they're almost completely automatic now. And America doesn't even need these people for war – not any more. Sylvia, I'm going to be an artist …. I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and unattractive. *That* is going to be my work of art." (47)

With this goal in mind and fueled by Trout's warning concerning the uselessness of humanity in a technologically enhanced world, Eliot begins to give away his inherited luxuries and fortune to the people of Rosewater. He and his wife "throw lavish banquets for morons, perverts, starvelings and the unemployed" and "listened tirelessly to the misshapen fears and dreams of people who, by almost anyone's standards, would have been better off dead, gave them love and trifling sums of money" (53). His wife eventually suffers from *Samaritrophia*, a mental "disease" brought about by her husband's generosity which is defined as "hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself." With this psychological diagnosis Sylvia is admitted to a mental hospital and eventually leaves her husband to return to Paris.

Eliot chooses to live in squalor in Rosewater, where he opens an office for the Foundation and personally mans the black phone that is connected to the Foundation's direct line. Every time the black phone rings, no matter what time day or night, Eliot answers with "This is the Rosewater Foundation. How can we help you?" This generic phrase takes on new meaning when Eliot says it, for when he asks the callers how he can help them he truly means to give them whatever it is they need. His father Senator Rosewater becomes increasingly convinced that Eliot is helping criminals, but "most of Eliot's clients weren't brave enough or clever enough for lives of crime .... The people who leaned on Eliot regularly were a lot weaker than that – and dumber, too" (69). Eliot helps those who cannot seem to help themselves, the ones who believe they are nothing. To some he provides money, but far more commonly he simply listens to their troubles and gives them his own prescription for dealing with life's difficulties: "Take an aspirin tablet, and wash it down with a glass of wine" (93).

Eliot's behavior only serves to infuriate his father as he becomes more and more generous, giving away his financial assets to everyone and anyone in Rosewater County who asks for help. His exploits are carefully tracked by Norman Mushari, who eventually seeks out the next Rosewater in line to inherit the Foundation, Fred Rosewater. When Eliot's father hears of Mushari's intent to declare Eliot insane and incapable of managing the Foundation, he attempts to take Eliot out of Rosewater, but Eliot boards a bus and ends up blacking out in Indianapolis. When Eliot awakens, he has been institutionalized in a mental hospital for an entire year. Coming back to life, he discovers that his father has contacted Trout at Eliot's request. Hoping to find a way to

win the court case against Mushari and Fred and prove that Eliot is not insane, the Senator brings in the science-fiction writer whose works served as a catalyst for his behavior: "When you told me to bring Trout here, I told the Doctor you were still crazy. You said Trout could explain the meaning of everything you'd done in Rosewater, even if you couldn't. But I was willing to try anything, and calling him in is the smartest thing I ever did .... You say what Mr. Trout says you should say" (209).

Trout's explanation for Eliot's altruism is an assessment of the futility of human beings and an extension of the warning Trout discussed in his novel *2BRO2B*:

> "What you did in Rosewater County was far from insane. It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horrors will eventually be made world-wide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love people who have no use?
>
> "In time, almost all men and women will become worthless .... So – if we can't find reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are human beings, then we might as well, as has so often been suggested, rub them out.
>
> ".... Poverty is a relatively mild disease for even a very flimsy American soul, but uselessness will kill strong and weak souls alike, and kill every time. We must find a cure." (210-11)

Despite Trout's somewhat satirical defense of Eliot's actions, he does provide a positive view of Eliot's insanity and the impact his works in Rosewater could have for others brave enough to follow in Eliot's footsteps:

> "It seems to me," said Trout, "that the main lesson Eliot learned is that people can use all the uncritical love they can get .... It's news that a man was able to give that kind of love over a long period of time. If one man can do it, perhaps others can do it, too. It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be parts of human nature.

> Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see. " (213)

Eliot's final act as head of the Foundation is to legally acknowledge the progeny of all of the mothers in Rosewater who claimed to have given birth to his children. Eliot declares that these children are to be given the name Rosewater and become heirs to the Foundation, with Eliot's last blessing "to be fruitful and multiply" (217). Thus the Rosewater fortune is given away to the "useless" souls Eliot helped for so long, thanks to Eliot's innate humanism and Trout's humanistic literary message.

Trout's appearance in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* has earned him many labels, each of which reveals a function of the Trout figure that Vonnegut would return to and develop further in his later novels. Vonnegut also uses Trout to introduce a number of themes which will reoccur throughout his body of work. Peter Reed notes that the link between the Trout character and Vonnegut the author which is first forged in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* is essential in that Trout first appears "at about the time that Vonnegut starts to speak directly, first-person, in his own fiction" ("Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool" 67). Critics who have labeled Trout as nothing more than a *deus ex machina* meant to further the narrative action of the novel have overlooked this connection between author and character. As is evidenced in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Trout's science-fiction stories function to "deliver [Vonnegut's] message effectively" in a novel "in which a serious, direct statement of the ethics implicit in it would seem serious and false" (73). As a stand-in for writers in general, and science-fiction writers specifically, Trout's purpose in writing the sci-fi, postmodern parable *2BRO2B* is to "stand back and

take a deconstructive look at something long accepted": the uselessness of human beings in a world increasingly overpopulated and dominated by technology (70) .

This search for the meaning is not limited to the human race, but extends to Vonnegut's chosen trade as a writer. In asking "What the hell are people *for*?", "Vonnegut has been implicitly answering a more focused question all along: What are the arts for?" Through the use of a figure such as Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut is able to explore the nature of writing, authorship and the purpose of literature. Trout has been considered Vonnegut's "daemon and doppelganger," (Rackstraw, "The Paradox of Awareness" 62) an evil twin created to reflect Vonnegut's pessimistic views of literature and the people who place too much value in what they read. It has also been argued that Trout represents the "dark side" of Vonnegut the author, the writer who called himself "a soreheaded occupant of the file drawer labeled science fiction" and resented critics who limited him to this genre. Yet these terms carry a negative connotation that, after further analysis, do not seem appropriate, given Vonnegut's essentially humanistic worldview. This view also denies the ever-present ironies of human existence which are frequently the subjects of Vonnegut's novels and short fiction. As a survivor of the Dresden firebombing of World War II, Vonnegut not only understood that life is ironic but also that it is short and precious. The character of Kilgore Trout is therefore more than just a "double" of the author, but a proxy who acts on behalf of the author to convey Vonnegut's humanistic messages and analyze the nature and purpose of the arts.

As Vonnegut's proxy, Trout introduces these views in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and allows Vonnegut to explore both the negative and positive sides of writing

and literature. Michelle Persell points out that, in defending Eliot's altruistic behavior to the men who would have him declared insane, "Trout is both lying and imparting the truth – a fair characterization of novel-writing itself" (43). The Troutean story which compels Eliot to establish the Rosewater Foundation, *2BRO2B*, follows Trout's "favorite formula" in which he "describe[s]a perfectly hideous society, not unlike his own, and then, toward the end, to suggest ways in which it could be improved" (*Rosewater* 29). In his *apologia* given on Eliot's behalf, Trout reiterates the message of *2BRO2B* and claims that Eliot's behavior offers a possible response to the question of human usefulness. Trout gives meaning to Eliot's "insanity" by arguing that helping others unconditionally, even those who may not seem to "deserve" it, proves that "our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be parts of human nature." According to Trout, Eliot's absolute altruism demonstrates the need to "find reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are *human beings*". In Trout's optimistic view, if others were to follow Eliot's example "millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see" (*Rosewater* 210-13).

These truths are derided by Eliot's father Senator Rosewater, who is only interested in keeping his vast fortune out of the hands of lawyers and the "useless" masses of Rosewater County, Indiana. He cannot see the value of Trout's assessment because "the sane are the insane in an insane world" (Persell 42): in the midst of the ironies of human futility and poverty, only a hack science-fiction writer such as Trout has the ability to "offer truth, wisdom, comfort, and perhaps above all, warnings of what is to come" (Simpson 262). In serving this purpose, Trout has been labeled a "savior" or

"preacher" who offers sermons meant to warn his audience of "the dangers of soul-rot and the uselessness of human beings" (Morse 158).

