

NAVIGATING THROUGH “A NIGHTMARE OF MEANINGLESSNESS WITHOUT
END”: A SEMI-STRUCTURAL READING OF KURT VONNEGUT’S
THE SIRENS OF TITAN

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Introduction

On the first pages of his second novel, *The Sirens of Titan*, Kurt Vonnegut establishes a dichotomy dealing with the ways human beings search for meaning, purpose and identity in their lives. This pair of perspectives involves looking outward for answers to existential questions—towards their external realities and even outer space, or what the story’s narrator calls “a nightmare of meaninglessness without end”—and looking inward, at the soul. Vonnegut suggests that people who look outward for the meaning of life will find nothing of any import and will, in fact, bring harm to those around them. “Goodness and wisdom” will only appear, as the narrator postulates in the opening paragraphs, when people begin searching inward for answers (1-2).

Lawler asserts that *The Sirens of Titan* consists of “a demonstration, a commentary, and a burlesque of the futility of seeking outward answers to the great abstract questions about the meaning of human life or the designs of providence” (67). Vonnegut demonstrates the futile and delusional aspects of searching outward by contrasting them with the benefits of an inward-looking quest for truth. Mustazza calls this inward-outward dichotomy “Miltonic” and reads the novel in light of *Paradise Lost*. Noting parallels between the archangel Michael’s warning to Adam that contentment cannot be found in an outward-focused pursuit of earthly delights and Constant’s movement from self-centered materialism to a kind of humbled humanism, Mustazza argues that *The Sirens of Titan* presents a “journey into morally empty space” ending in the discovery that the “paradise within” human beings can be achieved only through love (45-47).

Davis approaches the book similarly, remarking that Vonnegut propounds his ideas for a “postmodern humanism” in part by setting up a clear distinction between man’s rose-colored perception of the universe and the universe as it really is (2006). Outward-focused searches for identity and purpose blind us to the fact that, as Vonnegut makes clear in his works, “to love and serve humanity is our highest calling” (Davis 51).

From the beginning of history, humans have looked outward—to wealth, status, power, to a “God” that cannot possibly be known—for answers, explanations, and justifications. Man relies on these constructs for identity, purpose, and meaning. Yet even a cursory perusal through the pages of history will render numerous examples of grievously mishandled wealth, status, and power. It will also show us that when man looks outward to God, he too often attributes his own personal wishes and desires to that God. He believes and professes that *his* specific deity wants him to perform certain acts and exercise power over others, because this God prefers this particular instance of man over the rest of His creation. Malachi Constant’s notion that “somebody up there likes me” is just another illustration of such a belief, which implies that “somebody up there” is indifferent towards, dislikes, or even hates most other people. These attitudes tend to foster a false sense of self-importance that places those who hold them over and above everybody else, which in turn gives rise to manipulation, condescension, contempt, and division. Vonnegut and other thinkers, such as Lucretius, Bertrand Russell, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher

Hitchens,¹ have written about the ways in which abuses and atrocities have been perpetrated and justified on a large scale by those who believe that God prefers them over other groups. Many outward attempts at knowledge and understanding have resulted in ways of thinking that legitimize egregious behavior, including but by no means limited to: witch-hunting, crucifixion, torture, murder, war, terrorism, subjecting humans to slavery, colonization, xenophobia, racism, and suppression of minorities. In most of his works—and in *The Sirens of Titan* especially—Vonnegut advances the point that outward-looking philosophies, in whichever form they may take, primarily cause harm to others.

Davis writes that one of Vonnegut's main goals in *The Sirens of Titan* is to give the outward-looking Malachi Constant a "cosmological education" that will rid him of the beliefs that justify his ruinous behavior and horrible treatment of others; this education will, in the end, make him a better human being (49). I propose to take this idea and apply it to all of the major characters in the novel—Constant, Beatrice Rumfoord, Boaz, Winston Niles Rumfoord, and Salo—each of whom either adheres to a dangerous outward-looking philosophy or has yet to look inside himself for meaning and purpose. I will argue that Vonnegut places each character into a binary with his or her philosophical counterpart and that, through the course of the novel, members of these binaries act with and react to each other in ways that generally effect beneficial changes. Through these interactions, most of the characters are able to discard the philosophies that allowed them to behave so deplorably, to gain a richer understanding of

¹ Cf. Vonnegut's *Fates Worse than Death*, *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, Russell's "Why I am not a Christian," "Gerin Oil" by Dawkins, and Hitchens' *God is not Great*.

themselves and the universe, and ultimately to become better human beings—or, in Salo's case, a better robot.

It is possible to compare the characters of *The Sirens of Titan* to electrons existing within an atom, revolving around a central nucleus, which I will analogize to “meaning,” “purpose,” or “existential significance.” The outward-focused philosophies that Vonnegut's characters rely on determine their orbits around and perspectives of this nucleus. As we have noted, these conceptions provide reason for, legitimize, and justify what would otherwise be considered unjustifiable behavior. The “cosmological education” for each of Vonnegut's figures begins when he or she joins a binary with a character who exposes and works to eradicate his or her partner's outward-looking philosophy. I equate this operation to the phenomenon known in physics as one of the causes of the quantum jump: at the subatomic level, an electron will occasionally collide with another, shoving it from one orbit to the next. In much the same way, Malachi Constant, who believes that he enjoys the favor of an ambiguous, superhuman agency—which condones the noxious way he treats other people—gets bounced from one orbit of meaning or significance to another as he collides with Beatrice, Boaz, and Rumfoord. As the novel's central personage, Constant has the most developmental ground to cover; for this reason, he operates within more binaries than any other character. Beatrice's relationship with Malachi likewise rids her of her own injurious outward-looking philosophy and leads her to a better understanding of her place within the universe. Boaz, who toys irresponsibly with people's lives in order to attain a higher status for himself, collides with Unk, who

sends him into a fresh orbit that also contains the harmoniums. Salo's interaction with Rumfoord causes the machine to become in a sense more human and therefore to develop a sense of empathy for others. But as we will see, although Winston Niles Rumfoord acts within several binaries, he never becomes willing to jettison his outward-looking philosophy and is resultantly expelled from our "atom"—Vonnegut's solar system—altogether.

This study, then, will appropriate certain principles of literary structuralism. Practitioners of this theory tend to look scientifically at literary works, which, they insist, must be called by no other name than "texts." They do not take authorial intent or the historical context in which the text was produced into consideration, preferring instead to dissect the text as though it were a squid in a high-school biology class. Just as Noam Chomsky examined language and pointed out the "deep structures" within it that make all communication possible, structuralist critics seek to isolate the underlying frameworks that enable readers to make sense of a text. Generally speaking, these frameworks are composed of binary oppositions, such as *good/evil*, *oppressor/oppressed*, or *male/female*. Each member of any given binary is usually an archetype or a thematic, mythic, philosophical, or social symbol. It exists only by virtue of its having an opposite. The placement in and interaction of binaries through the course of a narrative allow the reader to understand that narrative because of his or her subconscious familiarity with such constructs. The structuralist is concerned exclusively with these constructs and does not, as Abrams notes, care about offering literary "interpretations of an individual text" (301). He contents himself with the

discovery of a narrative framework, and then “rearranges his rulers and reaches for the next story” (Eagleton 83). In this study I will isolate several deep structures manifested in *The Sirens of Titan* in an attempt to show how the novel’s binary oppositions help the reader to make sense of it. But I have made a conscious decision to break from traditional structuralist thought at this point since, as the critics cited throughout this paper agree, Vonnegut obviously intends to make serious points about human existence in relation to the universe—not only in this novel but in all his other works as well. Roland Barthes’ proposed “death of the Author” has no place here: we cannot read Kurt Vonnegut’s novels without acknowledging the tremendously powerful authorial presence of Kurt Vonnegut that pervades them. Lawler writes that “The purpose of art as Vonnegut sees it is very much like the criticism of life” (66). If we pay attention solely to the structural frameworks of his novels without understanding the message he conveys through them we would only be doing, at most, half of the work. As a professional writer, Vonnegut utilized all of the literary techniques available to him; as a satirist, social critic, and activist, he used them to consistently advance a postmodern humanism that values kindness and decency in a society that suffers from a distressing deficiency of these qualities. Accordingly, in *The Sirens of Titan* the author places characters who embody harmful outward-looking philosophies into binaries in order to dismantle or deconstruct those philosophies through the course of his characters’ developments.

I hope to have clarified what is meant by an “outward-looking” system and its faults. We have yet to discuss the full extent of an “inward-looking” philosophy and its merits. Vonnegut complicates the matter by never defining such a system and, as Mustazza points out, the author “does not specify...the nature of the goodness and wisdom to be found” by adhering to one (46). However, through the development of his characters, Vonnegut demonstrates *how* such goodness and wisdom can be found. Perhaps not surprisingly, an inward-looking system involves simple, everyday interaction with fellow creatures. The soul does not exist in a vacuum; it is defined precisely by its relationship to other souls. Franz Kafka writes that “Intercourse with human beings seduces one to self-contemplation” (240). It is such “intercourse”—both verbal and physical in *The Sirens of Titan*—that induces Vonnegut’s characters to look inward for meaning and purpose. We do not find them praying or practicing transcendental meditation. We find them interacting with others in ways that compel them to think about their place within their communities and the universe. They are thus able to view themselves from a critical distance and to rid themselves of the philosophies that allowed them to do harm to others. This kind of inward-focused search for purpose leads the characters to what Davis calls Vonnegut’s “postmodern humanism,” which Vonnegut describes in *Armageddon in Retrospect* and elsewhere:

We humanists behave as well as we can, without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an Afterlife. We serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any familiarity, which is our community. (20)

The communities with which the characters of *The Sirens of Titan* become familiar and in which they forge their new identities can be interpreted as the simplest forms of what Dr. Robert Redfield, an anthropologist and Vonnegut's former professor at the University of Chicago, termed Folk Societies. Vonnegut elaborates:

First of all, a Folk Society was isolated, and in an area it considered organically its own. It grew from that soil and no other. ... There was such general agreement as to what life was all about and how people should behave in every conceivable situation that very little was debatable. (*Fates Worse than Death*, 122)

I will argue that Malachi Constant, Beatrice Rumfoord, and Boaz become better human beings by operating within their binaries, abandoning their outward-looking philosophies, and taking root in small communities such as that described above. Here they are finally able to find a reasonable but by no means absolute purpose for living, to do no harm to others, and to use the members of their communities in benign and constructive ways.

Here I have raised an important issue that Vonnegut consistently deals with in this novel, that of *use*. His characters have varying attitudes about how they should use others depending upon whether they look inward or outward for meaning and purpose. Vonnegut appears to have divided these attitudes into three categories, which I have named and detailed as follows:

1. *Negative*: This attitude is the result of the outward-looking philosophy that Beatrice initially takes. Because of her worldview, she believes that no one could ever be useful to her and that she could never be useful to anyone. In essence she negates the concept of use altogether, thus nullifying her humanity.
2. *Solipsistic*: This attitude also results from an outward-looking philosophy. It involves one person manipulating and typically

injuring others in order to achieve personal goals. Malachi Constant, Winston Niles Rumfoord, and Boaz all take a solipsistic attitude towards the concept of use at one point or another in the novel.

