

## KURT VONNEGUT'S HUMANISM: AN AUTHOR'S JOURNEY TOWARDS PREACHING FOR PEACE

### L'HUMANISME DE KURT VONNEGUT: LE VOYAGE D'UN AUTEUR VERS UN DISCOURS POUR LA PAIX

### UMANISMUL LUI KURT VONNEGUT: DRUMUL UNUI AUTOR ÎNSPRE O PREDICĂ PENTRU PACE

**Alexandru OLTEAN-CÎMPEAN**

Facultatea de Litere, Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai  
Strada Mihail Kogălniceanu 1, Cluj-Napoca 400084  
Email: al.oltean@gmail.com

#### **Abstract**

*In a time of violence that is once more on the rise, it becomes useful to look back on the viewpoint of a writer and public speaker who preached humanism and peace. Throughout his career Kurt Vonnegut struggled to instill within his reader his personal notions of what is important in life. An individual's most important duty, as Vonnegut saw it, was not really to make the whole world a better place, but to simply try to be decent to those around them every day. The present article endeavors to look back over the life of this Clown of Armageddon (as Peter Freese calls him) in order to understand how the author's origins and experiences shaped the themes of his texts.*

#### **Résumé**

*Dans une période de violence qui est une fois de plus à la hausse, il devient utile de regarder en arrière sur le point de vue d'un écrivain et conférencier qui a prêché l'humanisme et de paix. Tout au long de sa carrière Kurt Vonnegut a lutté pour inculquer au sein de son lecteur ses idées personnelles de ce qui est important dans la vie. La tâche la plus importante d'un individu, comme Vonnegut la voyait, n'était pas vraiment de faire tout le monde un meilleur endroit, mais d'essayer simplement d'être décent à ceux qui sont chaque jour autour d'eux. Le présent article tente de regarder en arrière sur la vie de ce Clown de l'Apocalypse (comme Peter Freese l'appelle) afin de comprendre comment les origines et les expériences de l'auteur ont façonné les thèmes de ses textes.*

#### **Abstract**

*Într-o perioadă de violență care este din nou în creștere, devine util să ne uitate înapoi la punctul de vedere al unui scriitor și vorbitor public care a predicat pentru umanism și pace. De-a lungul carierei sale, Kurt Vonnegut s-a străduit să insufle în interiorul cititorului său noțiunile sale personale referitor la ceea ce este important în viață. Cea mai importantă datorie a unui individ, așa cum considera Vonnegut, nu era de fapt să facă toată lumea un loc mai bun, ci pur și simplu să încerce să fie decenti cu cei din jurul lor în fiecare zi. Prezentul articol se străduiește să se uitate înapoi peste viața acestui Clown al Apocalipsei (așa cum îl numește Peter Freese), în scopul de a înțelege modul în care originile și experiențele autorului au modelat temele textelor sale.*

**Key-words:** Kurt Vonnegut, freethinking, humanism, postmodernism

**Mots-clé :** Kurt Vonnegut, libre penseur, humanisme, postmodernisme

## **Cuvinte cheie:** *Kurt Vonnegut, gândire liberă, umanism, postmodernism*

### **Introduction**

In a time of violence that is once more on the rise, it becomes useful to look back on the viewpoint of a writer and public speaker who preached humanism and peace. Throughout his career Kurt Vonnegut struggled to instill within his reader his personal notions of what is important in life. An individual's most important duty, as Vonnegut saw it, was not really to make the whole world a better place, but to simply try to be decent to those around them every day. The present article endeavors to look back over the life of this Clown of Armageddon (as Peter Freese calls him) in order to understand how the author's origins and experiences shaped the themes of his texts. More specifically, I will begin by illustrating Vonnegut's origins and the importance that his great-grandfather Clemens Vonnegut's philosophy had in shaping the author's perspective on life. Next, the article will shift briefly to Vonnegut's experience during World War II and after, and how these events instilled a significant change in the image he originally had about US society and the government that should have its constituents constantly in mind. Armed with a more reactionary viewpoint, Kurt Vonnegut begins trying to illustrate his grievances through his literature, and so the present article continues with the first novels *Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan*. Finally, with the author's mission established, I turn to a more detailed examination of Kurt Vonnegut's sense of *humanism*, illustrating its significance and particularities.