Yet while Trout imparts these truths through his writing, literature involves, as has been previously argued, a simultaneous process of "lying and imparting truth" in the form of words. This is inherent especially in the case of science-fiction, which "presents the reader with a distorted view of reality" and contains "blissful images of a world that cannot be reached or achieved in reality." While Eliot takes action after reading Trout's cautionary tale of the lack of human usefulness in a postmodern, technological world, Trout "would rather hide behind his desk and write about what could be rather than what is" (Simpson 262). Neither Trout nor his story is the cause of Eliot's "insanity" but are merely catalysts: Eliot's traumatic experiences in World War II and his alcoholism are the true culprits. This is the underlying problem of literature in general, one which Vonnegut was keenly aware of and continued to explore throughout his writing career. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* hints at the notion that words are essentially inadequate for explaining things such as death, suicide, war, or any number of inexplicable events suffered by human beings, and that writers can only offer possibilities which may or may not convey truth. In many instances, literature can do nothing more than offer a means of escape from these events, as Vonnegut demonstrates through the use of Trout's fiction in his later novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Kilgore Trout, Dresden and the Futility of Words: *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Slaughterhouse-Five (*Slaughterhouse*) has often been labeled Vonnegut's "Dresden novel," since it deals primarily with the firebombing of Dresden, Germany at the end of World War II. The destruction of Dresden certainly plays a major role in the narrative, which is made up of flashes or "jumps" in time experienced by the protagonist Billy Pilgrim. Billy's traumatic wartime experiences have a similar effect on him as Eliot Rosewater's, and once again Trout's fiction is essential to Billy's post-war search for solace and healing. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut brings Eliot and Billy together in order to provide them with the same remedy for their post-traumatic stress: Trout's visions of "impossibly hospitable worlds."

Slaughterhouse-Five opens with a chapter written by Vonnegut in which he speaks directly to the audience. Vonnegut describes the years preceding the writing of the book as ones in which he would tell people he was working on a novel about Dresden, but was never able to complete it. This first chapter describes the trauma Vonnegut was still suffering twenty-five years after the events he has been trying to put into words, as well as the frustration he felt knowing that the American public had very little knowledge of the bombing or the tremendous casualties which resulted from it. He relates in the opening chapter that he wrote to the Air Force for details about the bombing and received the answer that the information was top secret. This prompts Vonnegut to respond, "Secret? My God – from *whom*?" (11)

This cover-up seems to have motivated him to give his own account of the event, which he experienced first-hand as a POW incarcerated in Dresden. In order to recount his memories of the bombing he writes that he visited a fellow POW, Bernard V. O'Hare, in order to exchange stories. However, something even more significant than anecdotes comes out of this visit, thanks to Bernard's wife Mary. After Vonnegut and Bernard reminisce briefly about the war, Mary angrily confronts Vonnegut about his intentions in writing a war novel:

> "You were just *babies* then! .... But you're not going to write it that way, are you." This wasn't a question. It was an accusation.
>
> "I-I don't know," I said.
>
> "Well, *I* know," she said. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra or John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the ones upstairs." (14)

Mary's outburst makes Vonnegut realize that "she didn't want her babies or anybody else's babies killed in wars" and he makes her a promise that will determine the way in which he presents war, in this novel and throughout the rest of his writing career: "I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne .... I'll call it the Children's Crusade" (15).

Thus the protagonist Billy Pilgrim is not a man when he is sent to Europe to fight, but a boy who becomes mentally and emotionally damaged as a result of his wartime experiences. The first thing Vonnegut tells us about him is that he has become "unstuck in time":

> Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963 .... Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. (23)

Billy first becomes unstuck in time after the Battle of the Bulge, when he and three other American soldiers became separated from the rest of the troops and found themselves behind German lines. After four days of wandering in the barren German countryside, Billy makes his first leap through time:

> His attention began to swing grandly through the full arc of his life, passing into death, which was violet light. There wasn't anybody else there, or any thing. There was just a violet light – and a hum. And then Billy swung into life again, going backwards until he was in pre-birth, which was red light and bubbling sounds. And then he swung into life again and stopped. He was a little boy taking a shower with his hairy father at the Illium Y.M.C.A. (43)

These leaps take him forwards and backwards through his life's timeline, returning him again and again to the war. Through these leaps he relives his experiences as a POW, captured behind enemy lines and sent to work with other American and English POWs in a former slaughterhouse in Dresden. He witnesses firsthand the beauty of the city that is destined to be destroyed: "The boxcars were opened, and the doorways framed the loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen. The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd. It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim" (148). At the time Dresden had become home to thousands of refugees from war-ravaged cities across Germany, and as a non-military site it had survived untouched until the final stages of the war. The bombing was meant to

hasten the end of the war, yet the attack on the city did little but destroy hundreds of thousands of innocent lives.

While in the hospital after surviving a plane crash, years after the war, Billy's roommate Bertram Copeland Rumfoord reads Billy a passage of a book written by an Air Force lieutenant which gives the Allies' argument for destroying the city:

> I find it difficult to understand Englishmen or Americans who weep about enemy civilians who were killed but who have not shed a tear for our gallant crews lost in combat with a cruel enemy .... V-1's and V-2's were at the very time falling on England, killing civilian men, women, and children indiscriminately, as they were designed and launched to do .... I deeply regret that British and U.S. bombers killed 135,000 people in the attack in Dresden, but I remember who started the last war and I regret even more the loss of more than 5,000,000 Allied lives in the necessary effort to completely defeat and utterly destroy Nazism. (187)

Thus the bombing, seen from Vonnegut's point of view as an eyewitness and as a humanist, is depicted as nothing more than revenge. Like Vonnegut, Billy cannot escape the memories of the firebombing and eventually suffers a nervous breakdown after returning home from the war.

It is during his stay at a veterans hospital after the breakdown that Billy meets Eliot Rosewater, who has been admitted for alcoholism. Eliot introduces Billy to the science-fiction works of Kilgore Trout. These two men "were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war .... So they were trying to reinvent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help" (101). Vonnegut points out that Trout lacks any real talent as a writer: "Trout's unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were

good" (110). Yet these two men find something comforting in Trout's novels, to the point that they both eschew any other kinds of fiction. One of Trout's stories, in fact, introduces Billy to the idea of aliens abducting Earthlings for their zoo. Billy later believes that he, too, was abducted by aliens and has flashes of his life in a zoo on the planet Tralfamadore.

These fantasies, whether true jumps in time or the imaginings of a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder influenced by poorly-written science fiction, offer Billy an escape in the form of a world where answers can be found. On Tralfamadore Billy learns that moments are structured, that free will is an idea unique to Earthlings. The Tralfamadorians lead him to believe that there is a structure to the world which has, until now, been so chaotic and inexplicable: "Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is* .... Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*" (76-77). They furthermore tell him that "All time is all time. It does not change. It will not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment" (86). The ultimate advice the Tralfamadorians offer Billy is that one should "ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones" (117).

Billy takes this message to heart, so much so that he decides to share it with the world. He speaks on the radio about his interactions with the Tralfamadorians, and writes two letters to the local newspaper describing the Tralfamadorian worldview. Having seen so much death and destruction during the war, the Tralfamadorian notions

concerning death that he publishes in the newspaper are meant to comfort those who have experienced death as Billy has:

> The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist .... When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes.' (27)

Billy's daughter, horrified that he is claiming to have been abducted, blames Trout for her father's behavior. Billy becomes friends with Trout when he finds him bullying juvenile newspaper carriers, telling him about Eliot Rosewater and declaring himself an avid fan. He even invites Trout to his wedding anniversary party, where Trout's status as a writer earns him the attention of the guests; "The adulation that Trout was receiving, mindless and illiterate as it was, affected Trout like marijuana. He was happy and loud and impudent" (171). In the end it is Trout who understands Billy's jumps in time, who understands that Billy is looking through "time windows" into the future or the past.