3. *Egalitarian*: This attitude springs from an inward-looking philosophy. At its core is the principle that creatures should be used beneficially and loved and treated equally simply by virtue of their being around.

Vonnegut plainly seeks to do away with the first two notions of use, which cause those who adopt them to either neglect or injure other people. The third attitude, which arises only when one begins to look inward, seems to bring about an answer—to the extent that Vonnegut offers answers—for living a good, decent life.

I will work through the character-based binaries as they appear chronologically in *The Sirens of Titan*, beginning with Malachi and Beatrice, moving through Constant's development as Unk in his relationship with Boaz and then again as the Space Wanderer with Winston Niles Rumfoord, and ending with the most "universal" of the pairs—the dichotomy involving Rumfoord and his robot companion Salo.

Beatrice and Malachi

At the beginning of the novel Beatrice Rumfoord and Malachi Constant search outward for a sense of identity and purpose. The perceptions that develop from their pursuits unfairly increase their senses of self-importance and diminish the value of others. Both see themselves in relation to the external world through distorted, yet antipodal, lenses, and through them Vonnegut clearly establishes a binary involving purity and contamination.

Beatrice looks to the rest of the world and defines herself in total opposition to it. Belonging to the “one true American class,” she regards herself as apart from and above the majority of the planet’s population (21). But others of similar distinction and rank—her husband included—feel obliged to take part in civic and world affairs, even though they consider themselves superior to people without a well defined social class. The narrator characterizes these men and women as ambitious, active, and, if elected to public office, “magnificently responsible” (21-22). Beatrice, however, sees no such relationship between herself and the world.

As a child, she refused to take a roller-coaster ride at a theme park. Not even her father, the New York Railroad’s chairman of the board, could convince her to climb aboard the apparatus, which here symbolizes universal human experience and its vicissitudes. An oil portrait of Beatrice as a young girl still hangs in the Rumfoord mansion when Constant arrives. Dressed entirely in white and posing, as we should expect, with a white pony,

She was the cleanest, most frozen little girl that Malachi Constant had ever seen. There was a strange expression on her face, and

Constant decided that she was worried about getting the least bit dirty. (18)

We can assume that she has known all along that belonging to this race means to fluctuate between certainty and uncertainty; to make and deal with mistakes; to “sin” and “get dirty” every now and again. As an adult Beatrice equates immersion in the world—for all practical purposes, “life”—with a roller-coaster ride, and consequently she wants nothing to do with her fellow creatures. “The hell with the human race,” she says at one point (48). She sees the world as a filthy place and fears that taking even the smallest step into it would contaminate her very being, would leave permanent stains on her soul. She is perfect, in her mind, just the way she is. Winston Niles Rumfoord interprets this self-conception later in the novel:

“It was implicit in Beatrice’s every attitude that she was intellectually, morally, and physically what God intended human beings to be when perfected, and that the rest of humanity needed another ten thousand years in which to catch up.” (267)

Having justified her outrageously arrogant outlook, Beatrice tries to remain as unnaturally pure, sinless, virginal, and isolated from the outside world as she possibly can. Afraid of being dirtied by that world, she does “troubled things...like having the gates of [her] estate bricked up, like letting the famous formal gardens turn into New England jungle” (7). She literally sets up a barricade between herself and all else by holing herself up in her mansion. This grand dwelling, a replica of London’s old Palace of Whitehall, serves partly as an outward projection of the relationship Beatrice feels she has with her external environment, and, by extension, the universe as a whole: it is an ivory tower,

providing her with the isolation and security necessary to maintain her purity. She has in fact been in the mansion for so long that she might as well be just another part of the edifice. After Rumfoord's first materialization, "The train of her gown cascaded down the top riser, making Beatrice continuous with the architecture of the mansion." Her face, the prominent physical indication of her identity and individuality, matters little: "A cannonball, substituted for her head, would have suited [this] grand composition as well" (35).

We cannot necessarily fault her for retreating into her estate to escape the ostensible filthiness of the outside world; she is hardly the first human to renounce and withdraw from society in an attempt to find identity and purpose. But she deserves blame for the way in which she glorifies herself while minimizing the value of other human beings. Her purity narrative and isolationist tendencies keep Beatrice from being social, productive, and useful to anyone. They also allow for the rationalization of her neglect of those around her. We would assume that a woman with her position and wealth (she happens to be worth seventeen million dollars) surely has the power to do a great amount of good. First and most obviously she could donate even a modest amount of money to charity or put her wealth to some other beneficial use. But due to her perceptions she decides to be of no use to anyone. She haughtily declines to give anything but the most basic information about her husband's materializations to the public, ignoring their carefully worded requests and claims that they have a right to the knowledge Mr. Rumfoord has imparted to her, since it purportedly has something to do with the meaning of life. But perhaps most

importantly, by choosing to live the way she does Beatrice deprives herself of a full and healthy existence. Unlike the tiger or the giant anteater, humans are chiefly social animals. We have been wired—“programmed,” as Vonnegut would say—to eat, work, talk, sleep, and live together. We are creatures who by instinct desire companionship and who have needs that can only be fulfilled by others. Vonnegut took the words of his son Mark to heart when he told his father, “We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.”² Beatrice may consider her lifestyle superior and try to remain uncontaminated, but as Marvin writes, *The Sirens of Titan* “shows that it is impossible to remain innocent forever, and even if it were possible, life in total isolation from others would not really be a life at all” (53).

We have seen what Beatrice, secluded in the mansion, hides from. She has sustained her “purity” for many years through vigilance, paranoia, contempt, and isolation. Her childhood refusal to hop on board the roller coaster is made all the more poignant by her husband’s description of his chrono-synclastic infundibulated experience as a roller-coaster ride, and by his “prophecy” that she will soon have to take a similar trip. This frightens Beatrice because such an adventure entails being contaminated by the world, and, more broadly speaking, the universe. She takes great pains to avoid this fate, converting her stocks into cash in order to buy ownership in the spacecraft on which they will supposedly begin the journey. As a last resort she procures a cyanide pill, just in case Malachi Constant comes anywhere near. But as hard as Beatrice tries to keep

² *Bluebeard*, epigraph.

from becoming soiled—Winston Niles Rumfoord reveals to Malachi that she remained a virgin the entire time they were married on Earth—she cannot “remain innocent forever.” The first time they meet, Rumfoord sarcastically remarks to Constant that it would be lamentable if the young girl in the oil portrait were to fall into a mud puddle. This is exactly what happens to Beatrice once she begins to take the roller-coaster ride. The stock market crashes, leaving Beatrice with next to nothing, bringing her to consider selling tickets to her husband’s materializations. Her financial consultants are actually Martian recruiters who kidnap her and put her aboard a spaceship to Mars. And even here, well beyond the outside world that Beatrice has detested for so long, she attempts to hole herself up, this time in the spaceship’s state room. But her security and privacy do not last long. In her first and probably only sexual experience she is raped by a drunken, boisterous Malachi Constant who is bent on conquering and claiming everything for himself. The narrative she chooses to live by during her first stay on Earth, which blinds her to the fact that she is just as much a part of the world as anyone else, is as fragile as the white dress in her portrait. It takes the traumatic experience of the rape to propel her from her virginal, isolationist orbit. Rumfoord describes her immediately after the violation: “Huddled on the bunk was a rather plain woman past thirty. Her eyes were red and her face was puffy with weeping, despair. ... She had been so high and proud the last time [Constant] saw her, and now was so crushed, that even the heartless [Constant] was moved” (163).

Heinous as it is, the rape acts as the climax in the first phase of the Constant-Beatrice binary. As much as she has tried to avoid it, Mrs. Rumfoord has joined perhaps the only person she loathes more than her husband in this violent event that defines the course of the rest of her and Malachi's lives. Beatrice has fallen from grace, or rather has been catapulted from a false sense of grace, and she must now learn to adjust to her new, radically humbled, position.

Beatrice appears next on Mars as an instructress of Schliemann breathing, the novel's answer to the problem of human survival in an atmosphere without oxygen. She has already undergone significant changes, making herself useful to others for the first time. On Earth, Beatrice completely withdrew from what she perceived as a hostile environment. On Mars, however, she has mastered the techniques for living in another, perhaps even more hostile environment and teaches that method to her fellow creatures, thus becoming more useful than she ever was on her home planet. The image of the bee on her shirt is not only a rebus of her Martian name; it reflects her station and her temperament—bees are of course well known for staying busy and being almost perpetually useful. Her view of the external world has also been revised, as evidenced by the last portion of the poem she wrote on that planet:

*To soul and heart within you trapped
Add speech and atmosphere.
Every man's an island as in
lifeless space we roam.
Yes, every man's an island:
island fortress, island home. (153)*

Her inversion of Donne's line "No man is an island" recalls the proposition on the novel's first pages that meaning cannot be found "in lifeless space"; she advocates an inward-oriented search for meaning in this poem, suggesting that her reader add speech—vital communication with other human beings—and atmosphere—the part of the external environment that is essential for a healthy and productive life—to his or her "heart and soul." As invasive and horrific as her rape by Constant is, it functions as the initial shove that propels Beatrice from the outward-focused mindset that justifies her selfish and neglectful behavior and her hermitage in the Rumfoord mansion. It also provides her with a son, Chrono, through whom she discovers one form of love.

We have again raised the issue of being useful to other human beings. It is essential that we remember that Vonnegut sets up three distinct categories relating to the ways in which his characters use, or fail to use, other people: negative, solipsistic, and egalitarian. Through the course of her development in *The Sirens of Titan* Beatrice falls into all three categories at different times. We have discussed how her outward-focused mindset allows her to think that she could be useful to no one, and vice versa. She notes how she has been a victim of those with solipsistic attitudes towards use when she reappears as a hawker of Malachi dolls outside the Rumfoord mansion. Winston Niles Rumfoord has used her in a harmful way, cleaning out her mind "the way you clean the seeds out of a jack-o'-lantern," treating her like a pawn on a chessboard (246). She consoles herself by claiming that she, along with other "Martian" veterans of the war with Earth, can no longer be useful to anyone since she is, in fact, "all used

up” (247). But this only seems to be true. During her stay on Titan, Beatrice, through her interaction with Constant, learns how to truly look inward to discover a sense of purpose, which deals with the issue of use as raised in the third category.