### **A Freethinking origin**

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was a middle-class freethinking intellectual, who as a child was raised in a family and a community of like-minded individuals. His place of birth was the city of Indianapolis, Indiana, on November 11, 1922. To understand Kurt Vonnegut's views, one must go all the way back to the first of his relatives that immigrated to the US, for, as the author explains more than once, the original sources of his beliefs were hereditary. Fortunately, in the autobiographical text *Palm Sunday* Vonnegut states that his Uncle John wrote a historical account of the family's history (see Vonnegut 1981[1994] for reference). Of the eight great-grandparents who emigrated to the US, certainly the most significant, in terms of the development of Kurt Vonnegut's views, was Clements Vonnegut. Very much a by-product of the Enlightenment Period, Clements "had a far better education than ninety-eight percent of the Germans or other immigrants" (Vonnegut 1981[1994]:336) and, perhaps equally important, he "rejected formalized religion and disliked clergymen" (ibid). Thus, instead of identifying with one religion or another, he considered himself a Freethinker, speaking and writing extensively on the matter of placing human virtue and human interactions above spiritual beliefs, which were considered by him to be wholly unnecessary, and even, ultimately, destructive. According to Kurt Vonnegut, Clements had arranged at his own funeral for this speech to be delivered:

"I departed from this life with loving, affectionate feelings for all mankind; and I admonish you: Be aware that people on Earth could be joyous, if only they would live rationally and if they would contribute mutually to each other's welfare. This world is not a vale of sorrows if you will recognize discriminately what is truly excellent in it; and if you avail yourself of it for mutual happiness and well-being. Therefore, let us explain that we base our faith on firm foundations, on Truth for putting into action our ideas which do not depend on fables and ideas which Science has long ago proven to be false"

(Vonnegut 1981[1994]:505)

Faith placed not only in Truth, but also in the possibility of human beings to work together for the greater good without the need for religion are elements that are found all over Kurt Vonnegut's writings.

With such a persona as a direct descendent, it is not surprising that the Vonnegut family invariably passed down, from generation to generation, a deep sense of faith in human rationale and in humanity in general, a sort of religion (ironically) which Kurt Vonnegut called *Freethinking* and which he was introduced to from the day he was born. Although he would find out exact details about his great-grandfather only later in life, Kurt Vonnegut felt deeply connected to the man and stated that “Clemens Vonnegut was a cultivated eccentric. That is what I aspire to be” (Vonnegut 1981[1994]:342).

Later on in life, working upon the importance of rational thought over belief, Vonnegut would debate in *Palm Sunday* the implications of Thomas Aquinas’ division of laws into three – Divine Law, Natural Law and Human Law – and of placing them on a hierarchical ladder in that order. The author makes an analogy between these Laws and playing cards and establishes that the first is equal to the Ace, the second to the King and the third to the Queen. According to Vonnegut, the original concept of the American system, the American dream as it were, is based on the premise that equality among individuals is possible since “because of the Constitution, the highest card anybody had to play was a lousy Queen” (Vonnegut 1994[1981]:322). This is to say that a person’s rights should be assured because all Governmental decisions are limited to Human Law and, at most, they can make reference to, though never act upon, Natural Law. The danger of being unsatisfied with an incomplete deck of cards, with adding Aces and Kings into the equation, as Vonnegut explains, is that “there is so little agreement as to how those grander laws are worded. Theologians can give us hints of the wording, but it takes a dictator to set them down just right” (ibid). In other words, accepting Divine Law and Natural Law inevitably leads to a totalitarian regime in which a dictator uses these laws to justify his ruling, placing it above man’s right to question it. The warning that Vonnegut brings to the table (since he usually has one) is that people in America are not made conscious of the fact that the freedoms they take for granted are not inalienable. As the author explains,

“what troubles me most about my lovely country is that its children are seldom taught that American freedom will vanish, if, when they grow up, and in the exercise of their duties as citizens, they insist that our courts and policemen and prisons be guided by divine and natural law” (Vonnegut 1994[1981]:323)

The moment that citizens (and it is considered that only citizens can do this) begin to believe that the administrative forces are not subject to their own will, that they are leaders of the people instead of servants of the people, then America stands just as much of a chance to become a totalitarian regime as any other country in the world. The only proper course of action, therefore, is to circle back to the kind of *Freethinking* mentality that was so well praised by Clemens Vonnegut and to consider that man and human needs should come first in our society above anything else, including Divine Will.