Trout's science-fiction is crucial to the post-war experiences of Billy Pilgrim. It is Trout's novel *The Big Board* which induces Billy's "jumps" through time and leads him to believe that he was abducted by an alien race called the Tralfamadorians. In the Troutean novel aliens kidnap an Earthling man and woman to display in their zoo, and this concept becomes so engrained in Billy's psyche that he later imagines himself in a

Tralfamadorian zoo with the movie star Montana Wildhack. Of particular note is the concept of authorial responsibility and the effects of literature which Vonnegut raises through Billy's Tralfamadorian experiences and non-linear movements through time and space. The zoo may or may not be of Billy's creation; it is left for the reader to decide if Billy really was abducted or whether these images are figments of Trout's imagination which Billy invokes when confronted with memories of Dresden and war. As has been noted by Andrews, "Trout had already imagined the zoo episode in fiction, and Billy had read it before living it, or dreaming it, or falling through time and space into it" (27). Trout's stories are "shorn of the painful elements" and provide Billy with "pure wish fulfillment": a means of escape from the images of death and destruction to which Billy returns without warning as he jumps through time. The safe, enclosed environment of the Tralfamadorian zoo thus may "exist[s] only in Billy's mind, having been placed there by Kilgore Trout's particular brand of literary 'poison'" (33).

However, Vonnegut is not necessarily arguing for the validity of these trips to Tralfamadore; he is more concerned with the effects fiction can have on the damaged human psyche. The ideas contained within Trout's science-fiction novels fuel Billy's jumps through time and space and "are, ultimately, responsible for his complete divorce from reality" (Simpson 263). This break with reality takes place many years after Billy's wartime experiences, when Billy is a successful and financially prosperous optometrist. While Billy appears to have all of the accoutrements of a happy life – wife, children, career, financial investments – his mind slowly degenerates under the weight of wartime memories until the only escape available to him are his visions of Tralfamadore. He

finds solace in their belief in an organized universe; if moments in time are structured, and there is no way to alter them, he can confront his wartime memories as unavoidable and necessary.

As in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Trout's fiction thus acts as a catalyst in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and provides a sense of "meaning" to readers such as Billy and Eliot Rosewater who have suffered serious psychological trauma. Vonnegut expands his questioning of the purpose of literature and the search for meaning within fictional works which was introduced in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* to further discuss the role of the author within this process. *Slaughterhouse-Five* expands upon the idea that "artists are responsible for their ideas," exemplifying the threat Trout poses as a writer "who manipulates the masses by numbing them with sentimental consolation or stimulating them with romantic lies" (Andrews 25). Both Billy and Eliot are searching for a purpose, having discovered that life is chaotic and irrelevant in the face of the unmanageable and destructive powers of war. In turning to Trout's fiction they each seem to find a *raison d'être*: Eliot devotes himself to his philanthropic "work of art" in Rosewater County and Billy attempts to bring the Tralfamadorian concept of "moments trapped in amber" to Earth. However, these actions are merely defense mechanisms against the real problem, the psychological damage these characters suffered as a result of war experiences.

And yet, given Vonnegut's humanistic agenda, can Trout truly be viewed in such a negative light? Are artists really nothing more than manipulators who numb the emotionally unstable masses? The introduction and use of Trout in these two novels would suggest otherwise. The purpose of literature and the role of the author within a

humanistic worldview is not only to publicly display the problems facing humanity but to offer solutions to those same problems. Vonnegut writes in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* that Trout's stories and novels "describe a perfectly hideous society … and then, toward the end, to suggest ways in which it could be improved," (29) and the characters who read Trout's novels are in fact seeking to improve society. The value of science fiction lies in the fact that the genre allows the audience to view humanity from the outside, without the restraints usually imposed by society. In this sense Trout's stories and ideas "appear as mini-illustrations of how the ideas of science, religion, and politics become the lenses that alter human perception and shape values and 'truth' " (Rackstraw, "The Paradox of Awareness" 63). Eliot and Billy are able to do away with these lenses and see the truths that lie hidden beneath them, thanks in great part to Trout's fiction.

In both *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the author and his work are the catalysts which set into motion a series of events meant to bring meaning and purpose to the lives of the reader and, in extension, the people to whom the reader conveys the message. In the case of Billy Pilgrim, "his Tralfamadorian existence must be approached as an escape mechanism grounded in mental instability but – and this is key – fueled by Troutean science fiction" (Simpson 267). In his first two appearances, Trout acts as the stimulus for the actions of others who are predisposed to ideas which would usually be considered "insane." The problem, however, is not in the message itself, as Trout's ideas are in essence revealing truths concerning the possible fate of the postmodern human being. The problem lies in the presentation and reception of the

messages Trout attempts to convey. As a science-fiction writer, Trout is the lowest of the low. He is only published in pornographic magazines, as we are told in both *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and is never compensated or recognized for his efforts. As a preacher giving sermons, as many critics have named him, Trout is essentially a failure. He only manages to reach the emotionally disturbed and mentally unstable.

Yet these broken characters are, as pointed out by Persell, the sane in an insane world. Boon furthers this argument when he writes:

> Pilgrim is often labeled 'crazy' and his visions are deemed hallucinogenic partly because his views of time are contrary to authorized views of time. Eliot Rosewater is often labeled 'crazy' and his handling of the Rosewater Foundation is deemed irresponsible because his views of wealth and its deployment are contrary to authorized views of wealth .... When people are judged (marked) insane, this is no more than a recognition of their alignment to the law. (28)

Trout provides Eliot and Billy with these "unauthorized" concepts in his science fiction, demonstrating the possibilities available to writers and their audiences who are able to look outside the generally accepted and limited point of views perpetuated in mainstream literature. Characters such as Eliot and Billy, like their creator Vonnegut, have seen the worst that human beings can do to each other and are therefore able to accept and act upon the humanistic messages Trout conveys in his works.

Trout's presence in these novels and the great influence he wields over Eliot and Billy should not be surprising given the fact that Vonnegut was so fond of pointing out the ironies inherent in the creation of "art." Persell notes that Vonnegut is "a master of

encrypting failed artistry into his novels," in particular through his depiction of Trout. Trout's works, and in extension Vonnegut's as well, remind us that "the author must guard against a mindless adherence to inherited aesthetic form as a flimsy bulwark against insanity, schizophrenia, and moral incertitude, without succumbing to those threats in the process of revealing them" and Trout's failures as a writer "enable[s] Vonnegut to explore the inherent inadequacies of both deploying or resisting traditional narrative strategies" (39-40). This becomes apparent in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the first novel in which Vonnegut begins to employ "jumps" in the narrative which prevent the reader from following a linear or chronological plot. As previously discussed, Trout's literature provides lies as well as truths in much the same way Vonnegut unveils the lies and truths inherent in the act of storytelling. This concept, which is hinted at in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, serves as the centerpiece of Vonnegut's next Troutean novel, *Breakfast of Champions*.

Kilgore Trout "Liberated": *Breakfast of Champions*

Breakfast of Champions (*Breakfast*) has been considered the "mid-point" novel of Vonnegut's career and presents the audience with a very different portrait of the author. Most critics agree that this novel is the first in which Vonnegut finds a voice with which to speak openly to the audience, without the use of vague, subtle interjections. His previous novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* included an introduction and brief comments meant to remind the audience that he, the author, had also been present at the events he relates. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut insert himself even more into his narrative and acts as narrator and character in his own work, providing a more personal vision of himself

than had been revealed in his earlier novels. Vonnegut was questioning many things at this point in his writing career, namely the meaning of literature and the arts as they relate to the purpose of human beings. Questions regarding the purpose of life which had only been hinted at before now become the center of the message Vonnegut attempts to relay to his audience, and so it should not be surprising that Vonnegut utilizes the character of Kilgore Trout not only to present this message but seek out an answer worth sharing with the world.

The interplay between Trout the creation and Vonnegut the Creator signifies a turning point in the focus of his works. Boon notes that the novels Vonnegut wrote before 1973 dealt primarily with "the dehumanization of people in the face of the promulgation of machinery," while *Breakfast of Champions* and the novels that follow are more concerned with "the people who construct the machinery." The machinery which most interests him is the type constructed by himself and those like him, "art." It appears that at this point in his writing career he has come to the realization that he has "turned his characters, his 'children,' into machines, slaves to do his bidding" (83) and decides to send Trout on a journey of liberation.