When Winston Niles Rumfoord expels Beatrice, Malachi, and Chrono to Titan, Beatrice still clings to the few remaining threads of the identity she has set up for herself at the beginning of the novel, saying to her husband:

“I do not recall the old days...when I was mistress of this estate, when I could not stand to do anything or to have anything done to me. But I loved myself the instant you told me I'd been that way. The human race is a scummy thing, and so is Earth, and so are you.” (268)

These statements reflect Beatrice's disposition at the moment, much like Unk's attitude towards the harmoniums reflects his disposition on Mercury. She rightfully feels indignation for being treated like an outcast, but still separates herself from her fellow creatures, dismissing them as “scummy.” She has yet to come to terms with the fact that she has been contaminated just as much as anyone else: we could attribute this to the fact that she has had no *reciprocally* useful interaction with any other human being save her son. Over their years on Titan, though, Beatrice and Malachi develop a practical, useful relationship that in many ways changes her views. Malachi uses her in ways that do not harm her; he visits and offers her food and friendship. In her waning years, Beatrice appears as “a springy, one-eyed, gold-toothed, brown old lady—as lean and tough as a chair slat. But the class of the damaged and roughly-used old lady showed through” (314). Although it results from her diet in the Amazonian rain

forest after the Martian invasion, this curious new skin coloration suggests a kind of experiential weathering brought about by her immersion in the world she once perceived as filthy. Through it all, Beatrice maintains her dignity and self-respect, shedding only the philosophy that allowed her to hurt or neglect others. As an attestation to how much Beatrice has grown, she begins a book in which she upholds the wills, individualities, and values of humankind against the far-reaching influence of Tralfamadore. In other words, she defends those whom she once judged inferior, among whose presence she felt she would have been contaminated. Additionally, she thanks Malachi for finally providing her with a healthy relationship, and shares with him her last realization before her death:

“The worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody,” she said, “would be to not be used for anything by anybody.” (317)

At the beginning of *The Sirens of Titan*, “Mrs. Rumfoord felt that she owed the world very little indeed in the way of information” (4). People pressed her for the secrets of life as revealed by her husband. These secrets mean, of course, “very little indeed.” Now, on Titan, we find her truly looking inside herself, discovering a purpose to life far more worthwhile than the one she had on Earth. We also find her willingly, freely giving away useful information regarding this purpose as far as she (and perhaps Vonnegut) sees it. If she had not taken the roller-coaster ride, had stayed on Earth and continued to cling to her purity narrative, she would never have been used for anything by anybody, would have lived an entirely pointless life.

For most of the middle portions of the novel, Beatrice and Chrono function as two-thirds of the goal that drives Malachi Constant (the other third being the

deceased Stony Stevenson, Malachi's closest friend in the Martian army). In this respect, Beatrice can be viewed as the namesake of the woman who guided Dante through Heaven—and in *The Sirens of Titan*, Beatrice Rumfoord indirectly helps to guide Malachi to a better understanding of his place in the universe, which, we might assume, is as close to Heaven as humans can get, as far as Vonnegut can tell.

Malachi Constant also looks out at the world and sees filth, but he reacts to it differently. He is just as concerned with bringing himself pleasure as Beatrice is with remaining pure. He does not renounce the world and its sleaze and sin. Instead, he defines himself as a major part of it. He is, after all, the richest man in America, having inherited the Magnum Opus corporation and the many companies it has swallowed up. Constant's view of the world justifies his immersion in its worst aspects—in fact to revel in an unspeakable, unnatural, and seemingly perpetual excess of drugs, alcohol, and women. In so doing he glorifies himself while minimizing the value of other human beings.

A lifestyle such as Constant's before his conscription into the Martian army is bound to cause harm to, on the one hand, the person who can afford it, and on the other, those he uses to maintain it. In his Space Wanderer sermon, Winston Niles Rumfoord says that he and the members of his Church “are *disgusted* by Malachi Constant...because he used the fantastic fruits of his good luck to finance an unending demonstration that man is a pig” (256). Conceived by a chambermaid who receives extra pay from Noel Constant to please him sexually on a regular basis, Malachi spends his youth without a father, seeing him only

once, on his twenty-first birthday. Because of his father's biblical investment plan, Malachi was born into colossal wealth. Noel Constant, however, never provides the kind of guidance parents should offer their children, so his son comes to view himself as unjustly wronged—which, in part, is probably true. But because the narrative he has chosen places all importance on him and none on anyone else, Malachi pities himself excessively and expects others to do the same. He fails to understand that many others have had it much worse off, as the blonde woman informs him after the great debauch. Constant takes a solipsistic attitude towards the concept of use, immersing himself in the world without regard for the consequences, exploiting women, money, drugs, and alcohol in ways that bring only harm to himself and others. His constant quest to fulfill his selfish desires blinds him to the fact that he should be playing an important, responsible role in the lives of many.

He justifies this negligence in part by considering the ways in which he is superior to people when he meets them. The main reason for his supposed superiority over Beatrice lies in the fact that she is a woman. He has slept with the most beautiful females on Earth, and in his mind Beatrice represents just another conquest. For Mrs. Rumfoord, however, Malachi functions as an immediate opportunity for her to suffer befoulment. Both characters show awareness of this: Beatrice is frightened by the prospect, while Constant seems to enjoy it at first—when he leaves the estate “he [is] delightfully aware of pulling the aplomb of the Rumfoord mansion [an outward expression of her self-conception] right out with him” (38).

Sometime in between his visit and the date for their blastoff to Mars, though, Malachi changes his mind. We have noticed how Beatrice tries to avoid taking the roller-coaster ride and endeavors to sustain her purity and innocence. Malachi Constant makes similar attempts to circumvent his fate. I suggest that he does this because Malachi sees himself as worthy of carrying “a first-class message from God to someone equally distinguished” (12). When Winston Niles Rumfoord “prophesies” that Constant will travel to Titan, Malachi believes that the time for him to make use of his heraldic qualities has finally come. Rumfoord knows nothing about a message to be delivered; he does relate, however, that Beatrice will play a leading role in the scheme that will take Constant to that pleasant moon. Malachi, of course, considers Mrs. Rumfoord inferior to him, and therefore believes that she should have nothing to do with the achievement of his lofty goals. The “somebody up there” who likes him clearly has a greater plan for Malachi—a plan from which Beatrice will be excluded. So, in hopes of evading participation in the events described in Winston’s prophecy, Constant writes Beatrice misogynistic letters that devalue her as a person and throws a wild, three-month revelry, which he hopes will render him physically incapable of going anywhere on Earth, much less on Mars. At its core this latter effort is oxymoronic, since it necessitates self-destruction as a means for self-preservation. What’s more—this final, emphatic gesture of selfishness, predicated on an outward-focused view of the world that places Malachi above everyone else, ruins the lives of thousands. He gives away an oil well to every woman at the party, thereby bankrupting Fandango Petroleum, one of his corporation’s most

important assets, and putting thousands of his employees out of work. He does all of these things in vain, however, because they backfire and leave Constant no other option but to accept the Martian recruiters' offer to become a lieutenant-colonel in their army.

Traveling to Mars, Malachi begins to change due to his interaction with Beatrice. The crew of the spaceship informs him of the presence of a beautiful woman who has locked herself in the ship's state room. Plastered and potent, Constant decides that he will once again prove his masculinity and superiority by taking her all for himself; and when he gets the chance, he does so in the most violent fashion. The woman, of course, turns out to be Beatrice Rumfoord, and the pain she feels after the violation touches even Constant, who beforehand was incapable of feeling sympathy. Up until this point his outward-focused views justify the way he uses others, causing him more often than not to harm them. Only now, upon seeing what he has done to Beatrice, does he begin to look inside himself and understand that his actions have caused injury and that he is not the only one who deserves pity. He acknowledges his role as both "victim" and "cruel agent" of outrageous fortune and inwardly admits that Beatrice and many others have suffered at his hands (163). This gained ability to empathize places him on the path to a new understanding of his place in the universe. Rumfoord says that after the rape, Constant "became hopelessly engrossed in the intricate tactics of causing less rather than more pain. Proof of his success would be his winning of the woman's forgiveness and understanding" (163). And not only that: after learning that as a result of the rape Beatrice has borne a son,

Constant's "problem...became to win her love, and through her, to win the love of her child" (164).

The guilt Constant feels for hurting other people in general and Beatrice in particular provides him with motivation once he arrives on Mars. He is humbled not so much by the ruthless, totalitarian methods instituted by Rumfoord as by the guilt he feels for wronging his future companion. The erasure of his memory does not obliterate that guilt; rather, it transforms the guilt into the need to "reconnect" with his "family." To sustain this drive in the adverse environment of Mars, Malachi, as Unk, becomes a messenger—of his own accord and not because a superhuman agency assigns him to the task. By writing himself a series of secretive letters that stress human communication, unselfishness, and inward-oriented soul searching, Constant enables himself to remember what is now most important to him. Rereading the letters, he "wolf[s] down a philosophy" (126). He no longer considers meaningful the women, drugs, and alcohol for which he once strove; he no longer needs to prove his masculinity or superiority. He only wants to belong to the simplest, closest, most useful group humans can form—the family unit—and to have a friend.

It takes some time, but Malachi, Beatrice, and Chrono gradually develop a familial way of life on Titan that in many respects resembles Vonnegut's definition of a Folk Society. Malachi foreshadows this as Unk in the letter to himself: "*When you get this little family of yours together, swipe a space ship and go flying away to somewhere peaceful and beautiful*" (131). Their Titanic community is about as isolated as it could get. They live off the land. The disdain that mother and son

felt for Constant has melted into politeness and decency. Chrono thanks both his mother and his father for giving him life, and Beatrice thanks Malachi for using her beneficially. Malachi repairs his son's religious shrines, and provides companionship and support for his wife when she needs it. And, though it takes most of their lives, through each other they have finally come to a "general agreement as to what life [is] all about":

"You finally fell in love, I see," said Salo.
"Only an Earthling year ago," said Constant. "It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved." (320)

Thus Beatrice, who was too afraid of becoming contaminated to get close to anyone, and Constant, who was so sullied that he couldn't get close to anyone, discover their purpose by casting off their previous philosophies, looking inside themselves through looking at each other, and regarding themselves simply as two human beings sharing the same space.³ Despite Malachi's proclamation as the Space Wanderer towards the end of the novel that he has been "a victim of a series of accidents," the fact that Beatrice and Malachi come together in this binary—which works to expose and eventually eradicate their flawed perceptions and harmful tendencies—is no fluke (232).

³ It is also worth pointing out that Constant says he has discovered "a purpose" and not "*the* purpose" of life. Attempts to discover or define "the purpose" of life have all too often resulted in division and harm, and by using the indefinite article Vonnegut reminds us that efforts to look for "the purpose" of life will be about as fruitful as those instigated by the creatures that were slaughtered by the Tralfamadorians in Salo's creation tale.

Boaz and Unk

The word “Boaz” comes from the Bible and means “strength” or “alacrity.”⁴ In *The Sirens of Titan* the strength of Vonnegut’s Boaz is predicated upon fear and manipulation. As a “real commander” in the Martian army, he enjoys a power those around him can’t even begin to comprehend. Unlike the soldiers and supposed generals and military leaders, Boaz has no antenna installed in his head. He possesses an electronic box that enables him to control the will of anyone with an antenna implanted in his or her skull. He and the other real commanders abuse their power, as evidenced by their cruel experiment with the generals, in which they force the putative authorities to race naked on the Martian terrain at night. Also, Boaz “couldn’t forebear torturing Unk [Malachi Constant’s second incarnation] from time to time” (119). There are limitations to this power, however: Boaz doesn’t know who commands the real commanders (Winston Niles Rumfoord) and he refrains from drinking out of fear of losing the fragile grip on the power he enjoys. He needs to hold onto it in order to fulfill his greatest ambition. Looking outward for meaning, Boaz wants to increase his greatness by becoming the center of attention of a large crowd, which he associates with a Hollywood night club. Having pieced together bits of information he has gathered about Unk’s seedy Californian past, Boaz feels that he needs Unk’s special connections to get to that night club and attain “maximum happiness” (120).