### **Post World War II disillusionment**

Despite growing up in a family culture that practiced free thinking and, naturally, healthy skepticism, in his youth Kurt Vonnegut trusted that he lived in a country whose government always wanted what was best for their citizens and who were above all sensible and honest. This belief, together with his desire to get out of his failing education at Cornell University, lead him to volunteer to become a soldier during World War II. He did badly in the military as well, and the most significant events during his brief military career were the death of his mother and him being taken as a prisoner of war, coupled with him having survived the firebombing of Dresden. Throughout the war, Dresden had been the only city that had no munitions factories or garrisons, no military items at all. The area had been kept clear intentionally, so that the city could serve as a major refugee and medical aid hub. In 1945, after having spent some time in a POW (prisoner of war) camp, Vonnegut and several other American prisoners were sent off to work there and it was presumed that they would be safe for the remainder of the war. What was unknown to them and the

Germans, however, was that the British had decided to make an example of the city, as an act of revenge for the damage that German forces had inflicted on English soil. Thus it was that, on February 13<sup>th</sup> 1945, British and American planes passed over and, with the use of incendiary bombs, leveled the entire city essentially in a single run. As the author remarks, “the firebombing of Dresden was an emotional event without a trace of military importance” (Vonnegut 1991:100). The death toll remains a controversy, as Vonnegut further explains, because “the population at the time of the raid was a mystery, since so many refugees from the collapsing Russian front were arriving day after day” (Vonnegut 1991:101). By his own estimate, some 135.000 people died on that day. As expected, the event shocked the young writer deeply, and, when he was eventually released and was allowed to return home, he began to read and listen to the news, expecting to hear official details about the catastrophic event. To his surprise however, the entire operation had been tossed under the rug. What Vonnegut did hear about was the detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Together with the fact that the Allies had leveled Dresden, this stunning display in Japan of the destructive force that human beings could wield convinced Vonnegut that “a trust in technology, like all the other great religions of the world, had to do with the soul” (Vonnegut 1994[1981]:381). Thus, fresh from the war, Kurt Vonnegut foresaw the exaggerated faith, akin to religion, that the US society of the late 1940's and the 1950's would place in science and technology, a faith whose fundamental flaws the author struggled to expose in his early writings.

### **Vonnegut's first response to his concerns**

In 1952 Vonnegut published his first novel entitled *Player Piano*. The book is inspired by the extreme faith that he saw placed in technology by the people around him and by the unanimously-agreed-upon idea circulating among scientists working for General Electric and other research labs that scientific research should not be hampered in any way. After World War II the General Electric company took it upon itself to be a place of unfettered innovation, to establish “a virtual reinvention of what humankind could make” (Klinkowitz 2012[1998]:3) and the premise that was at the base of this hope for streamlining innovation was that scientists should be given a free hand to research anything they wanted. This latter idea was one which the author found particularly disturbing, since it brought with it the implication that a scientist need not, or even must not, let elements of morality to intervene in his quest for uncovering truth and for pushing forward technological development. In response to this, Vonnegut's first novel depicts a dystopia that exists sometime in the future, where machines control all aspects of human life. In his next book, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Vonnegut toys with the notion of free will and life's meaning, postulating the possibility that all of human history may be nothing more than a process set in motion and controlled by an alien race that guided mankind's evolution for its own purposes. In this case, that purpose is utterly ridiculed through the notion that it was all done just so that one of these aliens, whose ship has become stranded on Titan, might obtain the spare part he needs to repair his space ship and continue on his journey. And while these ideas may seem to us and to the readers back in the 1950's as outlandish science-fiction, in fact they weren't very far from what was being seriously discussed by scientists at the General Electric Research Facility. Judging fact and fiction comparatively, the reality of the matter is that

“the themes from *Player Piano* and *the Sirens of Titan* seem far less science-fiction than commonly middle-class [because] what began as a technological miracle meant to free people from drudgery wound up relegating them to the emptiness of having no meaningful, rewarding work.” (ibid)

What thus became a crusade to technologically uplift mankind ended up backfiring, resulting, in Vonnegut's opinion, in a form of existence that is in fact not more fulfilling but, on the contrary, far emptier than before, because what the science-crazed direction followed by General Electric and all those that followed them ignored was that it is humanity and the human condition that must come first, before any other personal curiosity.

Overall, his goal (since Vonnegut believed that writers must have a specific goal, must transmit a certain idea to their reader) was essentially to point out the importance of humanism, a notion that he saw as being placed under fire in a world that is becoming ever-more artificial. The idea of scientists taking responsibility for their work and for how their work is applied is one that he held throughout his life. In 1985, for example, Vonnegut held a speech at MIT, where he proposed that the students (who would soon be the scientists of tomorrow) swear upon an adapted version of the Hippocratic Oath which would state that they “will create no deadly substance or device, though it be asked of them, nor will they council such” (Vonnegut 1991:120).