Vonnegut the narrator opens the novel, speaking directly to the audience in the preface as he did briefly in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He explains the purpose of the work and its "immaturity" by declaring that "I feel as though I am crossing the spine of a roof – having ascended one slope" and "I am programmed at fifty to perform childishly." He is giving himself license to revert back to a more irreverent, non-traditional form of writing, a process which will involve ridding himself of certain prescribed concepts of literature:

"I am trying to clear my head of all the junk in there .... I'm throwing out characters from my other books, too. I'm not going to put on any more puppet shows" (*BOC* 4-5). The opening of Chapter One states that the novel is "a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old men," Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover. The narrator/author Vonnegut further indicates that Trout will become "one of the most beloved and respected human beings in history" because of this meeting, despite being a nobody before (7).

Dwayne Hoover is a car dealer from Midland City, Ohio. He enjoys all of the comforts money and success can bring; Vonnegut labels Dwayne "fabulously well-to-do" and regularly refers to all of Dwayne's real estate holdings and business ventures to indicate his (irrelevant) financial status. Despite owning multiple enterprises, Dwayne is slowly going insane. Unlike previous characters such as Eliot Rosewater or Billy Pilgrim who are damaged by wartime trauma, Dwayne is a victim of the "bad chemicals" in his brain, which leave him susceptible to the science-fiction writings of Trout. While Dwayne falls deeper and deeper into madness, suffering from conditions such as depression, mania and echolalia, Trout makes his way from New York to Midland City to act as the guest of honor at an arts festival.

The character of Trout is fleshed out in more detail than ever before in *Breakfast of Champions*, as Vonnegut informs us that Trout is living in Cohoes, New York and makes a living installing aluminum combination storm windows and screens (20). We are also told that despite the fact that Trout has written one hundred and seventeen novels and two thousand short stories at this point in his life, no one even knows that he is a

writer. He blindly sends his fiction to a publishing firm which he found in a magazine at the public library, World Classics Library. This company uses his fiction "to give bulk to books and magazines of salacious pictures" and "never told him where or when he might expect to find himself in print," adding pornographic illustrations "which had nothing to do with his tales." In order to find his own works he must seek them out in pornography stores, and he is never paid for any of his work (20-21).

In spite of his anonymity, which Trout himself works to maintain, his one and only fan Eliot Rosewater decides to bring him to the attention of the public. In exchange for the loan of an expensive painting for the Midland City Festival of the Arts, Eliot insists on hiring Trout, "the greatest living writer in the English language," as the guest speaker for the festival (34). After telling his parakeet Bill that "I don't want out of my cage" and arguing that "they don't know anything about books out that way," Trout decides to attend the festival in order to "show them what nobody has ever seen at an arts festival before: a representative of all the thousands of artists who devoted their entire lives to a search for truth and beauty – and didn't find doodley-squat!" (36-37)

While Trout hitchhikes to Midland City to attend the festival, Dwayne Hoover's "bad chemicals" have provoked him to the point of suicide, although he finds himself incapable of carrying out the act. As his mental state deteriorates, he has a conversation with his secretary and mistress Francine Pefko in which he states that he wants to hear "new things from new people" in the hopes that someone will "take me by the hand and lead me out of the woods." Francine suggests talking to the artists and writers coming to the Festival of the Arts, since they "don't think like other people" and could tell him

something different. Dwayne decides to attend the festival in the hopes that he will receive "a brand new viewpoint on life" from the attendees (167).

This fateful decision brings him into contact with Trout and Trout's literature, and the meeting between the two men contains a warning from Vonnegut regarding the calamitous effects of fiction writing on the damaged human psyche. With his bad chemicals raging and awaiting a new meaning for life, Dwayne finds himself (courtesy of Vonnegut the Creator) at the bar of the Midland City Holiday Inn. Trout arrives, dressed in a white shirt which glows like a searchlight under the lounge's blacklights; the beam of Trout's shirt "roused Dwayne from his trance" and made him believe that "something painless and supernatural was going on" (238). At this point, "Dwayne Hoover's bad chemicals suddenly decided that it was time for Dwayne to demand from Kilgore Trout the secrets of life" and the madman speed-reads Trout's novel *Now It Can Be Told.*

This story, a work of fiction in the form of a letter written by the Creator of the Universe to the only sentient being in existence, states that "You are the only creature in the entire Universe who has free will. You are the only one who has to figure out what to do next – and *why*. Everybody else is a robot, a machine" (252-53). This message is too much for Dwayne, who proceeds to attack twelve people in the mistaken belief that they are all machines. He tells the young convict Wayne Hoobler, "I used to think the electric chair was a shame. I used to think war was a shame – and automobile accidents and cancer .... Why should I care what happens to machines?" (263) Trout is wounded by his own "poison," his own words, when he is attacked by Dwayne while trying to restrain him and loses the tip of his right ring finger.

Of course the meeting between Dwayne and Trout is not the true focal point of the novel. It is part of a much larger plan, one which Vonnegut the writer only admits to toward the end of the narrative when he sends Vonnegut the Creator into the lounge of the Holiday Inn with Trout and Dwayne. Vonnegut the Creator now appears in order to clarify the goal he means to attain through the writing of the novel: he will undergo a spiritual climax in which he will be born again thanks to the words he gives to the painter Rabo Karabekian (218). This artist, who has been paid an exorbitant amount of money for a piece of "art" that is nothing more than an avocado-green field with a strip of day-glo orange reflecting tape attached vertically to the canvas, defends his work in such eloquent terms that Vonnegut is given hope:

> "I now give you my word of honor," he went on, "that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal – the 'I am' to which all messages are sent .... It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light .... Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery." (221)

This explanation serves two purposes. First, it proves that art, in its various manifestations, is capable of conveying beauty and meaning. Even a painting "that any five-year-old could make" can remind us of our unique position within the universe, of the consciousness that gives us life, or it can relate any number of other humanistic messages. Secondly, the awareness offered by those messages is not irrelevant but the most important reason for human existence. Vonnegut takes Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" beyond the individual and rewrites it here to say "I am aware, therefore I

am." The necessity of awareness, especially of the other forms of life sharing the planet with us, is the answer to Trout's earlier question "What in the hell are people *for*?" According to Vonnegut, people are meant to be aware of life and respect it where it exists.

After his "rebirth," Vonnegut has to perform one last symbolic action before he can move forward into the next stage of his writing career: he must free his "slaves," his characters. In order to do this he must come face-to-face with Kilgore Trout, his most sentient creation:

> Trout was the only character I ever created who had enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of another human being. He had spoken of the possibility several times to his parakeet. He had said, for instance, "Honest to God, Bill, the way things are going, all I can think of is that I'm a character in a book by somebody who wants to write about somebody who suffers all the time." (240-41)

Vonnegut confronts Trout in order to tell him the truth of his existence. He informs Trout that "I am a novelist, and I created you for use in my books .... I'm your Creator" (291). After performing a number of sleights of authorial hand to convince Trout of this truth, Vonnegut claims that he means to heal both of them through the revelation of the truth:

> "Mr. Trout, I love you," I said gently. "I have broken your mind to pieces. I want to make it whole. I want you to feel a wholeness and inner harmony such as I have never allowed you to feel before .... You are the only one I am telling. For the others, tonight will be a night like any other night. Arise, Mr. Trout, you are free, you are *free*." (293-94)

In freeing Trout and telling him the truth, Vonnegut can free himself from the need to put on "puppet shows." The liberation of his characters allows him to enter the next stage of his life with a greater understanding of humanism.

Breakfast of Champions thus represents a turning point not only in Vonnegut's writing style but in his approach to the humanistic ideas he had been working with up until this point in his career. Beginning with this novel "Vonnegut's focus shifts to the individuals who construct the systems that turn people into machines," such as technology, medicine, psychology and economics (Boon 132). Yet the most problematic system Vonnegut faces is not one which overtly turns the public into unthinking machinery but one which subtly infiltrates the psyche: the "bad ideas" contained within language and literature. In *Breakfast of Champions* Vonnegut attempts to criticize the arts for their role in misleading audiences while simultaneously defending the need for the beauty and meaning provided by works of art, and as usual Trout is essential to Vonnegut's discussion of this theme.

