

Foucaultian Systems of Normalization in the Early Novels of Kurt Vonnegut

In *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault presents various systems of discipline and power that work together to establish a set of standards and enforce normalization. Foucault illustrates the phenomenon of panopticism, by which individuals of a society begin to self-normalize, and thus align themselves with societal expectation without the overt enforcement of any type of tangible institution. The modern disciplinary societies described by Foucault are also on display in the work of Kurt Vonnegut, who presents many similar systems of discipline and normalization through his characters' interactions with such societal systems. Vonnegut does not stop at merely assuming that social forces act to normalize individuals. He illustrates that those systems are inescapable, that they aim to evolve to the point of machine-like efficiency, and that the systems created by modern societies encourage, reinforce, and reward greed, callousness, and cruelty, and thus tend to discourage or realign acts of charity, compassion, and kindness. Once Vonnegut has established these systems and their nature, he delivers his message to the masses: The only way to remain human and morally upstanding in a society that creates such systems, is to deviate from the norm with benign acts of kindness, charity, and human companionship.

Such an unsolicited act of kindness is displayed in Vonnegut's novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. The titular character, Eliot Rosewater, is the heir of a generations old family fortune, but instead of following in his father's footsteps and becoming a prominent politician and businessman, Eliot uses the fortune to aid the poor in the fictional Indiana town of Rosewater. This choice of generosity by Eliot is treated like the insane whims of a mad man by the Rosewater family and the lawyers in charge of the fortune. The result of Eliot's rampant kindness is a long term stay in a mental health facility. It is clear that the society that Eliot is a part of is structured along strict levels of

a social hierarchy, or what Vonnegut explains as a money river – the closer one is to the river's beginning, the more wealth there is to be had. As the river reaches its end those on the shore are left fishing for small change. Eliot was born on the banks near the top where wealth jumps out of the river and onto his lap. Vonnegut explains this hapless system of control and class early on in the novel: QUOTE “Thus did a handful of rapacious citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America. Thus was the savage and stupid and entirely inappropriate and unnecessary and humorless American class system created. Honest, industrious, peaceful citizens were classed as bloodsuckers, if they asked to be paid a living wage. And they saw that praise was reserved henceforth for those who devised means of getting paid enormously for committing crimes against which no laws had been passed” END QUOTE (22).

Eliot's decision to redistribute this good fortune of his to those farther down the river is a dangerous notion to the normalized status quo that those at the top of the hierarchy attempt to maintain, and thus Eliot has deviated from the norm, and must be separated from society and normalized. Foucault explains this facet of control in the section “Docile bodies”: QUOTE “Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. It was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using. Discipline organizes an analytical space” END QUOTE (143). Eliot's generosity was a danger to the structure of society, so he had to be isolated within a facility to “interrupt” the communication of his actions to those who were recipients of them. The isolation within a mental health facility had the goal of

curing him of his atypical existence, and realigning him into the greedy and socially unconscious existence of those of his lineage. Vonnegut forces one to ask what such a system of control says about the society that creates it? Eliot overcomes the attempted normalization by bestowing his fortune to the masses of Rosewater, Indiana, but in doing so he confirms his alleged insanity to a society that possesses an errant definition of sanity. Vonnegut concludes, therefore, that these systems of control and normalization are broken, and the surest way to be a decent human being is to deviate from this socially constructed ideal of normal. In a message to babies coming into this world of destructive values, Eliot delivers the only advice he can for one hoping to develop anything resembling a positive existence: QUOTE “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” END QUOTE(54). These simple acts of polite defiance are a common theme presented by Vonnegut in the face of misguided systems of control and normalization, even once he reveals that these creations are not a product of humanity’s choice, but of the nature of existence.

In the novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut escalates the effectiveness of a familiar and prominent system of control that Foucault consistently refers to in *Discipline and Punish*: the military. The military functions much like many other systems of power, including the facility in which Eliot Rosewater was admitted, and the central institution that *Discipline and Punish* focuses on, as Foucault notes: QUOTE “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” END QUOTE (228). The protagonist of the novel, Malachi Constant, is forced into the machine of one of these institutions as surely as Eliot is, but the fictional army of Mars that Malachi becomes a part of has evolved to a state of absolute control that the

American society represented in *Rosewater*, can only fantasize about. Through the installation of antenna in nearly every soldiers' head, the army can be controlled like a well-oiled machine. When a soldier begins to question his existence (as Malachi repeatedly does, following the trend of Vonnegut's socially deviant characters), he is simply sent to the hospital to have his memory wiped. Later in the book, it is revealed that the entire purpose of this frighteningly efficient and successful system of control is a sham created on the whim of an individual named Winston Niles Rumfoord.

