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Introduction: A Vonnegut Retrospective

America, in the past year or two, has started to lose some of its greatest post-WWII writers—Norman Mailer, William Styron, and Hunter S. Thompson among others. But Kurt Vonnegut’s death in April of 2007 seemed to strike a particular chord not only with literary scholars, but with ordinary Americans and in the popular media as well. The subject of a malicious obituary on Fox News the day after his death, which characterized Vonnegut’s writing as “left-wing screeds,” “random musings,” and “sci-fi mumbo jumbo,” and which claimed that Vonnegut was, by the late 70’s “rich and irrelevant,” a writer who failed even at suicide, Vonnegut nonetheless had legions of fans who bought up his books in huge numbers after his death. These same fans also made Vonnegut’s 2005 book *A Man Without a Country* a surprise best-seller, and his just-released posthumous collection *Armageddon in Retrospect* a top ten *New York Times* bestseller this May.

Such contradictory views are the norm for Vonnegut. A popular, even cult figure whose work has sometimes been condemned by literary critics for being too simple, too sentimental to be “serious” literature, his works, especially *Slaughterhouse-Five*, nevertheless continue to be taught in college classrooms and to generate a great deal of scholarly attention.

Often labeled a science fiction writer, especially early in his career, Vonnegut studied biochemistry at Cornell University and believed that contemporary writers should not avoid talking about technology, since technology is such a pressing part of twentieth-and twenty-first century American life. Yet, at the same time, Vonnegut referred to himself as a Luddite who typed his essays and stories out rather than use a computer, who relied on the U.S. Postal Service rather than e-mail communication, and who warned repeatedly of the dangers of technological advancement.

A writer whose work is easily accessible to the general reading public—his style is marked by a conversational tone, short chapters, nearly child-like descriptions at times, and a gleeful mining of humor from even the darkest of situations—Vonnegut nevertheless helped usher in the postmodern era in American literature. Like other pieces of postmodern art, such as Andy Warhol’s

paintings of soup cans, Vonnegut's work blurs the line between high and low culture. His novels often include jokes, drawings, dirty limericks, cartoonish characters, flying saucers, and other science fiction elements at the same time that they ask important questions about the nature of human beings and their purpose in the world. His novels frequently use metafictional techniques to examine sophisticated questions about narrative and the relationship between art and reality. In his 1991 essay collection, *Fates Worse than Death*, Vonnegut compares himself to postmodern writer Donald Barthelme: both are the sons of architects and both are "aggressively unconventional storytellers" (55); both "tried hard to make every architect's dream come true, which is a dwelling such as no one has ever seen before, but which proves to be eminently inhabitable" (55). The words "eminently inhabitable" are key to understanding Vonnegut's intent: he insists that his works be inviting to readers rather than obscure, overly difficult, or off-putting despite their unconventionality.

Vonnegut's characters tend to be hapless, often bewildered and lonely human beings who are the victims of fateful circumstances beyond their control. His work is peopled by well-intentioned characters who find themselves traumatized by life in twentieth-century America and who respond by trying to imagine and create new worlds more suitable to their dreams, characters like Paul

Proteus, Eliot Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim, Dr. Wilbur Swain, Walter F. Starbuck, Mary Hepburn, Rabo Karabekian, and perhaps above all, ubiquitous science fiction writer Kilgore Trout. Yet, despite their best attempts, the new worlds created by Vonnegut's characters are almost always doomed to failure. While Vonnegut repeatedly depicts failed utopian schemes, he nevertheless professes love and compassion for the fragile, unlucky, all-too-human individuals he depicts.

Vonnegut was, in many ways, a deeply pessimistic writer who fully expected human beings to eventually destroy themselves and their planet. In an essay originally published in *Lear's* magazine, he imagined humans carving these words in great big letters on a wall in the Grand Canyon:

WE PROBABLY COULD HAVE SAVED OURSELVES,
BUT WERE TOO DAMNED LAZY TO TRY VERY HARD.

AND TOO DAMN CHEAP.

Yet, at the same time, he preached the necessity of maintaining human kindness and common decency in the face of the social ills confronting the contemporary world. Over and over, he cites as secular saints those human beings “who behaved

decently in a strikingly indecent society” (*A Man Without a Country* 106). The most admirable characters in his work tend to be nurses, doctors, schoolteachers, and firefighters—ordinary people who refuse to give in to despair, who work to help others in the most trying of circumstances.

Above all, Vonnegut remained throughout his career a profoundly moral writer, someone who was unafraid to thumb his nose at authority: at fundamentalist versions of organized religion, at military science that treats human beings as disposable, at a U.S. government willing to commit atrocities at home and overseas, and at literary critics who dismissed his work as “serious literature” because it was too popular and too accessible. A self-described atheist, Vonnegut nevertheless pleaded with readers to retain what he called “the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty” (*Wampeters* 165). One of my favorite Vonnegut quotes (and it’s hard to choose, because there are so many good ones!) appears in his novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*: “Pretend to be good always, and even God will be fooled” (255).

Today’s panel won’t reconcile any of these contradictions in Vonnegut’s life and work. But we do think it’s time that literary scholars begin to reassess the

corpus of Vonnegut's work and his legacy in American literature as well as talk about new directions for Vonnegut scholarship in the future. Our panelists today have all written extensively about Vonnegut; several knew him personally and considered him a friend.

We'll begin with Rodney Allen, Professor of English at The Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts. Professor Allen is the author of the 1991 book *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut* as well as editor of the seminal collection of interviews, *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*.

Next up will be Marc Leeds, of The High School of Donna Klein Jewish Academy in Boca Raton, Florida. Professor Leeds is the author of *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia*, a book described by Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Timequake* as a "witty encyclopedia of [Vonnegut's] life and work." Professor Leeds is also the co-author, along with Peter Reed, of the 2000 study *Kurt Vonnegut: Images and Representations*, and he co-edited, again with Peter Reed, the 1996 volume, *Vonnegut Chronicles: Interviews and Essays*.

We also have with us Charles J. Shields, who is currently writing a biography of Kurt Vonnegut. Mr. Shields is also the author of the best-selling 2006 biography, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*.

Finally, our last speaker is Robert T. Tally, an assistant professor of English at Texas State University. Professor Tally is the author of an article called “A Postmodern Iconography: Vonnegut and the Great American Novel,” which is forthcoming in a Cambridge Scholars Press edition called *Reading America: New Perspectives on the American Novel*. He has also written an article called “Apocalypse in the Optative Mood: *Galápagos*, or, Starting Over,” which is slated to appear in the collection “*So It Goes*”: *The Life, Work, and Influence of Kurt Vonnegut*, currently under consideration at Macmillan/Palgrave.

Each of our panelists will talk for about ten minutes or so, which should leave us plenty of time for discussion and questions at the end of the session. I’d also like to announce, to anyone that might be interested, that we’re in the process of trying to form a brand-new Kurt Vonnegut author society. We’ll have our very first organizational meeting at noon today in room Pacific D (listed in the conference schedule). I warmly invite everyone to attend.