### Vonnegut’s humanism

In order to better understand Kurt Vonnegut, it is important to not only point out his interest in *humanism*, but to also pause a bit upon the type of humanism that the author adopted – postmodern humanism. The best way to do this is to place it in contrast with its predecessor. *Modernist humanism*, true to its interest in the individual, “draws all cognitive, aesthetic and ethical maps to the scale of the individual subject who believes in the originality and individuality of a unified self” (Davis 2006:31). Still very much acceptant of unified, grand truths, modern humanists believed in exploring and unlocking the depths of the single man’s mind and soul, which in turn were considered sufficient sources of inspiration. All the while, social interaction was considered less significant, and certainly the relationship of an individual or of a collective to the rest of the world was of minor importance. The end goal for the modern humanist was “utopia, an end result based on the belief in the perfectibility of humanity” (Davis 2006:32), since it was considered that the human being is not only capable but also predestined towards continual growth. In contrast, the *postmodern humanist* “denies an essential individuality of the subject [...], recognizing the global associations of humanity and its intricately delicate alliance with the earth” (Davis 2006:31). If the end game for modernists was a utopia,

“for the postmodern humanist there can be no utopia, only endless play, endless affirmation of life. Unlike the modernist, the postmodernist does not believe in the perfectibility of humanity or a final, static position such as utopia; rather, the postmodern humanist concentrates on the daily, local activity that may improve human life” (Davis 2006:32)

These elements of postmodern thought – the link between one individual and another, between humanity and the world, as well as the lack of any authentic truth – permeate throughout Vonnegut’s writing and spokesman careers. His concerns centered especially around the question of what humanity needs to do in order to survive through the centuries to come. Of course, his focus is not on what people should consider doing in the future, but on what they can do today, such as learning to respect one another and to preserve the natural resources of the planet that we so deeply depend upon. Despite the ominous warnings with which he litters his writings, his avid use of humor, his unwillingness to place blame on any singular individual or social class (a joke that went around often and which was adopted by the author himself was that his writings have never had a villain in them), and his constant insertion of hopeful characters like Eliot Rosewater all point to the solid belief that humanity can balance itself out and that small communities can improve human life at a local level. But, at the same time, Vonnegut “never rests easily in his guarded optimism. Although he continually strives to believe in humanity, his precarious position as a postmodern humanist is constantly threatened by humanity’s incessant acts of deranged destruction” (Davis 2006:104). Even at a local level violence is constantly springing up in various forms and what seem to be simple steps that can be taken for the life of a community to improve often fall short. Ultimately, for Vonnegut, even “postmodern humanism is nothing more than a comforting lie, one more constructed narrative in the infinite range of narratives” (Davis 2006:33). But this need not lead people to despair in Vonnegut’s eyes, since, as he showed in the novel *Cat’s Cradle*,

comforting lies have their uses, since merely striving to turn such lies into reality already lead to improvement in some form or another, even if the lie can never become truth.

Vonnegut's interest in people and his focus on humanism can be drawn back to before he was born, but the theory behind it all, the theory he put into practice directly, was formed before he began writing, in Chicago. After returning from the war, before his family grew to include all three children, Kurt Vonnegut enrolled himself at the University of Chicago in the hopes of getting a degree in Anthropology. It was during that time that he came into contact with Professor Robert Redfield and the concept of *Folk Societies*. As defined in the Encyclopedia Britannica, a folk society is "an ideal type or concept of society that is completely cohesive – morally, religiously, politically and socially – because of the small numbers and isolated state of the people and because of the relatively unmediated personal quality of social interaction". According to Kurt Vonnegut, we now live in "societies that have gone insane" (Vonnegut 1991:32), because the modern world has all but abandoned the ideal of the *Folk Society* in return for a culture based on individualism.

During the 1960's, one of the most important events in Vonnegut's life, one which would have very long lasting consequences from multiple perspectives, was his invitation to teach at the University of Iowa Creative Writing Workshop. This meant four semesters which he would spend away from his family. What he got in return for his hardships was "an extended family in the community of writers and students that, more than being just a college, made existence here a distinct way of life" (Klinkowitz 2009:51). Since his days as a student at the University of Chicago, when he first learned about *Folk Societies* (and even before this, perhaps because of the traditionally community-centered mentality of the old Indianapolis), Kurt Vonnegut longed to become part of an extended family. He had hoped that Cape Cod might provide him with this community, but, as it turned out, actual *Folk Societies* only accepted those members who were traditionally already part of the community, to the author's bitter disappointment. It must have come to him as a great surprise then to discover that, upon reaching Iowa, he would also be welcomed into an extended family of individuals that were united by the same endeavor – to create literary art.