⁴ “Definition: boaz.” *Hitchcock Bible Names Dictionary* (late 1800s), *Easton’s 1897 Bible Dictionary*. <http://dictionary.die.net/boaz>.

Boaz therefore has adopted a solipsistic notion of use, which allows him to exert a harmful power over Unk. In this respect he resembles Winston Niles Rumfoord, though on a much smaller scale. Whenever Boaz thinks he needs to use his power, he reaches for the remote control in his pocket and sends a jolt of electricity screaming through Unk's brain. This tactic seems to be effective for a while, but Unk is not as stupid as Boaz would like to believe. Because of his knowledge-gathering mission and the letters he has written to himself, Unk—even though the Martian authorities have been obligated to erase his memory several times—knows that the source of Boaz's power lies in the remote. En route to Mercury, as Boaz sleeps, Unk disables the device. In so doing, Unk gives Boaz the opportunity to think for probably the first time about what is really happening around him. This experience forces Boaz to look inward and realize the pointlessness and tenuousness of his power and authority. He begins to laugh; the narrator says that he

was laughing at the ferocious mess he was in—at the way he had pretended all his army life that he had understood everything that was going on, and that everything that was going on was just fine. He was laughing at the dumb way he had let himself be used—by God knows who for God knows what. (185)

Here Boaz understands his position as victim as well as the agent of outrageous fortune. He knows that he has been harmed, that he has been manipulated by someone who or something that takes a solipsistic attitude towards the concept of use. But more importantly he recognizes—like Malachi Constant immediately after his rape of Beatrice—that he has adopted the same attitude and has harmed others in the process. He renounces this way of life at the end of chapter

seven, and he is on his way to a better understanding of his place in the universe, which will allow him to espouse an egalitarian notion of the concept of use.

When the pair arrive on Mercury, Boaz, whose ambition and power corrupted the way he used and treated those around him, meets the harmoniums, for whom “Hunger, envy, ambition, fear, indignation, religion, and sexual lust are irrelevant and unknown” (189). These slightly evolved single-celled organisms feed on the slow, continuous “music” produced by the tension between the planet’s hemispheres. Moreover, they contribute to the beauty of their environment by refracting colored light through their bodies and by arranging themselves in aesthetically pleasant patterns on cave walls. Boaz appreciates their existence; he gradually develops a love for the creatures and believes that they reciprocate the sentiment. He sees himself as the provider and protector of the harmoniums, introducing them to irresistible Earthling music on his spaceship’s music player. The narrator says that he “was God Almighty” to the creatures (204).⁵ Now we know that Rumfoord is actually the one who organizes the harmoniums to form the messages that express their so-called love for Boaz. We could probably go so far as to say that the harmoniums lack the capacity to feel any sort of emotion, perhaps even among themselves: the organisms simply drift to the place where the best musical vibrations come from, and Boaz just happens to be providing them. *Who* or *what* provides the vibrations

⁵ It is important for us to remember that while Boaz may entertain godlike notions with respect to the harmoniums, he never abuses them by “violat[ing] the sanctity of the individual”—an act of which Davis accuses Rumfoord, since he toys with the lives of tens of thousands of human beings (54).

likely makes no difference to the creatures. The bigger point, however, is that the harmoniums act as a sort of mirror through which Boaz's new feelings are reflected. Regardless of whether the animals are capable of loving Boaz, they bring about a change in the human that is for the better. His ambition to become the cynosure of a Hollywood night club, which causes him to inflict injury on Mars, has been deflated. He now understands the effects of his opprobrious behavior and resolves to make a change, as he tells Unk:

“And I keep saying it over to myself about how I'm going to be free,” said Boaz, “and then I try to think what that's going to be like, and all I can see is people. They push me this way, then they push me that—and nothing pleases 'em, and they get madder and madder, on account of nothing makes 'em happy. And they holler at me on account of I ain't made 'em happy, and we all push and pull some more. ...

“I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I'm doing good, and them I'm doing good for know I'm doing it, and they love me, Unk, as best they can. I found me a home.” (216-217)

The environment and lifestyle that he subsequently adopts reminds us of Vonnegut's Folk Society in several respects. Boaz and the harmoniums are isolated and they literally live off the land. Through these creatures Boaz has come to a basic understanding of a purpose of life, which parallels Constant's claim that it is “to love whoever is around to be loved.” So we see that the envious, unsatisfied, bullying “real commander” on Mars has, through his experience with Unk and with the harmoniums on Mercury, been transformed into what the narrator calls “a thoroughly great human being” (216).

Unk, however takes no pleasure from the harmoniums, or from his former buddy Boaz, for that matter. The way he feels about himself, the universe, and

about being used for any purpose parallel the way Rumfoord feels at the end of the novel. Unk is indignant, upset, and contemptuous. These feelings are reflected in the way Unk treats the harmoniums. They are useless animals who deserve nothing but his hate; he rips them in half whenever he feels the urge. He cannot stand, or even understand, how Boaz could feel love for such despicable monstrosities, or believe that they in turn are capable of loving him. Unk has yet to come to terms with his existence: if Vonnegut had decided to end the novel on Mercury, he would have reserved a different fate for Unk—one similar, no doubt, to the one Rumfoord suffers at the end of the book.

But Unk gets another chance when Boaz's compassion for the harmoniums pulls him out of his existential rut. When Unk learns how to escape from the caves (by, comically, merely turning the spacecraft upside down), he pulls Boaz to the ship to explain. In going to the craft, Boaz neglects the harmoniums and many perish from an overdose of music. The emotions that Boaz expresses over this loss force Unk to compare himself with his shipmate.

Boaz

was a wise, decent, weeping, brown Hercules.
Unk, by comparison, felt scrawny, rootless, and sore-headed.
(215)

Just as Unk inadvertently humbles Boaz and propels him into an orbit that offers a clearer perspective of his existence in relation to the universe, so Boaz helps his partner to begin to understand that the powerlessness he feels on Mercury results from the foolishness of his looking outward for answers. (Unk's anger over the situation on Mercury has been directed towards nameless, faceless

entities living in skyscrapers on the surface of the planet that, indeed, do not exist.) At this point the binary is no longer necessary since both characters have worked to bring about significant change in each other. Boaz, who has reached his full development, will evidently remain on Mercury, caring for the harmoniums, until his death. Unk, or Malachi, on the other hand, has yet to achieve his “cosmological education.” Thus he needs to jump to a few more planets or moons and two more binaries—meeting up with Winston Niles Rumfoord before he rejoins Beatrice on Titan.

Rumfoord and Constant

Mustazza argues that this “novel’s meaning lies precisely in the conflict between [Rumfoord and Constant]” (53). On the surface this statement rings true, but the book would not have the same meaning—and would not have nearly as much depth—were it not for the conflicts among and collisions between its other characters. That said, however, a study of the binary comprising Constant and Rumfoord is critical to this reading of *The Sirens of Titan*, since it demonstrates the absurdity of human attempts to look outward.

We have seen that Malachi’s belief that “somebody up there” favors him over everybody else leads him inflict pain on others and on himself. Constant fancies that this magnificent, ethereal presence has bestowed upon him immense wealth and privileged status, and also desires that he deliver a message to a sufficiently distinguished recipient. These expectations are frustrated when Winston Niles Rumfoord, during their initial meeting at his estate, says he knows nothing about a message that needs to be conveyed. The mission that Constant has been chosen for—to travel to Mars and then Titan—is not exalted enough. To boot, it includes Beatrice Rumfoord, one of the principal objects of Malachi’s disdain. In an attempt to sidestep this fate Constant performs several pernicious actions. He sells his shares of Galactic Spacecraft, which owns the rocket on which he will begin the mission, and purchases a large portion of MoonMist Tobacco, which—although he doesn’t know it because he didn’t bother to do any research into the brand—causes what some might consider to be greater harm than any other tobacco product (it has been

discovered that this specific type of cigarettes renders the people who smoke them sterile, as Ransom K. Fern informs Constant just before he resigns his post at Magnum Opus). He dishonors Beatrice by sending her hurtful, misogynistic notes. He disgraces his father's name and ruins the lives of Mr. Fern and thousands of other employees of Magnum Opus and its subsidiaries by drunkenly and whimsically giving away valuable corporate assets to complete strangers. Malachi does these things for the benefit of no one but himself—but undoubtedly, if somebody up there likes him, he enjoys the privilege of doing whatever he pleases, regardless of the effects and repercussions.

Continually working to shape people and events according to his plan, Winston Niles Rumfoord tries to entice Constant into going on the journey by showing him a picture of the three most beautiful, exotic women he has ever seen: the sirens of Titan. For the moment he declines, even after witnessing the beauty of these extraterrestrial enchanters. But the sirens are crucial to his development because they epitomize what Constant, in his first incarnation, cares more than anything else about—attaining pleasure and satisfaction for himself. Every single decision he has made and action he has taken has been predicated on an outward-focused pursuit of meaning that places all importance on him and none on other people. His outlook and behavior exemplify what Rumfoord alleges to expel from the planet once he establishes the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Rumfoord, the “Master of Newport,” says to Constant, who now, as the Space Wanderer, acts as a scapegoat figure:

“We will imagine, to our spiritual satisfaction,” said Rumfoord up in his treetop, “that you are taking all mistaken ideas about the

meaning of luck, all misused wealth and power, and all disgusting pastimes with you.” (260)

As hypocritical as Rumfoord can be, this statement shows that he can be genuinely helpful insofar as he raises the issue of looking outward and points out its failings. The irony of this moment, however, lies in the fact that Malachi will—through his experiences with Boaz, Rumfoord, and Beatrice—cast off the outward-looking philosophy that allows him to act so disgustingly, while Rumfoord will never give up clinging to his.

The schemes that evolve from Rumfoord’s outward-looking philosophy include moving Constant into the trajectory that will ultimately change his view of himself and the universe. It is Rumfoord, after all, who arranges the binaries in which Malachi operates with Beatrice and Boaz. Rumfoord knows that the experiences that Beatrice and Malachi will share will greatly benefit both characters. He tells his wife to “Look forward to being really in love for the first time” (60). (We will find out that the benefits do not serve as the central motivation for Rumfoord’s actions; they are only a by-product of his overarching plan.) Of course the person who will provide Beatrice with that love is Malachi Constant, whom Rumfoord manipulates throughout the novel. For the first time in his life Constant has encountered someone who challenges his apparent superiority, who can and will use Constant however he sees fit. Agents working under Rumfoord’s direction accost Constant at just the right time with a once-in-a-lifetime job offer as a lieutenant-colonel in an otherworldly army. Perhaps Helmholtz, the Martian recruiter, does not realize the depth of his statement when he tells Constant that he “can offer [him]...an opportunity to think about

[his] native planet from a fresh and beautifully detached viewpoint” (90). And surely Constant cannot imagine the scope of his adventures or how “fresh and beautifully detached” his new perspective will actually be. To gain it he must violently rape a woman he detests; have his memory practically obliterated—and with it, his identity; submit to the will of an invisible, Orwellian dictator by means of a remote-controlled radio in his head; involuntarily execute his best friend; endure the rejection of his own son; unwillingly act as both messiah and pariah of a religion he has never heard of; and travel in exile to a faraway Saturnian moon.