Reed has labeled *Breakfast of Champions* as a "comic fable" which dramatically demonstrates the failures of communication inherent in the reception of literature ("Hurting 'Til It Laughs" 20), and this concept is evident particularly in the effect Trout's novel *Now It Can Be Told* has on Dwayne Hoover. While earlier Vonnegut protagonists such as Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim "are often men who are able to see beyond boundaries, men who note the inhuman treatment of people marked as 'other'" (Boon 106), Dwayne's violent reaction to Trout's fiction represents the other side of this coin. Not only is Dwayne led to believe that he is the only non-mechanical human being in the

universe, he uses this "knowledge" as an excuse to physically harm others. Furthermore Dwayne sees Trout as a messenger sent to reveal to him the truth of his existence, believing that as a writer Trout has access to insights which others cannot provide.

While *Now It Can Be Told* "does indeed contain a wise and moral message, what happens as a result of Dwayne Hoover's literal reading of it warns of the dangers of making gurus of fiction writers" (Reed, "Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool" 74) and provides evidence for Vonnegut's argument that people must learn to think for themselves in order to avoid becoming machines. Dwayne's and Trout's struggles with the concept of their own humanity is one shared with the rest of human existence; as Boon points out, "just as Kilgore Trout in *Breakfast of Champions* is unnerved by the thought that he is no more than a machine in his creator's (Vonnegut's) artificial universe (the novel), human beings desire to affirm their difference from machine-function .... this impulse defines humanism" (146).

And yet, Vonnegut's view of the arts (and literature in particular) is not as deterministic and negative as some critics would argue. Vonnegut's spiritual rebirth and the freeing of his characters do not represent an acquiescence to the notion that art and artists are perpetuating harmful, limiting beliefs meant to pacify the audience's need for meaning. On the contrary, *Breakfast of Champions* reminds us "to be conscious of our persistent and paradoxical need to invent new works of art and bodies of knowledge to transcend our awareness of mortality and impotence" (Rackstraw, "The Paradox of Awareness" 62) while at the same time acknowledging that the creation of art is "a renewing experience to be cherished and protected at all cost – for the sake of life itself"

(58). The "unwavering beam of light" in Rabo Karabekian's painting provides Vonnegut and his audience with the knowledge that art has the capacity to "celebrate not human imagination ... but rather simple human awareness, the self-conscious style of knowledge that among all animal life only humankind enjoys" (Klinkowitz 97).

Moving away from the more limited views of the author's purpose expressed in previous novels such as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "Vonnegut seems to have come to a refined perception of his authorial role, which he articulates explicitly in his often quoted wish in *Breakfast of Champions* for a culture of human harmony" (Rackstraw, "Quantum Leaps" 59). This shift is due in great part to the presence and use of the Trout figure; Vonnegut "felt increasing freedom to write autobiographically in introductory pages, or to include intermittent interjections ... yet he obviously found advantage in the use of the alternative voice, the persona, afforded by Kilgore Trout" (Reed, "Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool" 67). Despite the fact that Vonnegut appears constantly throughout *Breakfast of Champions* and speaks directly to the audience (and the characters), Trout still provides Vonnegut with an example of an author who, like himself, is suffering from a lack of credibility and purpose. From Trout, through Trout, Vonnegut learns that "he possesses an imaginative faculty capable of resisting the mechanistic conditioning processes of a machine-ridden world, and therefore of steering his own course as a person and an artist" (Broer 74).

The need to free this character takes on a new meaning within this context of resisting conditioning and machine-like behavior. Not only does this resistance pertain to everyday actions, but it also involves the process of writing itself. As Vonnegut's most

"noxious" character and the one "associated with disillusionment and death throughout his fiction," setting Trout free "amounts to the author's repudiation of his most pessimistic voice," Trout is therefore liberated "to celebrate his [Vonnegut's] own disengagement from a mechanical relationship with his creator, who programmed him to write as he has" (Broer 77). Thus Trout takes on the role of Vonnegut's proxy, standing in for him symbolically as he seeks to free himself as a writer and examine his work's influence on humanity.

In *Breakfast of Champions*, Trout "gain[s] a conscience and an understanding of the power that is both possible and available in and with the written word" when he experiences firsthand Dwayne Hoover's violent reaction to his novel. This attack "forces Trout to examine his work's influence on humanity" and shows Trout that "he is not invisible and that his ideas do matter" (Simpson 271). Despite this apparent rejection of the author's role as one which is negative, the novel is not strictly advocating a turn away from creative expression. On the contrary, the novel's message is that art, and especially literature, "needs an audience to complete it." Once a work of art is shown to a receptive audience "they are free to make the painting 'mean' something" and use the unique awareness which human beings possess (Gholson 138). Vonnegut does not intend to stop writing or creating works of art after setting his characters free, but claims he will "shun storytelling" and "write about life" instead (*Breakfast* 210).

For this reason, Vonnegut meets with and "frees" Trout, resolving what Rackstraw has called the "patriarchal authority conflict" which acted as a driving force in his earlier works ("The Paradox of Awareness" 61). Having finally come to understand

that chaos, not order, is the primary force at work in the world, Vonnegut is able to move into the next phase of his career with a new outlook on the function of narrative itself. He discovers that the purpose of writing is not to manipulate the narrative and characters, as he so often does in *Breakfast of Champions*, but to use language to transform himself and his audience. Trout, who represents the authorial control Vonnegut exercised in his previous works, is sent on his way so that Vonnegut can be "reborn" as a more humanistic writer. Of course, the problem with setting Trout free lies in the fact that Vonnegut has already given him awareness. A sentient character such as Trout, so connected to his Creator that he bears a resemblance not only to his Creator but his Creator's father, will prove most difficult to liberate. For this reason, Trout returns for a final appearance in Vonnegut's last novel, *Timequake*.

CHAPTER 2

THE INTERTWINING OF ART AND LIFE: *TIMEQUAKE*

Vonnegut's final novel *Timequake* is the culmination of a long writing career which had spanned nearly half a century. This novel is one which, as Vonnegut informs us in the prologue, "never wanted to be written in the first place" and was created from the salvaged parts of an earlier version "which did not work" (*Timequake* xiii-xiv). Vonnegut knew that this novel would be his last as he wrote it, having turned seventy-four years old as he finished the prologue. Despite the author's own pessimistic view of his work *T* can easily be considered Vonnegut's "swan song," the encore and final bow of a novelist who had struggled with his own status as a writer for decades. In *Timequake* Vonnegut finally comes to terms with the problematic questions he had raised throughout his career, such as the purpose of human beings, the purpose of art, and the role of the author within society. The central figure of this novel is the character Vonnegut "freed" more than twenty years before, Kilgore Trout. In the end Vonnegut is not only bidding farewell to his career as a novelist but giving Trout the send-off he deserves after so many years of suffering at the hands of his Creator.

Vonnegut writes in the prologue to *Timequake* that the novel is a mixture of the best pieces of a failed work, named *Timequake One*, and the thoughts and experiences which occurred to him in the seven months previous to completing the novel. Trout is the main link between the original version of the novel and the published version; in fact, Vonnegut states that "most of what I have chosen to preserve from *Timequake One* has to

do with his adventures and opinions" (xv). The other important element Vonnegut salvaged from *Timequake One* is a clambake at the writers resort Xanadu in Rhode Island which will be attended by Vonnegut and Trout. These two will meet for the last time at the resort after the world has suffered a "timequake," which Vonnegut defines as "a sudden glitch in the space-time continuum" that "made everybody and everything do exactly what they'd done during a past decade, for good or ill, a second time" (xiv-xv).