It was also shortly after this important change in his life, of going to Iowa, and after close to two decades of writing, that critics would catch up with the times and recognize Kurt Vonnegut's contributions, thanks to the appearance of his fourth novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. This rise to fame was of course also due to the fortune of Vonnegut having published his anti-war book in 1969, when throughout America people were finally tired of the Vietnam War and marches for peace became ever more frequent. By 1971, Kurt Vonnegut was internationally renowned, though, having finally tackled with his Dresden experience in his writing, he found himself at a crossroads, uncertain in which direction he should take his literary career next. Nevertheless, the author continued to speak about the importance of compassion, passivity and tolerance, on the idea of living one's life in accordance with a solid set of morals. He spoke especially to university students, because

"it's been the university experience that taught me that you catch people before they become generals and presidents and so forth and you poison their minds with...humanity, and however you want to poison their minds, it's presumably to encourage them to make a better world" (Somers in Klinkowitz 1973:107)

To the best of his abilities, the author tried to maintain a positive and hopeful attitude towards the future, holding on to the idea that there is "certainly one good thing about this planet – the way people will try to help other people sometimes" (Vonnegut 1994[1981]:470) and that "beauty could be found or created anywhere on this planet, and that is that" (Vonnegut 1991:25). Yet, as the years went by and things seemed to change all too little, Kurt Vonnegut became increasingly skeptical in regards to tomorrow. The future, as he saw it, lay entirely in human hands, for even if there is a God, "we can expect no spectacular miracle from the heavens, so the problems of ordinary human beings will have to be solved by ordinary human beings" (Vonnegut 1994[1981]:515). This task of

securing a future for humanity, however, as Vonnegut began seeing it, is one that we are failing at. To put it in his words, starting off from the words of another:

“Bertrand Russell declared that, in case he met God, he would say to Him: ‘Sir, you did not give us enough information’. I would add that: ‘All the same, Sir, I’m not persuaded that we did our best with the information we had’” (Vonnegut 1994[1981]:509)

Ten years after this statement, Kurt Vonnegut tries to explain his change of tone by stating that “Humorists, [...] those who choose to laugh rather than weep about demoralizing information, become intolerably unfunny pessimists if they live past a certain age” (Vonnegut 1991:283).

This growing infusion of pessimism certainly colors his writing, starting after *Slaughterhouse Five*. If in this novel and the ones before it we can say that “there are no heroes in Vonnegut’s books and no real villains either” (Sommer in Klinkowitz 1973:126), in the latter half of his writing career “the villains are culture, society and history” (Vonnegut 1991:31). Yet even during these darker latter years, hope – even if it is only a fool’s hope – still lingers in the author’s mind and is reflected, though to a lesser degree, in his writing. In *Deadeye Dick* (1982), for example, while the *neutron bomb* symbolizes the destruction that contemporary man tolerates and even approves of (it is considered a *friendly bomb*), still, the story of Rudy Waltz and his focus on family history show how “the author searches his [own] past to understand how the world he lives in has come to such an inhumane and irrational position” (Davis 2006:106). Just the act of searching for answers denotes a willingness to believe that solutions can still exist. One such solution, which would make it possible for mankind to live peacefully not just with each other but also with the world around them, is expressed in his very next novel *Galapagos* (1985), where a mysterious phantom narrator presents the future man – a seal-like creature that has discarded the *big brain* that made our violence possible, so as to live in harmony. Of course, this solution too is not a perfect one and indeed it can be considered that Vonnegut in fact rejects this evolutionary course, for without the *big brain* that brought about the atom bomb, but also Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, one can hardly be considered human.

## Conclusion

It has been nearly ten years since Kurt Vonnegut’s death. Whether or not the world has become a darker place as the author feared is a point of contingency. Even if it has, Vonnegut would still consider that there is hope, in spite of his growing pessimism. Up until his death, though he would continue to say that our society was heading for a cataclysm, Kurt Vonnegut never denied that humanity’s fate was in its own hands, and, therefore, that we can always save ourselves if at one point we begin to make the right choices. Even more proof of his enduring sense of compassion and hope was the fact that the author continued to deliver his heartfelt speeches into his eighties. According to Jerome Klinkowitz, who remained a close friend to the author and who followed his career even closer, in the last years of his life Vonnegut was still making ten major lecture appearances a year and, even if by now it was an increasingly difficult endeavor, he did it “for the pleasure of making people laugh, and the gratification of helping them understand” (Klinkowitz 2009:123). Apparently he also had a growing fear in old age that he would be forgotten. This was hardly the case, as proven by the fact that, on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2007, the news of his death was reported on multiple News channels across America and even shows like John Stewart’s *The Daily Show* stopped to commemorate the loss in the closing of the show’s April 12<sup>th</sup> 2007 episode.

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