The first of these events—the rape of Beatrice Rumfoord—provides him with a fresh perspective. He now realizes that he plays the role of both victim *and* agent of “outrageous fortune”: he has gained an awareness of the harm he has brought to other people as well as the harm that has been inflicted upon him. Further, Winston’s manipulation of Constant exposes the latter to his own faults. The immense physical and psychological pressure that Rumfoord indirectly heaves upon Malachi on Mars forces Constant to work harder than he ever did before, and for a practical purpose at that. In the remaining sequences of his development we see Constant slowly coming to terms with the universe as it is instead of how he fancies it to be. The relationships he establishes with Beatrice and Boaz, as discussed above, contribute much to Malachi’s new understanding. But even after arriving on Titan he has not yet finished his “cosmological education,” as shown by his speech to no one in particular on that moon:

“No matter what happens, no matter what beautiful or sad or happy or frightening thing happens,” Malachi Constant told his family there on Titan, “I’m damned if I’ll respond. The minute it looks like something or somebody wants me to act in some special way, I will

freeze.” He glanced up at the rings of Saturn, curled his lip. “Isn’t that just too beautiful for words?” He spat on the ground.

“If anybody ever expects to use me again in some tremendous scheme of his,” said Constant, “he is in for one big disappointment. He will be a lot better off trying to get a rise out of one of these statues.” (295)

Rumfoord’s manipulation of Constant has left him disappointed and bitter. He is angry because he has been treated like nothing more than a tool in a scheme that means nothing to him, and he gives his resignation from universal affairs. These statements remind us of Malachi’s disposition in the caves of Mercury, where he resented the faceless, nonexistent beings on that planet’s surface who, so he thought, controlled his fate as well as Boaz’s and the executed Stony Stevenson’s. In one sense we could regard his resignation as positive: it means that he will no longer look outward for answers (the sardonic comments about Saturn’s beauty are especially symbolic and powerful). However, Malachi fails to understand that his refusal to respond when someone desires him to “act in some special way” in itself designates a response; the resentment he feels for having been used is similar to Rumfoord’s reaction to the Tralfamadorian plan that minimizes Rumfoord’s supposed greatness. More importantly, it hinders Constant’s development and keeps him from growing as a character.

But his bitterness subsides over the years that Malachi and Beatrice spend together on Titan, and Constant fully attains the critical distance from himself that he needs to move forward. One important example of this growth comes when Malachi sees in person the sirens—inanimate, sculpted out of Titanic peat by Salo, and attracting only algae—that symbolize the lecherous goals he once set for himself. These figures have been reduced to little more

than debris on the bottom of a swimming pool—an image that, when we consider his own pool in Hollywood after the three-month bacchanalia, throws his development into sharp relief. “By the time Constant has reached Titan,” writes Lawler, “he has changed so much that he does not even feel the irony of discovering the true nature of the sirens” (79). And, through his interaction with Beatrice in their Titanic Folk Society, Malachi realizes that it doesn’t matter *who* or *what* controls his destiny; the important thing is the way human beings act towards each other given the circumstances in which they have been placed. Also, when Salo proffers Constant a ride back to Earth after Beatrice’s death, he wants to be returned to Indianapolis, which, besides its obvious connection as the author’s hometown, is also the “the first place in the United States of America where a white man was hanged for the murder of an Indian” (321).⁶ He wants to belong to a place where people who fail to treat others humanely are dealt with accordingly—similar to the way in which Vonnegut deals with Rumfoord at the end of the novel.

Rumfoord resembles the early Malachi Constant more than he would probably like to believe. He too possesses enormous wealth, coming from New England “old money.” As a member of “the one true American class,” he holds a substantial amount of power and influence. He looks outward for answers—further outward than Constant, or any other human being, for that matter—by firing himself into space. Like Malachi, Rumfoord is concerned exclusively with

⁶ According to Conner Prairie’s archives, the first recorded American instance of whites being punished for mistreating Indians appears in 1825, when four Indiana men were hanged for the murder of eight members of the Delaware and Seneca tribes near Pendleton, some thirty miles outside Indianapolis. (<http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/fallcreek.html>.)

himself, uses others in harmful ways for his own personal benefit, and bolsters his ego by considering other people inferior or unequal. This last fact plays a major role in his relationship with Malachi, as Rumfoord asserts his authority over Constant with a handshake during their first meeting. Mustazza suggests that the seemingly mundane act of the handshake actually speaks volumes about Rumfoord's character:

[Constant] immediately feels diminished to precisely the degree that Rumfoord intends; and given Rumfoord's harsh manipulation of Malachi's fate later in the novel, we must conclude that this ego assault was quite deliberate. His lack of regard and sensitivity for this man is clearly carried over to his view of the unwashed masses assembled outside his door. Is it any wonder, then, that his plan for the salvation of the species includes the deaths of so many people? Indeed, it is small wonder that he sets himself up as the disposer of people's lives. Feelings are unimportant to Rumfoord, and people are expendable. The experiment is all. (49)

Wolfe offers an opposing interpretation of Rumfoord. "For much of the novel," he writes, "Constant assumes the role of the typical Vonnegut villain—materialistic, crude, and self-centered—while Rumfoord is the protagonist, trying to alter events to conform to what he believes is a viable moral system" (967). Further examination of this claim will expose its inaccuracies. First of all, I would argue that, on a technical level, Constant plays the role of protagonist, seeing as how he is the character who undergoes the most change in *The Sirens of Titan*. Rumfoord, on the other hand, never changes at all. Secondly, while it is true that Constant exhibits certain "villainous" traits at the beginning of the book, he sheds them through his development. Using Wolfe's reasoning we could argue just as well that Rumfoord should be categorized as the villain. However, Vonnegut has

said that he does not create villains,⁷ or, that if there are villains in his novels, they do not take the form of human beings, but rather of “culture, society, and history.”⁸ With the possible exception of Norman Mushari in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Paul Lazzaro in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and James Wait in *Galápagos*, I can think of no character in the whole of the author’s work that consistently acts “villainously” and draws absolutely no sympathy from the reader. The only similarities between Mushari, Lazzaro and Wait are their indifference to or hatred for other people and their lack of any redeeming qualities whatsoever. So we see that there is no “typical Vonnegut villain.” And lastly, Wolfe suggests that Rumfoord’s attempts “to alter events to conform to what he believes is a viable moral system” reflect Rumfoord’s “altruistic” ethos (967). I would argue instead that only an egomaniac or a dangerously powerful lunatic would go so far as to manipulate human events and beliefs so as to actualize his own personal, “moral” vision of society: one thinks of—among other human embarrassments—Nero’s persecution of the early Christians, Ferdinand and Isabella’s Inquisition, Hitler’s “Final Solution,” Senator McCarthy’s crusade against communism, or the jihadists’ irrational calls to mutilate and murder “unbelievers” and “apostates.” As for Rumfoord’s relationship with Constant, Rumfoord functions as an antagonist: he works to bring about a change in the other character.

In his binary with Rumfoord, Constant operates chiefly as a victim of outrageous fortune. Rumfoord, therefore, acts as an agent. The fundamental goal—so we are led to believe—that he hopes to achieve through the

⁷ *Slaughterhouse-Five*, p. 8.

⁸ *Fates Worse than Death*, p. 31.

manipulation of others is to bring about a period of enlightenment and brotherhood on Earth. He creates a new religion, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, the teachings of which proclaim that God doesn't care about anything and that, although all men apparently are not created equal, they can be equalized through the legalized enforcement of bodily handicaps. Rumfoord, as leader and prophet of this religion, vehemently dismisses the notion that God bestows gifts of any kind upon humans, which contradicts the claims he makes to Beatrice earlier in the novel:

“Look forward to behaving aristocratically without any outward proofs of your aristocracy. Look forward to having nothing but the dignity and intelligence and tenderness that God gave you—look forward to taking those materials and nothing else, and making something exquisite with them.” (60)

These statements blatantly go against one of the major tenets of the religion Rumfoord himself founds. He expressly warns his “messiah”—Constant as the Space Wanderer—to refrain from making similar comments in front of the crowds, who believe, because Rumfoord says so, that God is indifferent to humanity.

Although he claims to be working for the benefit of all humankind by spreading this knowledge, the only one who really benefits from his efforts is Rumfoord himself. He consciously seeks to decrease the value of others and to increase his own greatness. Mustazza writes that Rumfoord's overall plan for Earth, which is supposed to enlighten and enrich people's lives, involves “concealment, half-truths, illusion, victimization, and, of course, dazzling spectacle” (50). He neglects his wife's needs throughout their relationship. He

arranges things so that thousands of Earthlings in need of real help (mainly alcoholics and people without friends) receive brutally oppressive treatment on Mars—and after the war he “thanks” the veterans by allowing them to sell “brummagem wares” outside his mansion (240). He forces those who will not willingly follow his plan by some ruthless method or another. There are, however, people such as Moncrief, Rumfoord’s butler, who need little in the way of harsh persuasion:

It was such people who took the Martian money and the Martian orders gladly. They asked no questions. They were grateful for the opportunity to work like termites on the sills of the established order. (175)

Such behavior is reminiscent of the deeds of those officers, soldiers, and citizens who happily served a Hitler or a Kim Jong-II. And although the narrator says that Rumfoord rarely lies, he does so when it suits his purpose. We have already seen that, if he is being honest with Beatrice when he tells of how God has endowed her with intelligence and dignity, then he lies to his congregation to get them to comply with his desires. Further, he has the messiah-figure for his new religion proclaim that he “was a victim of a series of accidents,” when, in fact, Rumfoord intricately planned all the events that led Malachi Constant to become the Space Wanderer. We also catch him putting deceptively clever spin on the reason for the Martian “invasion” of Earth. As for “dazzling spectacle,” Rumfoord engineers his materializations such that they produce crowds similar to those at a public hanging, and, as the narrator says, “When Rumfoord staged a passion play, he used nothing but real people in real hells” (243).