This timequake essentially removes free will from the universe and forces everyone to repeat the ten years spanning from February 17th, 1991 to February 13th, 2001:

> There was absolutely nothing you could say during the rerun, if you hadn't said it the first time through the decade. You couldn't even save your own life or that of a loved one, if you had failed to do that the first time through.... Then we all had to get back to 2001 the hard way, minute by minute, hour by hour, year by year.... Only when people got back to when the timequake hit did they stop being robots of their pasts. (xv)

This premise is the element which unifies the disparate narratives of the various characters that appear throughout the novel. Interspersed with the pre- and post-timequake stories of Monica Pepper, Dudley Prince and Kilgore Trout are Vonnegut's own recollections and observations, drawn from his personal and public lives. Many of Vonnegut's anecdotes deal with the nature of writing and his role as an author as he looks back upon the changes the world has undergone since he was young. These anecdotes are interconnected with stories attributed to Trout. Vonnegut writes that while he has given up on publishing short fiction, "the habit dies hard" and he still comes up with

ideas for short stories from time to time. Instead of publishing them, as he did when he began his writing career, "all I do with short story ideas now is rough them out, credit them to Kilgore Trout, and put them in a novel" (17). Vonnegut uses these story sketches to emphasize many of the negative trends in human behavior which have come about in the seven decades since his birth.

The most significant of these stories found in *Timequake* is "The Sisters B-36." The story tells of three sisters from the planet Booboo, an Earth-like world with "the most adaptable creatures in the local family of galaxies." Booboolings were raised in an environment where the programming of children "was done socially, with nothing but talk, talk, talk. Grownups would speak to little Booboolings favorably about presumably appropriate and desirable feelings and deeds. The brains of the youngsters would respond by growing circuits that made civilized pleasures and behavior automatic" (18-19). Under the influence of this type of social conditioning, "the brains of most, but not quite all, Booboolings made to grow circuits, microchips, if you like, which on Earth would be called *imaginations*" (20).

The three Boobooling sisters of the story's title are a short story writer, a painter and a scientist. The two artistic sisters are very popular, but the scientist, Nim-nim, is a social outcast and seeks revenge on her sisters: "She was so *boring*! All she could talk about was thermodynamics. She was envious. Her secret ambition was to make her two artistic sisters feel, to use a favorite expression of Trout's, 'like something the cat drug in'" (18). Nim-nim spends her time with the lunatics of an asylum and with their help invents "satanic devices" such as "television cameras and transmitters and receivers."

These inventions "made imaginations redundant," and eventually "young Booboolings didn't see any point in developing imaginations anymore." Nim-nim comes to develop machinery and weapons as well, and eventually "new generations of Booboolings grew up without imaginations. Their appetites for diversions from boredom were perfectly satisfied by all the crap Nim-nim was selling them." The Booboolings' fate is thus sealed by their acceptance of mind-numbing technology: "Without imaginations, though, they couldn't do what their ancestors had done, which was read interesting, heart-warming stories in the faces of one another. So, according to Kilgore Trout, 'Booboolings became among the most merciless creatures in the local family of galaxies'" (20-21).

"The Sisters B-36" is one of many Troutean stories which was never meant to be read by others. We are told in *Timequake* that Trout no longer sends his stories to the World Classics Library to be printed as filler in pornographic novels; after the death of his son Leon in 1975 "Trout had been a hobo, throwing away his stories instead of offering them for publication" (53). Trout has spent the last quarter century without a home, scribbling stories that he is compelled to write but which are always destined to end up as garbage. As Vonnegut explains, the addiction he and Trout shared was not alcohol, religion or chess but "making idiosyncratic arrangements on horizontal lines, with ink on bleached and flattened wood pulp, of twenty-six symbols, ten numbers, and about eight punctuation marks" (32).

This addiction to writing leads Trout to throw "The Sisters B-36" into a trash can in front of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, where it is found by one of the Academy's guards, Dudley Prince. Dudley is drawn to the garbage can when he sees

Trout "talking to and gesturing at the lidless wire basket as though it were an editor in an old-fashioned book-publishing house, and as though his four-page handwritten yellow manuscript were a great novel." Dudley does not know that Trout is "having fun in a nightmare," but believes him to be a crazy bag lady (62). Intrigued by Trout's performance, Dudley recovers the story and imagines that the story is a message from God (64). Dudley's reaction to this supposed message from the Creator is not the same as Dwayne Hoover's in *Breakfast of Champions*, but more akin to Eliot Rosewater's reaction to Trout's fiction. Dudley takes the story to the Executive Secretary of the Academy and her husband, Monica and Zoltan Pepper, and tells them that "I think maybe somebody is trying to tell us something" (67).

Monica and Zoltan do not give credence to the "bag lady" and "her" stories, but Dudley proceeds to watch for "her." Despite the fact that he believes "that a bag lady was using the trash receptacle for a mailbox," Dudley "retrieved each story and pondered it, hoping to discover some important message from a higher power encoded therein" (75). Like the previous Vonnegut characters Eliot Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim and Dwayne Hoover, Dudley believes that literature will explain to him something about the world and humanity. Like Eliot and Billy Dudley has suffered unnecessarily at the hands of the world's institutions, having been mistakenly incarcerated for seven years for a rape and murder he did not commit. This experience, as we have seen with previous Vonnegutean characters, leaves him more susceptible to the messages contained within Trout's fiction. Vonnegut demonstrates through the experiences of these characters that dehumanization, whether it takes place as a result of war or incarceration, has the capacity to awaken a

keener awareness of the frailty of human beings and provoke a sympathetic reaction to humanistic ideas. This is especially true for Dudley, who ends up spending a total of fourteen years in prison when the timequake returns him to the correction facility and he is forced to serve his sentence twice.

Trout is apparently the only person aware of the timequake while it is taking place. Everyone else is destined to repeat the previous ten years of their lives with no clear understanding as to why they have been sent back in time. Trout, however, accepts this event and even provides the public with an explanation for it in his memoir *My Ten Years on Automatic Pilot*:

> "The timequake of 2001 was a cosmic charley horse in the sinews of Destiny. At what was in New York City 2:27 p.m. on February 13th of that year, the Universe suffered a crisis in self-confidence. Should it go on expanding indefinitely? What was the point? It fibrillated with indecision. Maybe it should have a family reunion back where it all began, and then make a great big BANG again. It suddenly shrunk ten years." (63)

The timequake means that Trout is destined to rewrite, and throw away, all of the stories he wrote during the previous ten years. But Trout accepts this without complaint, as he never meant for anyone to see his works the first time around: "Trout was the only appreciative audience he needed for what he was and what he did. That let him accept the conditions of the rerun as unsurprising. It was just more foolishness in the world outside his own, and no more worthy of his respect than wars or economic collapses or plagues."

This attitude also helps to explain why Trout is able to recover so quickly when the timequake ends: "He was capable of being a rational hero in the neighborhood of the Academy the instant free will kicked in again, because, in my opinion, Trout, unlike most of the rest of us, had found no significant differences between life as déjà vu and life as original material" (105-6). When free will returns, Trout does not find himself confused but finishes the story he is writing. The act of writing is what ultimately sustained him through the rerun: "The wings of a narrative, begging to be told, had carried its author over what was for most of us a yawning abyss" (110). After completing the story Trout is able to notice for the first time the chaos at work around him as the rest of the world's population suddenly finds itself freed from the "automatic pilot" of the timequake.

With the exception of Trout, most of humanity is taken by surprise when the timequake ends and free will kicks in once again:

> Most other people, after the relentless reprise of their mistakes and bad luck and hollow victories during the past ten years, had, in Trout's words, "stopped giving a shit what was going on, or what was liable to happen next." This syndrome would eventually be given a name: *Post-Timequake Apathy*, or *PTA*. (113)

The condition Vonnegut calls PTA results in massive, worldwide chaos, as anyone not seated or lying down when the timequake ended found themselves suddenly in control of their bodies for the first time in ten years. In the aftermath of the timequake "everybody for miles around was immobilized, if not by death or serious injury, then by PTA" (129). Throughout the world "there were millions of pedestrians lying on the ground because the weight on their feet had been unevenly distributed when free will kicked in," and the

worst of the devastation was brought about by "self-propelled forms of transportation" (121-22). A horrifying scene ensues as the drivers and pilots of all manner of vehicles in motion are suddenly forced into awareness, with accidents occurring everywhere. When Trout steps outside of the shelter he has been living in, situated next door to the Academy, the scene which greets him is reminiscent of a battleground: "The dead and dying were widely scattered, rather than heaped or enclosed in a burning or crumpled airplane or bus" (127).