Later still, it is revealed that all of human existence, from the mysterious placement of the rocks at Stonehenge to the actions of Rumfoord is one giant system of control - the product of the needs of a machine-like race of space-beings known as the Tralfamadorians. Here, Vonnegut posits that systems of discipline and control are an unalterable and cruel aspect of human existence that is well beyond their influence. Again, Vonnegut also presents a few ways to combat a system structured to control, manipulate, and disadvantage large swaths of the human race. One character, Boaz, for instance, escapes the systems of power and control by opting out of the human race entirely, choosing to live a secluded life with beings in the caves of Mercury known as harmoniums. Similarly, Malachi's son, Chrono, leaves his family behind and joins a race of giant birds on Saturn's moon, Titan. Malachi finds no escape from control, but does finally stumble upon a small act of defiance similar to the sentiment of Eliot Rosewater: QUOTE "a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved" END QUOTE (320). The sentiment of a convoluted and cruel existence being shaped by others (and others and others) is presented again by Vonnegut, and once more he has a character combat it with a resigned sigh and an

unbridled attempt at kindness and human companionship. Vonnegut's most famous character, Billy Pilgrim from the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, finds himself the subject of several systems of discipline and control, and discovers a similar benign sense of happiness in the face of them.

Although Pilgrim is enlisted in the military, he is a terrible soldier, and the system of control that was so efficient in Malachi's case is an utter failure in Pilgrim's. As Foucault outlined, several other systems of discipline and control exist to corral Pilgrim with the rest of society. Upon his return home from the war, Pilgrim gets married, enrolls in optometry school, has children, and eventually becomes a practicing optometrist. The family unit, the school, and the work day are all systems of power and discipline that work to normalize Pilgrim, but as his hapless service in World War II proved, he is not so easily realigned. Pilgrim subsequently cracks by society's standards, and like Eliot Rosewater, is sent to a mental health facility for adjustment. In the face of so many systems of control attempting (and failing) to create a man deemed acceptable by society - his roommate in the hospital claims he QUOTE "could carve a better man out of a banana" END QUOTE - Pilgrim is introduced to the Tralfamadorians. The space-beings become Vonnegut's means to explain the nature of being human to his character in a manner that will help him cope with an uncontrollable existence. As Winston, Malachi, and Eliot eventually realize, Pilgrim is told that he is a small piece that has been shaped and rounded by powers well beyond his control.

The Tralfamadorians tell Pilgrim how everything that ever was, is, or will be is already structured. Everything from the dawn of life on Earth to the destruction of the universe (which the Tralfamadorians have a hand in) is set and unchangeable. When

Pilgrim asks why they chose him, the Tralfamadorians respond, QUOTE “That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? [...] Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no *why*” END QUOTE(77). Furthermore, the Tralfamadorians go on to explain that freewill is solely an errant *human* notion: QUOTE “‘If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings,’ said the Tralfamadorian, ‘I wouldn’t have an idea what was meant by ‘free will.’ I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will’” END QUOTE (86). Weighed down (or perhaps relieved) by his knowledge of the truth of existence, Pilgrim is ironically presented with the perfectly *normal* and controlled environment in which to exist that he has been so slow to adapt to on Earth. The Tralfamadorians build Pilgrim a zoo habitat to live in that is picturesque of everything normal and predictable in 1960’s American life – in fact, the Tralfamadorians literally pull the furnishings right out of a Sears Roebuck. Within this existence on Tralfamadore Pilgrim has everything an American male could want – a beautiful Hollywood starlet wife, a color T.V., a baby boy, and a QUOTE “tremendous wang.” END QUOTE. The man who was too hapless to conform to society now has the perfect postcard existence. Furthermore, according to the Tralfamadorian understanding of time, it was something he had *always* had, and eventually arriving at it is beyond his control. In light of the discovery of such structured systems of normalization and control, Vonnegut again equips Pilgrim with a mindset capable of dealing with such a state of helplessness – resignation and an urge to be happy and kind, like he did with Eliot and Malachi before: QUOTE “Everything was beautiful, and