Not only is he a showman, manipulator, and dictator: Rumfoord is also the biggest hypocrite of them all. We have seen the contradictions in his words to Beatrice and in the tenets of his religion. Additionally, in his Space Wanderer sermon, he expels Constant from Earth and claims that he will be taking all erroneous ideas about luck and all abuses of power with him to Titan. We know—although Constant doesn't—that Rumfoord is guilty of misusing wealth and power on a scale much larger than Constant could ever dream. The motivations for such misuse and manipulation arise not from an urge to make the world a better place to live in; they arise from his desire for self-aggrandizement. Mustazza points out that in his speeches, Rumfoord's "motives for action become clear—motives that give the lie to his denials of aspiration to godhead and, hence, that sharply undercut the arguments of those critics who see any traces of altruism in his plans" (51). Any good that results from his actions is a byproduct of the process Rumfoord employs to acquire greater power and status for himself. His key argument against Constant just before the expulsion hinges on Malachi's self-centeredness and repulsive behavior, and how these factors have kept him from doing any good at all. He asks Constant if he has had any goodness in his life whatsoever. Constant replies that he had a friend once, and Rumfoord assails this defense by informing him that he (under the influence of the antenna in his head) executed his good friend Stony Stevenson on Mars. This is the *coup de grace* for Malachi's identity up to this point. He feels the same guilt he experienced after raping Beatrice, but now with much more intensity. Upon hearing this news, Constant "had a thorough understanding now of his own

worthlessness, and a bitter sympathy for anyone who might find it good to handle him roughly” (265). Rumfoord manipulates Constant into thinking that he acts once more as a cruel agent of outrageous fortune, when in fact it is Rumfoord who functions as agent this time. He neglects to mention to Malachi and the crowd his own responsibility for Stevenson’s death; he controlled the entire Martian army and presumably gave the orders to arrest and execute Constant’s friend. Rumfoord never gives any indication of feeling guilt for inflicting pain upon anyone, particularly Malachi Constant. Manipulation and pain are simply the means to his ends. He needs both a messiah and a pariah figure to make his new religion seem convincing; Constant fits both bills, and Rumfoord is willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish his goals.

As Malachi Constant begins to search inward and to look at himself from a fresh, critically distanced perspective, he learns how to value and treat other creatures. Thus he acquires a new sense of freedom even though he has been so shockingly used and abused. Rumfoord, on the other hand, continues to justify his nefarious actions by adhering to his outward-looking philosophy. He never achieves a detached perspective of himself, and therefore can neither acknowledge the value of others nor treat them with the respect they deserve. This, according to Davis, supersedes any good Rumfoord may have done for Earth:

Although Rumfoord is instrumental in transforming an entire culture by staging a war between Mars and Earth and establishing the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, by using Malachi he violates the sanctity of the individual. Rumfoord...may wish to create a better world, but in perpetrating his scheme he crosses the line

between his own humanity and the inhumane urge to play God.
(54)

I would argue that Rumfoord “violates the sanctity of the individual” not just by using Malachi Constant, but by manipulating practically every other Earthling as well. Here is a man who has no qualms about toying with the lives of millions, kidnapping and brainwashing them, cheating them out of the little freedom they enjoy and impressing them into an army the reason for whose existence they are never given; rewriting their personal histories to give credibility to his far-reaching schemes; and deceiving them into adopting a “religion” that essentially negates the characteristics that provide them with a sense of individuality. Rumfoord sees himself almost as a demigod: this illusion—like Beatrice’s purity narrative, like Constant’s belief that somebody up there likes him—blinds him to the fact that he is only a human being in a sea of billions of other human beings, his chronosynclastic infundibulated status notwithstanding. This illusion allows Rumfoord to set up a double standard: he manipulates others however he pleases to carry out his arrangements while believing the whole time that no one has the right to exploit him in any way for even the slightest of reasons. Embracing this double standard to the very end, he expresses indignation when he finally understands the extent to which the Tralfamadorians have made use of him to achieve their ends. As he tells Salo, his former friend:

“Tralfamadore,” said Rumfoord bitterly, “reached into the Solar System, picked me up, and used me like a handy-dandy potato peeler!”

“If you could see this in the future,” said Salo miserably, “why didn’t you mention it before?”

“Nobody likes to think he’s being used,” said Rumfoord.

“He’ll put off admitting it to himself until the last possible instant.” He

smiled crookedly. "It may surprise you to learn that I take a certain pride, no matter how foolishly mistaken that pride may be, in making my own decisions for my own reasons." (290)

Rumfoord, the most powerful Earthling in *The Sirens of Titan*, fails to recognize the right of anyone under his control to suppose that they make their own decisions for their own reasons. He can never rid himself of the solipsistic notions of use that permit him to behave the way he does. Vonnegut, the outspoken advocate for kindness and decency, saves the novel's bleakest fate for Rumfoord, who repeatedly demonstrates behavior antithetical to the author's postmodern brand of humanism.

Rumfoord and Salo

We have seen that Winston Niles Rumfoord functions as “cruel agent of outrageous fortune” with regard to all inhabitants of Earth and particularly to Malachi Constant, who in their binary acts as a “victim.” Rumfoord’s influence on Constant plays a large part in the latter character’s development. In effect, Rumfoord reaches into Hollywood, California, picks Constant up, and uses him “like a handy-dandy potato peeler.” Rumfoord’s actions expose Constant’s mistaken ideas of use and the universe to the reader and to Constant himself; they also force Malachi to reconsider these ideas, to mature, and to adopt a radically humbled humanist philosophy that places equal importance on all creatures. In much the same way, Salo and the Tralfamadorians work to expose the errors of Rumfoord’s outward-focused philosophy. They give Rumfoord a taste of his own medicine by operating as agents of—and thereby making him a victim of—outrageous fortune.

Rumfoord represents the logical conclusion of humanity’s outward quest for universal authority and knowledge. He has all a human being could ask for on this planet, but it isn’t enough for him. There is only one thing left for him to do, which is, naturally, to load himself and his dog up in a rocket and blast off into outer space. Truly, he plans to go where neither man nor canine has gone before—even after the government has prohibited space travel due to the discovery of the chrono-synclastic infundibulum between Earth and Mars. He sets out on a quest for new universal truths when all traditional truths have been considered and deemed insufficient. At first glance we come to think that, as the

narrator says, Rumfoord has noble intentions. He possesses “pure courage—not only pure of lusts for fame and money, but pure of any drives that smack of the misfit or screwball” (23). Indeed, this early account of Rumfoord, when contrasted with that of Constant, nearly convinces us that we are being introduced to the novel’s “hero.” The narrator describes a man who epitomizes “style” and “gallantry,” a rugged individual whose courage and leadership command the world’s attention and respect (23). However, our earlier discussion of Rumfoord’s ulterior motives and his view of others as simply tools to achieve his ultimate goals throws a different light on the man. Rumfoord’s actions throughout the novel undercut the rhetoric that the narrator employs to portray him as a “hero.” I suggest that Vonnegut deliberately uses this rhetoric to illustrate the general public’s perception of Rumfoord: his position and wealth enable him to convey such an image of himself. “Rumfoord can be seen as the champion of outwardness,” writes Marvin. “He has mastered the art of *appearing to be superior*, so people who base their judgments on appearances believe that he really is superior. But behind this appearance there is little to be found” (48, my emphasis). To say that he doesn’t need to be driven by “lusts for fame and money” is to miss the point entirely, since he already has all the fame and money he could ever desire. Rumfoord aspires to increase his authority and knowledge at the expense of other people’s freedoms and lives. Marvin argues that the novel’s narrator sums up this man’s opinions about those lives in his brief description of “Skip’s Museum,” the room in which Rumfoord, as a child, collected shells, skeletons, and other empty husks that once contained life:

[Skip's Museum] provides an important clue to Rumfoord's character. It suggests that Rumfoord is unable to appreciate the importance of the human soul. As a grown man, he plays with people in the same careless way that he once played with shells. The army he creates on Mars consists of the hollowed out shells of men, deprived of their memories, wills, and identities. Rumfoord shows no remorse when he sends tens of thousands of them to their deaths. (48)

It seems that no one in the novel, least of all Rumfoord, realizes the contradiction in his injuring and killing thousands of people in order to make a better world for the survivors of his scheme.

Maybe he genuinely believes that his plan, which includes his taking control of the world, murdering in industrial quantities, and imposing his ideology and value system upon all populations, will bring about some kind of change. Indeed, this does not lie beyond his scope, and the pretense that he desires "change" indubitably attracts a significant following. Rumfoord claims to want to eradicate mistaken notions about luck, the hand of God, and power. He wishes to install a righteous "brotherhood of man" on Earth. Just before he disappears from the solar system forever, he says that he "tried to do [his] best while serving the irresistible wishes of Tralfamadore" (303). We could assume that he feels he is telling the truth here, to the extent that he can be honest with himself and others. But with cosmic knowledge and authority comes cosmic responsibility, which Rumfoord chooses not to exercise. The ostensive reasons for Rumfoord's actions may be noble, but regardless of his intentions, he causes atrocious harm to many. His Martian scheme ruins thousands of lives and memories. He also manipulates his wife and Malachi Constant. His new religion equalizes all inhabitants of Earth except for himself. Mustazza points out that although

Rumfoord never *claims* to play God, his actions betray his words (48-51). He becomes a godlike figure in his new religion; pilgrims flock to the Master of Newport's mansion to peek at the great apparition and to hear his prophesies and sermons. While we could argue that some of the harm Malachi Constant inflicts is unintentional, we cannot bring ourselves to say the same about Rumfoord. This quotation comes from Rumfoord's *Pocket History of Mars*:

“Any man who would change the World in a significant way must have showmanship, a genial willingness to shed other people's blood, and a plausible new religion to introduce during the brief period of repentance and horror that usually follows bloodshed.”
(176)

Sigman wonders if Rumfoord really knows where his will ends and the Tralfamadorians' begins, and concludes that “Vonnegut has ordered *Sirens* in such a way that these questions...cannot be answered” (31). However, I argue that, based on his ideas such as the one quoted above, Rumfoord knows precisely what he is doing, regardless of the Tralfamadorian influence. Unk on Mars faces a situation arguably more severe and degrading than anything Rumfoord ever experiences, but he never complains about his plight. Rather, he makes a conscious attempt to fight it with all the will he can muster. Rumfoord has committed all his acts consciously, premeditatedly. He has no antenna in his head to electrically reprimand him whenever he thinks a subversive thought. He never tries to fight for good in adverse circumstances, as Unk does on Mars; he only lays the blame on others for minimizing his own sense of individuality—of which he deprives countless others.

It is worth pointing out as well that in his publication Rumfoord writes about bringing “*significant* change” to the world, but mentions nothing about helpful or beneficial change. Klein remarks that Rumfoord’s “misguided attempts at reform are a devastating commentary on all endeavors to manipulate mankind for its own good” (1999). To be sure, any prodigious renovation of society demands that its members work hard, make sacrifices, collaborate and cooperate; but—at the risk of sounding too idealistic—any leader who hopes to oversee such restructuring requires the consent of those over whom he or she wishes to hold authority. Vonnegut clearly learned this as a youth during the Great Depression and during his involvement in World War II: the demand for change, for action, for sacrifice was pressing and immediate, and American citizens endowed Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the necessary power to preside over that onerous period of American history. Vonnegut has explained that he based Rumfoord in part on President Roosevelt (Davis 54). If we examine their circumstances and motivations, however, we will find no similarities between the two save for their “glottal...tenor[s]” (15) and their membership in “the one true American class”: first, as we have just said, Roosevelt was backed by the will of the people, while Rumfoord takes the initiative to restructure society without anyone’s consent; second, Roosevelt worked to fix America’s exigent problems—such as devastatingly widespread job losses and the fascist threat—while Rumfoord attempts to change people’s minds about secondary or even tertiary issues, such as the role that “luck” plays in their lives; and third, Roosevelt’s efforts—including the establishment of the Works Progress

Administration and the fight against Hitler—by and large brought about beneficial changes for most Americans, while Rumfoord's undertakings greatly diminish the value of other people and rob them of their freedoms. Although Vonnegut admitted to never putting any villains in his books, we can infer from his other writings that he would consider villainous Rumfoord's thoughts and actions throughout the course of *The Sirens of Titan*.