Trout is the only person who reacts when a fire truck proceeds to crash into the entrance of the Academy, taking out the doors and killing Monica Pepper's husband Zoltan. Dudley Prince is almost killed by a chandelier which falls due to the impact of the truck, as he is dumb-struck by PTA. Trout is able to stay calm because "his experiences as a forward observer for the artillery had taught him that panic only made things worse" (128) and rushes to Dudley to wake him from his apathy. When Dudley does not respond to Trout's cries of "Free will! Free will!", Trout revitalizes him with the mantra that will forever after be known as "Kilgore's Creed": "You were sick, but now you're well, and there's work to do" (193).

This Creed is the saving grace of humanity after the timequake, when the world must once again take control of their thoughts and actions. Vonnegut relates that "Kilgore's Creed did as much to save life on Earth as Einstein's *E equals mc squared* had done to end it two generations earlier," as it spread from Dudley Prince to two armed guards to the homeless of Trout's shelter and eventually into the neighborhoods of New York. Kilgore's Creed is first spread by the lowly members of society; "the people Trout

energized in the neighborhood of the Academy, although most of them wouldn't have won any beauty contests, were by and large cheerful and public-spirited" (204). The message is carried to the rest of the world, ironically, via television and radio. Before long Trout's message becomes commonplace, an epithet with multiple and diverse functions: a morning recitation for public school children, the climax of a wedding ceremony, a wake-up call at a hotel (196-97).

After setting in motion the events which will bring a sense of normalcy to humanity, Trout is taken to the writers resort Xanadu. There he is asked to participate in a stage performance of a play named *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* which stars the descendant of the illegitimate son of John Wilkes Booth, Frank Smith. Trout's only duty is to sound the antique steam whistle at the end of the play, when Abe Lincoln boards a train in Springfield after winning the election and becoming president. Trout was hand-picked for this task, insignificant as it may be:

> There were of course many club members who had no parts in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, who would have liked at least to blow that big brass rooster, once they saw it and then heard it blown by the plumber himself during dress rehearsal. But the club most of all wanted Trout to feel that he was home at last, and a vital member of an extended family. Not merely the club and the household staff at Xanadu, and the chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous, which met in the ballroom there, and the battered women and children and grandparents who had found shelter there, were grateful for his healing and encouraging mantra, which made bad times a coma: You were sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do. The whole world was. (228)

Trout's reward for years of service and suffering, for being the pessimistic puppet of his Creator, his stand-in as a discounted writer and artist, is the thing Vonnegut himself

treasured most in his life and desired most from his career: an extended family and respect as a writer with a serious message. Lincoln's final speech in the play is a reflection upon Trout's purpose in Vonnegut's fiction and a beautiful send-off for this much-loved character:

> "Perhaps we have come to the dreadful day of awakening, and the dream is ended.... And yet - let us believe that it is not true! Let us live to prove we can cultivate the natural world that is about us, and the intellectual and moral world that is within us, so that we may secure an individual, social, and political prosperity, whose course shall be forwarded, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away .... I commend you to the care of the Almighty, as I hope that in your prayers you will remember me .... Good-bye, my friends and neighbors." (230-31)

This speech evokes a sob from Trout as he blows the steam whistle, a cry elicited by the beauty of the words he has heard. Vonnegut writes that at the clambake following the play, "we were mourning not only Lincoln, but the death of American *eloquence*" (232).

The clambake to celebrate the successful completion of the play is populated by many of the deceased members of Vonnegut's extended family as well as "stand-ins" he creates to represent people from his past, such as his ex-wife Jane. He also includes living persons, specifically those who have in some way helped to create his authorial legacy and defended his body of work: scholars and critics who have studied his works, filmmakers and actors who were involved in the cinematic versions of his novels, friends and business partners. It is Vonnegut's farewell party for himself, but he denies being the guest of honor; this privilege he leaves to Trout. The clambake is depicted as Trout's crowning moment as a writer and an intellectual:

> He was so happy! He was so popular! There on the beach, whatever Trout said produced laughter and applause. He couldn't believe it! .... People told him he was as witty as Oscar Wilde! Understand, the biggest audience this man had had before the clambake was an artillery battery, when he was a forward spotter in Europe during World War II .... I called back to him from the rear of the crowd: "You've been sick, Mr. Trout, but now you're well again, and there's work to do." (240-41)

Trout's final gift to his audience, and to Vonnegut as well, is an explanation for humanity's unique status in the universe. After pondering this question through so many novels Trout finally provides Vonnegut, and the rest of the world, with a reason for the humanistic agenda he has propagated throughout his writing career. Wanting to say one last thing to his "family," Trout asks Vonnegut to choose two twinkling points of light in the sky and to look at one, then the other.

> "Ok," I said, "I did it."
>
> "It took a second, do you think?" he said.
>
> "No more," I said.
>
> "Even if you had taken an hour," he said, "something would have passed between where those two heavenly bodies used to be, at, conservatively speaking, a million times the speed of light."
>
> "What was it?" I said.
>
> "Your awareness," he said. "That is a new quality in the Universe, which exists only because there are human beings. Physicists must from now on, when pondering the secrets of the Cosmos, factor in not only energy and matter and time, but something very new and beautiful, which is *human awareness*."
>
> Trout paused, ensuring with the ball of his left thumb that his upper dental plate would not slipwhen he said his last words to us that enchanted evening.
>
> All was well with his teeth. This was his finale: "I have thought of a better word than awareness," he said. "Let us call it *soul*." (241-43)

Thus Trout leaves the stage having provided Vonnegut with a reason for defending human life, for cherishing even the lowliest of human beings. The capacity for awareness, the existence of a soul, is the trait which makes humans unique and necessary within the universe.

His life's work now finished, Vonnegut is finally able to let Trout go in peace, not only recognized as a writer but as a savior. Vonnegut rewrites the ending he imagined for Trout almost thirty years previously in *Breakfast of Champions*, when he wrote that Trout died in 1981 after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for advancing theories concerning the causes of mental health in his science-fiction works. The tombstone he had imagined for Trout in 1973 read, "We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane" (*Breakfast* 16). In place of leaving the world with a warning, in *Timequake* Trout offers a resolution for the apathy many suffer as a result of the mechanized, impersonal world we have come to inhabit, in the form of Kilgore's Creed. Trout's death at the writer's resort Xanadu is an honor bestowed upon him by his Creator for serving as his alter-ego, his proxy, his mouthpiece and his messiah for so many years. Trout lives long enough to see himself and his life's work recognized by the public he tried to reach through his writing, knowing he made a difference in the way people perceive the world and each other. It is as if Vonnegut is trying to live vicariously through Trout and imagine the posthumous reception he would ask for himself and his own works.

Timequake reiterates, summarizes and expands upon many of the ideas regarding authorship and literature that Vonnegut had been working with throughout all of his novels. Trout is still a source of pessimism, cynicism and irony, but he has become so

integral to Vonnegut's humanistic agenda that he takes on the role of a heroic figure. In this sense Trout could be considered a postmodern flawed hero; he "emerges as a tenacious model of hope after Vonnegut's literary career of misanthropic worry about determinism and random accidents." Trout becomes a hero not because he is able to reveal the mechanistic nature of human beings to the general public but through his "humanitarian use of free will" (Rackstraw, "The Paradox of Awareness" 64). Trout's transformation from unrecognized hobo to world savior, and the final recognition of the existence of free will presented in *Timequake* which differs greatly from the concepts introduced in earlier Vonnegut novels, has been linked to the changes in perception experienced by his Creator. Broer argues that Trout's regeneration "measures the degree of optimism Vonnegut feels now about the efficacy of free will." As Trout represents "the voice of pessimism Vonnegut has battled in himself throughout his career," his redemption represents the culmination of the spiritual rebirth Vonnegut describes in *Breakfast of Champions* (78).