nothing hurt” END QUOTE (122). This is the statement that Vonnegut claims would make a good epitaph for Billy Pilgrim, and the imbedded self-deception doubles as the only weapon Pilgrim has to combat predestined conformity. Vonnegut also offers a glimpse of the potential future that these systems of normalization may hold for humanity when he writes: QUOTE “The Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine. It amuses them that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines” END QUOTE (154).

This idea of humans as machines was already approached in Vonnegut’s first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), and was expanded upon farther in *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). In *Player Piano*, the society depicted has begun to mechanize an ever growing percentage of former human tasks. One such transition was with factory workers. Ilium Works chooses their best line worker and have his movements recorded by a machine on a peak day. From that point on, all machines operated independently, mimicking the best worker on his best day. This projected future of Vonnegut’s introduces the idea that a machine – more consistent and easier to alter to an acceptable standard – could eventually completely eradicate the need for humanity. What is more efficiently normalized than a well-oiled machine, after all? Vonnegut takes that next step in *Breakfast of Champions*, when the protagonist, Dwayne Hoover, becomes mentally unstable and perceives that every other human being is, in fact, a machine. Reading the two books in tandem, it is easy to see that the future of systems of discipline and control that strive for a machine-like product would produce a mechanized human. This next step in the evolution of humanity’s normalization would theoretically create a product so efficiently standard that it would strive to realign itself without the help of prisons,

hospitals, schools, or family units, as Vonnegut explains in *Breakfast of Champions*:

QUOTE “So, in the interests of survival, they trained themselves to be agreeing machines instead of thinking machines. All their minds had to do was to discover what other people were thinking, and then they thought that, too” END QUOTE (116).

Player Piano ends with a failed revolution by the expanding class of people who were replaced by machines. Ilium is the only place where any kind of success is found, as the people there destroy every machine they can get their hands on. As the four main instigators walk around the wreckage of Ilium, however, they see a group of people fascinated by some scraps. As they move in closer they discover a few handymen repairing a machine that they had destroyed not so long ago, and the crowd around them is uproariously pleased when the machine is put back in working order. From his earliest novel, therefore, Vonnegut revealed that it is in the very nature of humankind to become as efficiently standard as possible – evident in this case by replacing any part of themselves that they can with a machine. Upon realizing this, the four principal instigators of the revolution proposed a toast: QUOTE “‘The record,’ said Finnerty, and he seemed satisfied with the toast. He had got what he wanted from the revolution Paul supposed – a chance to give a savage blow to a close little society that made no comfortable place for him” END QUOTE (231). And a hopeless chance, at that. Vonnegut reveals another harmless protest to an overpowering system of discipline and control by a character that dares to deviate from the accepted standards of a society.

Evident by the discussion of these five novels, systems of discipline, control, and normalization are frequently contrasted by a character deviating from the standard that

the systems create within Vonnegut's fictional societies – societies that represent the America that he saw in the present, or that he projected to see in the future. The often kind, compassionate, or resigned nature of the deviations revealed that these societies created a misguided and decadent standard. Also illustrated in the novels, however, is the fact that these systems of discipline and control are unavoidable and concrete – a horrid facet of existence that strives to sand the edges of each individual until he or she fits perfectly in their assigned place. In his conclusion, Foucault states, QUOTE “we must hear the distant roar of battle” END QUOTE (308), but Vonnegut has already explored this avenue, and discovered it a fruitless venture. These systems of discipline and control are beyond the ability of the individual to alter, mangle, or even scratch. The society that creates systems of normalization that abhors kindness rules its disciples with an iron fist. The only way to combat these systems is to “be kind,” “love whoever is around to be loved,” note the beauty of life and ignore the pain, or “do a good job of being human beings” (*Player Piano* 178), in spite of the promise of realignment brought on by incarceration, hospitalization, enlistment, or assassination. In short, be the outlier who flaunts his or her abnormality and is unacceptably and unflinchingly compassionate.

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