Of course the ultimate irony for Rumfoord is that while he has consciously manipulated tens of thousands of people to serve his ends, he is in turn being manipulated on a much greater scale by creatures with a much greater understanding of the universe to serve theirs. The book's major joke, the punchline of what Lawler calls Vonnegut's "metaphysical shaggy-dog story"—humankind's achievements being reduced to nothing more than efforts to help Salo deliver his message, "Greetings"—can be seen as more of an attack on quests through outwardness in general, and Rumfoord's quest in particular, than on human progress. Although his perceptions have been heightened and expanded, they come nowhere close to those of the Tralfamadorians, who make Rumfoord a cat's-paw in their plot to deliver a spare part to Salo's malfunctioning spacecraft on Titan. Rumfoord becomes increasingly disenchanted with the circumstances, with being used on such a massive scale for such seemingly insignificant purposes, because he feels that he has a right to make his "own decisions for [his] own reasons" (290). We have already noticed how he deprives Malachi, Beatrice, and many others of this right. His philosophy, which provides him with a false sense of self-importance and which in his mind minimizes the

value of other human beings, allows him to indulge in such beliefs. Constant, Beatrice, and Boaz eventually develop the capacity to look at themselves from a critical distance. This permits them to abandon the narratives that caused them to harm others, learn to use each other in productive ways, and come to terms with their place in the universe. Rumfoord, however, presents a special case in *The Sirens of Titan*: although he operates in several binaries from which some characters emerge with a fresh, humbled perspective of themselves, other creatures, and the universe as a whole, Rumfoord remains basically the same person the narrator introduces to us at the beginning of the story.⁹ He “gets trapped,” as Pascual writes, “in the pattern of meaning [he] imposes, becoming a paranoid victim of his own forceful projections” (2001). Embracing his outward-focused philosophy to the very end, Rumfoord never achieves the critical distance from himself that is necessary to truly look inward, to acknowledge the value and equality of others, and to treat them accordingly. *His* place in the universe takes precedence over all else.

If it weren't for Salo—presumably the only friend Rumfoord has ever had—Rumfoord would never have been used in such an unjust way. He therefore hurts the robot by insulting him, questioning his feelings of friendship, and calling him a machine, subtly implying that to be a machine is “to be insensitive, ...unimaginative, ...vulgar, ...[and] purposeful without a shred of conscience” (291). Tragically, Rumfoord misses the irony of his claims, as he does not realize that with the exception of “unimaginative”—the plans for the

⁹ Herein lies another irony: Rumfoord has undergone a substantial change by becoming chronosynclastic infundibulated; but in spite of—or perhaps because of—his newfound knowledge, he is never able to rid himself of the reprehensible qualities that contribute to his downfall.

Martian invasion and the installation of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent obviously reflect this man's imagination—all of the insults directed at Salo could just as easily be applied to him. Indeed, any sympathy the reader might have left for Rumfoord completely dissolves when he chooses to take his frustrations out on Salo instead of analyzing himself and considering the egregiousness of his behavior. Thus Vonnegut reserves the novel's worst fate for Rumfoord, dismissing the man from the solar system, separating him from his faithful dog, and keeping him from seeing the final fruits of his efforts. And whereas Malachi Constant begins to feel a new sense of freedom on Titan, Rumfoord "experiences no freedom, existential or otherwise" (Davis 54).

Vonnegut saw the absurdity in the human tendency to look outward for answers to existential questions and to affirm with absolute certainty the existence of a knowable, divine being that favors one group of people over all others, that concerns itself with earthly affairs great and small—from the fate of nations to the wish-fulfillment of a single individual. As of 2009, half a century after the publication of *The Sirens of Titan*, physicists are practically just beginning to understand the intricate and complex properties of the universe; they have come to no unanimous conclusion concerning its true nature or its ultimate fate. Searching outward for divine knowledge and solutions that, for all we know, do not even exist has a way of diverting people's attention from very real and very immediate concerns, such as—as Vonnegut says—serving "as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any familiarity, which is our community."

Vonnegut, in *The Sirens of Titan*, parodies the idea of projecting one's personal set of beliefs into "a nightmare of meaninglessness without end." He takes the liberty of creating his own teleological construct, and the result is Tralfamadore, a planet whose inhabitants challenge the conceit that humanity is the end result of all creation and force us to question previous definitions of time, existence, and the purpose of life. He also reprises and revises the theme of automation that he raises in his first novel, *Player Piano*. There he seems to be saying that machines can be useful and beneficial to human beings but that we should not rely on them for all tasks and purposes, lest we lose our sense of usefulness and put our own freedoms at risk. We would gradually be removed, like Ilium's Reeks and Wrecks, from the society we helped to maintain. *Player Piano* makes use of science-fiction elements, of course, but it portrays a world that Vonnegut, after working for several years at General Electric, believed could very much become reality. In *The Sirens of Titan*, however, Vonnegut is clearly stretching the boundaries of the possible: we have talked about aliens and spaceships as if they actually exist; interplanetary wars as if they could actually occur; and we will talk about Salo as if a machine could actually gain a human sense of empathy and love. Critics such as Lawler (1977), Rose (1979, 1994) and Sigman (1994) have discussed extensively Vonnegut's use of science-fiction elements, formulas and plot devices as a literary means to his overall ends. He utilizes them as a springboard from which to launch and convey his own conception of a viable postmodern humanism. Salo's becoming more human,

then, is in one sense Vonnegut's way of getting the upper hand over the threat of automation that so daunted the author through the 1940s and 1950s.

Winston Niles Rumfoord functions as the "champion of outwardness." Salo and the Tralfamadorians work directly to expose and counteract his mistaken perceptions. These robotic aliens possess a cosmic authority and a fuller, more rounded knowledge of the universe that eludes Rumfoord. The Tralfamadorians conceive of time as circular rather than linear: everything in the past always will be, and everything in the future always has been. It is a concept that humans, with the exception of Rumfoord, can't wrap their minds around. The Tralfamadorians also have the knowledge and ability to send their influence hundreds of thousands of light years away. As humans, we are pathetically incapable of understanding the mind-bogglingly elaborate method by which the creatures use the Earthlings. The narrator tries to explain anyway:

Suffice it to say, in such primitive company, that the Tralfamadorians were able to make certain impulses from the Universal Will to Become echo through the vaulted architecture of the Universe with about three times the speed of light. And so they were able to focus and modulate these impulses so as to influence creatures far, far away, and to inspire them to serve Tralfamadorian ends. (277)

These machines have not only discovered the primal creative force of the universe ("The Universal Will to Become," or what some might call "God")—they have also figured out how to use that energy to suit their purposes. Their manipulation of human history in general and Rumfoord in particular works as the book's ultimate joke; all human efforts—especially Rumfoord's—have been reduced to nothing more than elements of the Tralfamadorian plan to deliver a

spare piece to Salo's broken-down spacecraft. Vonnegut suggests that anyone who searches outward for meaning will be met with the same absurdity dealt to Rumfoord and those who came before him. "The bounties of space, of infinite outwardness," writes the narrator, "were three: empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death" (2).

Now the Tralfamadorians come from the far reaches of space, "a nightmare of meaninglessness without end." We know that "The Universe inhabited by Winston Niles Rumfoord and his dog [and, for that matter, everyone else in the novel] was not schemed in mercy" (300-301). Humankind and its ethical systems would appear to be anomalous in this universe, which shows eternal indifference to the suffering or safety of living beings. Our criticism of the novel's characters rests on a foundation of human-generated ethical standards, on the humanist understanding of what is "right" and what is "wrong" as propounded in Vonnegut's works, which the author succinctly summarizes in *A Man Without a Country* by defining, on his terms, saints: "By saints I [mean] people who [behave] decently in a strikingly indecent society" (106). By looking inward instead of outward for meaning, Malachi Constant, Beatrice Rumfoord, and Boaz learn to "behave decently" with respect to their fellow creatures in a universe in which the concept of decency is virtually aberrant. Winston Niles Rumfoord does not, and we have discussed the fate that Vonnegut reserves for him.

Salo, however, is a machine, not a human being, and as such he has been programmed to perform specific tasks with flawless efficiency, not to make

human-centered value judgments about the rightness or wrongness of a particular action. The well-being of his people does not depend upon their having some great purpose or overarching meaning. The Tralfamadorian creation story mirrors and satirizes humankind's outward search for significance. It tells of a race of creatures obsessed with purposefulness who invent machines to accomplish lowly tasks so that they can spend their time looking elsewhere for greater meaning, which, as it happens, cannot be found anywhere. Ashamed of their purposelessness, the creatures assign the machines the job of wiping them off the face of the planet. The machines then slaughter their creators without considering the ethical implications of murder, since they were programmed to perform—and not to question the reasons for—specific operations. Their programming, which emphasizes cold practicality in a merciless universe, guides them. The inventors of the machines did not supply their creations with an ethical sense of right and wrong. By the same token, the creatures have been manufactured with a built-in critical distance from themselves, for which Malachi, Beatrice, and Boaz must work so hard to achieve.

Salo's critical distance from himself complicates our discussion of it. Because of that distance, he sees no problem with his involvement in the Martian invasion. He contributes the blueprints of his ship for the fleet of Martian spacecrafts and helps to devise the grisly means by which the new army can be controlled. He has been programmed to find the easiest, most practical way to get a particular job done. The easiest, most practical way to get tens of thousands of people to do what you want, if you do not control the major cable

news-media outlets, is to clean out their memories and install antennae in their heads. As opposed to the novel's other major characters, who cause injury primarily for self-aggrandizement, Salo does these things neither to increase his greatness nor to minimize the value of others, but because—oddly enough—of his feelings of affection for Rumfoord. He helps his newfound friend “unselfishly” (287). Having been unfamiliar with the concept of friendship before prematurely landing on Titan, Salo observes Earthling relations through his spaceship's viewfinder. Friendship, therefore, is “a fascinating novelty to him. He had to play with it” (283). In a manner similar to Frankenstein's monster, Salo desires connection and companionship with others and expresses that need awkwardly, but in the only fashion he knows.