The most significant shared element of these epiphanies and rebirths, Trout's as well as Vonnegut's, is that they all involve works of art. Trout's regeneration is complete when he breaks down in tears at the end of the play *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* from the beauty of the moment. The spiritual rebirth Vonnegut describes in *Breakfast of Champions* is due to Rabo Karabekian's painting *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Vonnegut writes in *Timequake* that scenes from plays such as *Our Town, A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman* "became emotional and ethical landmarks for me in my early manhood, and remain such in the summer of 1996" because "I was

immobilized in a congregation of rapt fellow human beings in a theater when I first saw and heard them" (26). The question Vonnegut is raising with these epiphanies is "whether he can create art out of his American experience or whether America has replaced art – his art – with advertising" (Uphaus 173). Without the audience to take part in the shared experience of literature and art, the writer is no better than Trout; the author should either expect to earn nothing and find their works only in publications of ill repute, or should throw them away as soon as they are completed.

Yet if there is an audience, a group of people who are able to accept the messages contained within the work and use them to improve their lives and the lives of others, as eventually happens with Trout's works, then the arts and the artist/author are still necessary in the postmodern world. The problem then is not works of art or the artists themselves; as Vonnegut has shown, art is even more precious in a technological age where humanity's role has been completely redefined because it reminds us that we are still unique in our capacity for communication and deeper awareness. The problem lies in the fact that technology is slowly making that awareness, and the creative use of that awareness, what Vonnegut calls imagination, irrelevant.

Trout's stories are most often the medium through which Vonnegut discusses this problem, but none relate his message on this theme more clearly than "The Sisters B-36" in *Timequake*. This story, as well as all of the others attributed to Trout throughout Vonnegut's novels, demonstrate how Trout speaks for his Creator in an messiah-like capacity. As Reed has noted, this story is "a parable about our own society ... [which] urges the crucial role that writing and other arts play in the development of the

imagination. It proclaims the dreadful cost to the culture and to the individual of the loss of the imagination and the capacity to recognize and respect the feelings of others" ("Hurting 'Til It Laughs" 34). This story furthermore "addresses the vital role that writing and other arts play in the development of the imagination and the crucial importance of that facility to the culture and the individual" (Reed, "Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool" 77). Vonnegut counters this warning in *Timequake* by juxtaposing Trout's cynical stories proclaiming the disastrous effects of a lack of humanism with references to novels and plays which offer a remedy. The finale of the play *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* which is described in such detail in *Timequake* can thus be seen as "an epiphanic scene that represents Vonnegut's celebration of the nobility made possible by humanity's capacity for awareness and language" (Rackstraw, "The Paradox of Awareness" 65).

Trout's final appearance in *Timequake* reveals a number of the functions he served and roles he played throughout the Vonnegut canon. Reed discusses Trout's role as savior, one which can be seen in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* as well as *Timequake*:

> "It seems appropriate that this man, whose imagination finds anything possible, should be the one to accept the situation with some alacrity and carry on. His message, "You were sick, but now you're well again, and there's work to do," captures something fundamental in the nature of Trout himself. He has acted out that same message for Eliot Rosewater in the earlier novel, and he embodies it in his own resilience throughout his appearances. Perhaps he also embodies that part of his creator's constitution .... Trout's message also may come close to defining his function in the novels, to recognize the malaise of the world we inhabit, provide some wisdom and some healing laughter, and set us on our way again. ("Kurt Vonnegut's Bitter Fool" 78)

This assessment is related to that of Gholson, who links Trout's various roles – as savior, as a catalyst, as a mouthpiece for the author – as part of the larger scope and purpose of Vonnegut's fiction; "From *Breakfast of Champions* on, Vonnegut focuses his energies around a constellation of questions about the nature of narrative, its ability to transform the self, and the implications of viewing the self as a form of narrative" (136).

In addition to providing the author with transformative insights, writing, whether it is done by Vonnegut directly or through Trout, "seems to encourage us to perceive the act of storytelling as a means of coping and as a way of understanding the fluidity of our relationships to one another and the planet" (Davis 158). This argument seems at odds with the failures in communication seen in many of Vonnegut's novels, as many of his earlier characters seem to experience not rebirth but condemnation for giving credence to the messages Trout relays. Eliot Rosewater is labeled insane, as is Billy Pilgrim; Dwayne Hoover acts out violently in a true display of insanity. This would indicate what Meyer refers to as "the impossibility of *verbalizing* the good/evil 'essence' of the New World" (95), the impossibility of words to properly express the gravity of traumatic events and the "inability of the writer to match saying with seeing" (107). Yet, despite the fact that Vonnegut demonstrates this lack of communication which is inherent in writing he continues to seek a return to a shared Word. This is exemplified in *Timequake* not only through the references to a time when ideas were transmitted through plays and literature but through the dissemination and use of Kilgore's Creed. The writer's message may not be able to completely describe or depict life's traumas, but it can provide solace and community if the message it contains is one that can be shared.

This shared message not only leads to self-actualization for the author but is meant to make the audience more self-aware. The "continuum of imagined alternatives" offered by Trout's and Vonnegut's works may not fundamentally alter the course of history, but it does leave the audience free to self-actualize and seek out their own answers to the chaos which dominates our world (Uphaus 166). Free will does exist, but as usual "the author presents us with counterbalanced texts – the advantages of free will versus the attractions of determinism" (Broer 80-81). In the end, "it is their (Trout and Vonnegut's) hopeful voice inspired by their faith in the inviolability of human awareness that prevails in *Timequake,*" not the free will which has supposedly returned after the timequake (Broer 80). Free will can lead to Vonnegut's post-timequake apathy, a condition in which the ability to act independently results in a state of numbness and inactivity, but a mantra such as Kilgore's Creed can awaken one into action and bring awareness back to the sufferer of PTA.

Conclusion

Kilgore Trout's progression and growth throughout Vonnegut's novels is one of liberation of the author from the constraints of the literary world as well as those mandates imposed by society. He first appears in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a pseudo-messiah, peddling fateful messages which only the "insane" are capable of accepting. Yet these messages always carry the ring of truth, despite the fact that they are coming from a hack science-fiction writer who "couldn't write for sour apples." Having questioned the purpose of writing and fiction in a world where the sane are declared insane, Vonnegut then meets with Trout personally in

Breakfast of Champions in order to set him free. Vonnegut came to realize that he, too, was a machine programmed to write, and the only way he would liberate himself as an author would be to let go of the machinery he had used in his earlier novels; thus the truth of his creation is revealed to Trout and he is released from Vonnegut's service.

Yet Trout reemerges in *Timequake*, not merely as a scapegoat, or a *deus ex machina*, or a preacher, but as a hero. Trout is recognized as a savior and as an author before his death, finally sharing his fiction with the world after a lifetime of anonymity. With Trout's redemption as a writer Vonnegut is finally able to provide a reason for the arts after years of questioning its purpose in the postmodern American society. He comes to the conclusion in *Timequake* that "aesthetic experience should be a communal activity designed to increase human kindness," as Trout's words do for so many when free will is once again available to them (Andrews 41). Writing may be a curse to the author, as it seems to be so often for Trout and Vonnegut, but it serves a greater purpose not only for the audience but for the author: "For the writer ... the creative act is typically a task to be finished – and sometimes an afflictive task, at that – so completion and reception afford the greatest joy" (Andrews 24).

This connection between art and artist is at the heart of Vonnegut's relationship to Trout, as it has been argued that "no single example in Vonnegut's work more compellingly illustrates life and art as similar creative ventures as does the illusion of Kilgore Trout" (Broer 84). In utilizing a character such as Trout Vonnegut offers "answers about the human condition in particular and the world in general" (Simpson 261) as his writing becomes less of a "response to a world of violence and death" and

becomes, in his later novels, a "spiritual manifesto" which depicts "moral rebirth and new artistic faith" (Broer 73). Despite being deeply ironic and sarcastic, Vonnegut hoped to one day be acknowledged as the author he knew himself to be. Trout's appearances in Vonnegut's fiction, and in particular his final redemption in *Timequake*, are more than artistic contrivances; in the end, they reflect Vonnegut's own emotional journey as he sought to carve out his place as a respected American author.

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