What appears to be going on here is an ironic reversal. As far as we know, Salo never looks outward for anything until he becomes stranded on Titan. Here we have Salo, the primary cause of all human history and achievement, observing the activities of human beings, who have been manipulated for a single purpose: to deliver a spare part to the robot's malfunctioning spaceship. Salo's observation of human affairs, therefore, can be interpreted as Vonnegut's teleological *end* (the goal for which all humans unwittingly strive) looking outward to Vonnegut's teleological *means* (the humans themselves). Though he probably doesn't expect it to happen, Salo develops a human-centered notion of purpose simply by looking outward, to Earth instead of to the stars or the heavens (since he comes from there). Here we need to ask ourselves: if Salo's programmed narrative makes no mention of mercy, gives him no awareness of the suffering of

other creatures, can we blame him for becoming involved in Rumfoord's physically and psychologically destructive schemes? On Earth, ethical systems and standards vary from society to society. And Salo, as we have said, is not a human being. On our planet, animals engage in brutal acts daily just to survive; the lioness does not consider the zebra's feelings as she kills it in order to feed her cubs. We are thus put in the position of judging Salo and the Tralfamadorians—fictional alien life-forms from another galaxy—by the ethical standards that we have absorbed through our upbringing as humans. Despite their obvious differences, the greatest discrepancy between the novel's leading human characters and the Tralfamadorians is the human ability to empathize with other creatures and to work to minimize their sufferings. Malachi, Beatrice, and Boaz don't possess Salo's fuller understanding of the universe, but they develop the ability to empathize as they operate within their binaries. In this respect, Salo's knowledge, although much greater than humankind's in many ways, is still limited by his indifference to the suffering of other creatures. The critical distance he has from himself needs to be tempered with—as strange as it sounds—a kind of Vonnegutian humanism.

Salo's development occurs rapidly, since we first meet him in the novel's penultimate chapter. It is before the narrator introduces him to us that his critical distance and cold practicality allow him to do harm, however indirectly, to so many people. In chapter twelve we discover that the robot's feelings of friendship have substantially deepened. Consequently he is able to empathize with others as well as to experience emotional pain, inflicted by none other than Rumfoord,

the person he views as his greatest friend. The machine himself says that “After watching human behavior for two hundred thousand Earthling years [and of course after spending much time with Rumfoord as well], I have become as skittish and sentimental as the silliest Earthling schoolgirl!” (305). He wants to keep Rumfoord from discovering the Tralfamadorian influence on Earthling affairs—not because he thinks it would lessen his chances for leaving Titan, but “because he love[s]...Rumfoord” (279). Salo knows that help will arrive soon, but not that Rumfoord has involuntarily been recruited in the Rube Goldbergian plot to transport the spare part to his spacecraft. But Rumfoord does learn the extent to which he has been manipulated. Disillusioned with his subserviency and frustrated with Salo for refusing to transgress his orders and open the message before he reaches his destination, Rumfoord unreasonably vents his anger by denying his closeness to and verbally assaulting the robot. He admits that Salo had little to do with the manipulation other than being the capital cause of it; nevertheless, Rumfoord makes himself feel better by taking his frustrations out on him. “It was a tribute to the spiritual intimacy he and Rumfoord had once shared,”¹⁰ writes the narrator, “that Rumfoord knew so well how to hurt him” (291). Rumfoord’s actions once again cause harm, this time to the only friend he has ever had. Salo views himself as unjustly wronged, since he doesn’t know that Rumfoord serves as the Tralfamadorians’ primary tool. Of course, Salo could argue that Rumfoord uses him just as much as the Tralfamadorians use Rumfoord: the man does, after all, benefit from Salo’s involvement in the creation of the Martian army and Winston’s rise to the top of a newly established church

¹⁰ It is also a tribute to Salo’s growth that he, as a machine, is able to share “spiritual intimacy” with anyone.

on Earth. But he does not. The machine goes against the very core of his being in hopes of restoring his friendship with Rumfoord; he rips the sealed message from his neck, opens its case and prepares to share its contents. Unfortunately it is too late for his friend, who has by now been blown completely from the solar system by a mighty series of sunspots on the nearest star.

Upon reading the message—a lone dot that translates in English to “Greetings”—Salo breaks down in a manner similar to that of Constant (on Mercury and during his early days on Titan) and Rumfoord (when he perceives the magnitude of the Tralfamadorian plot). His words to Malachi and Beatrice nearly echo Rumfoord’s: ““Would you like to know how I have been used, how my life has been wasted?”” (306). Add to this the loss of his only friend—though we have good reason to question whether Rumfoord is ever a true friend to Salo—and the robot is confronted with his first emotional breakdown. He has fallen into his own existential rut; he has no other recourse than to wallow in his own self-pity. Salo’s “humanization” engenders not only empathy but the exclusively human desire that all actions be completed for some great purpose. The robot clearly feels that the friendly message of salutations fails to satisfy this desire, and he one-ups both Constant and Rumfoord in their doldrums by dismantling himself—effectively committing suicide. When Chrono gives up his good-luck piece—the spacecraft’s spare part—Salo lies as a lifeless junk-heap on the surface of Saturn’s moon. Constant’s son has faith, however, that “the magical forces of the Universe [will] put everything back together again” (307).

The “magical forces of the Universe” are not controlled by “God” or even by those celestial power brokers, the Tralfamadorians. Here they are controlled by a human being who has learned, through the process of looking inward, how to treat other creatures with respect, how “to love whoever is around to be loved,” which constitutes the core of Vonnegut’s postmodern humanism. The aging Malachi Constant reassembles Salo, in effect giving the robot the same kind of second chance at life that both he and Beatrice enjoy in their later years on Titan. Salo emerges renewed, without the self-pity that caused him to destroy himself and with a better grasp of the humanity he has absorbed by looking through his viewfinder. He thanks Malachi for restoring him to life and articulates a retooled existential position:

“Anybody who has traveled this far on a fool’s errand,” said Salo, “has no choice but to uphold the honor of fools by completing the errand.” (320)

Salo, who only recently began to struggle with the idea that some purposes could be higher than others, has, like Malachi and Beatrice, come to terms with his situation and is now willing to make the best of it. The apparent paltriness of his message does not upset him now. Although it might lack depth, he will deliver it with “honor.”

Early on, Salo offered his knowledge and technological advancements to Rumfoord so that the latter could manipulate and harm tens of thousands of innocent people. As a final testament to his development, Salo ends up using that knowledge and technology for a benevolent purpose. Aware of the pain Constant feels for losing Beatrice, Salo takes him back to Earth; and knowing

that Malachi himself will soon expire, the robot hypnotizes him with the peaceful illusion of a reunion with his friend Stony Stevenson. This final empathetic gesture completes Salo's humanization. It shows us that the robot has the ability to "love whoever is around to be loved," and we can only assume that Salo will carry that sentiment to the other "Rim of the Universe" and share it with the creatures he finds there (let us hope that those creatures will be disposed to kindness).

We would do well to note here that Salo's message works like a coin. The obverse side functions as the punchline that reduces all outward-looking efforts to absurdity. If we believe, like Malachi in his first incarnation, that we were put on Earth by an omniscient, superhuman agency who wants us to fulfill some great and divine purpose, or if we believe, like Winston Niles Rumfoord throughout the book, that we are the center of the universe and that our place within it takes precedence over all other concerns, the message undoubtedly seems to be a monumental waste of time and manpower. It functions as a direct assault on Rumford's ego, which is sustained by the man's outward-looking philosophy. The reverse side of the coin, however, has a meaning that those who look outward will never fully appreciate. We find it in the harmoniums' "*Here I am, here I am, here I am,*" "*So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are*" and the reciprocal "*Graw*" of the Titanic bluebirds (189, 286). In whatever form it takes—these and Salo's "Greetings" being only a few manifestations—it signifies the initial communicative act that makes all mutually beneficial relationships between creatures possible. Without understanding its significance, Malachi, Boaz,

Beatrice and Salo would never have achieved the understanding they come to at the end of their developments.

Summary

Marvin writes that “Vonnegut...loves to stir up controversy, especially when he suspects that people are in danger of taking themselves too seriously” (12). We find this tendency in *The Sirens of Titan*, in which all of the major characters take themselves too seriously at one point or another due to the outdated and injurious methods they use to search for meaning and purpose. The controversy that the author contrives involves the placement of these figures into binaries that expose and usually eradicate their flaws. In their first incarnations, Malachi Constant and Beatrice Rumfoord view themselves as existing on a plane somewhere above the rest of humanity because of their belief that they are chosen or blessed by “somebody up there” who likes them. This attitude justifies their injuring or neglecting of other people. Their meeting in a binary, which we have analogized to one electron colliding with another and displacing it into a separate orbit, gives both characters a clearer, more humble view of “a purpose of life,” or the nucleus of the atom around which they travel. As the novel’s central personage, Malachi must go through a series of similar binaries, including one with Boaz—who ends up accepting modest life in the caves of Mercury with the harmoniums—and Winston Niles Rumfoord—who cannot give up the importance that his philosophy places upon him—before rejoining Beatrice on Titan, where they live out the remainder of their days in what Mustazza calls an “Edenic” society, which, I argue, closely resembles the Folk Societies described by Vonnegut’s anthropology professor, Dr. Robert Redfield. In his binary with Salo, Rumfoord’s faults are finally exposed and, since

he cannot refrain from looking outward, he is expelled from the solar system—our atom—altogether. Through his relationship with Rumfoord, however, Salo develops a humanlike sense of empathy that allows him to treat other characters—particularly Malachi Constant—in the way Vonnegut feels all creatures should be used and treated.

In his novels, essays, plays, and speeches, Vonnegut consistently struggles with the human condition, with the relationships between humans and how their perceived role in the universe influences those relationships. This is nothing new: we have been searching for meaning since our brains became big enough to do so. The problem with this quest, as far as the author is concerned, is that for far too long we have been looking in the wrong place. As Lawler writes,

After fifty thousand years of human endeavor, the existential mysteries remain unsolved. Vonnegut implies that, in an objective sense at least, they cannot be solved, because the traditional terms in which mankind has tried to answer them (free will, God, Heaven, salvation, etc.) cannot be understood. Such questions, therefore, are not relevant to man because they are unanswerable. The thesis of [*The Sirens of Titan*] seems to be that human history is absurd if we assume the existence of an objective, divine consciousness.
(67)

Always distrustful of absolutes—and hesitant to provide seemingly absolute answers to existential questions--Vonnegut continually jars his readers from a false sense of certainty, from thinking that he, as a human being first and a writer second, can provide consummate solutions to life's most profound problems. The most he can do is what every writer has the opportunity to do when he or she offers their work to the public. As he says in the *Playboy* interview:

Writers are specialized cells in the social organism. They are evolutionary cells. Mankind is trying to become something else; it's

experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into the society, and a means of responding symbolically to life. (*Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* 237).

With the publication of *The Sirens of Titan* in 1959, Vonnegut introduced into society his rather simple, human-centered approach to living a decent life. The key to leading such a life, according to the author (and the narrator, in the first pages of the novel) is to cease looking outward for answers and instead to search inward, to probe the soul and to discover its intimate connection with other souls, irrespective of the wishes or even of the existence of a “higher power.” Answers that we will be able to understand, he suggests, will arise from this interaction. They will allow us, unlike so many previous efforts to achieve existential understanding, to see the universe as clearly as possible and to behave in ways that do not bring shame upon ourselves.

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