

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

**Associate Professor- Department of English Language and Literature- Faculty of Arts- Alexandria University**

**Abstract**

It is the aim of this paper to shed light on how Kurt Vonnegut responds to the complexities and absurdities of life in *A Man Without a Country* (2005), by adopting a light-hearted tone that mitigates the traditional postmodernist pessimism. In its broadest sense, postmodernism adopts a skeptical standpoint towards established truths and assumptions whose authenticity has gone unquestioned for a long time. In Vonnegut's hands, this pessimistic stance is imbued with a humanist dimension, and a search for a glimpse of optimism in the midst of a highly fragmented and incoherent postmodernist world. Black humour, laughter, irony, a light-hearted tone and a tendency towards optimism are often the conduits he opts for to expose the inexplicable absurdities that run rife in his postmodernist world, while at the same time maintaining a hopeful outlook on life and humanity. Throughout the book, Vonnegut weaves a tapestry of his own personal views regarding disparate topics.

**Keywords:**

Hope; optimism; postmodernism; black humour; pessimism.

## كيرت فونيغوت "رجل بلا وطن": البحث عن الأمل والتفاؤل في عالم ما بعد الحداثة

د. جيداء جواد حمادة

أستاذ مساعد - قسم اللغة الانجليزية وآدابها  
كلية الآداب - جامعة الاسكندرية

ملخص البحث باللغة العربية:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على كيفية استجابة كورت فونيغوت لتعقيدات وعبثية الحياة في كتاب (A Man Without a Country) (2005)، من خلال تبني لهجة تخفف من تشاؤم ما بعد الحداثة التقليدي. تتبنى ما بعد الحداثة وجهة نظر متشككة تجاه الحقائق والافتراضات الراسخة التي ذهبت أصالتها دون جدال لفترة طويلة. في يد فونيغوت، هذا الموقف المتشائم يصبح مشبعاً ببعث إنساني، وبحث عن لمحة من التفاؤل في خضم عالم ما بعد حداشي متفكك. الفكاهة السوداء والضحك والميل نحو التفاؤل هي القنوات التي يختارها للتخفيف من حالة الوجود التي تنتشر في عالم ما بعد الحداثة، مع الحفاظ في الوقت نفسه على نظرة متفائلة للحياة والإنسانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الأمل؛ التفاؤل؛ ما بعد الحداثة؛ الفكاهة السوداء؛ التشاؤم

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

In its broadest sense, postmodernism is an eclectic movement that adopts a skeptical standpoint towards established truths and assumptions whose validity has gone unquestioned for a long time. It may thus be said to derive “its main incentive from a critique of established structures and forms”, whereupon it becomes a “fundamentally antagonistic” movement, with an invariably pessimistic attitude towards life and humanity (Huber 3). In the hands of the postmodernist American writer Kurt Vonnegut, this “antagonistic” stance is imbued with a humanist dimension, and a search for a glimpse of optimism in the midst of a highly fragmented and incoherent world. This paradoxical combination has earned him the designation of being a proponent of a “misanthropic humanism” (Tally 113). Black humour<sup>1</sup>, laughter, irony, a light-hearted tone and a tendency towards optimism are often the conduits he opts for to expose the inexplicable absurdities that run rife in his postmodernist world, while at the same time maintaining a hopeful outlook on life and humanity. It is the aim of this paper to shed light on how Vonnegut responds to the complexities and absurdities of life in *A Man Without a Country* (2005), by adopting a light-hearted tone that takes the edge off the traditional postmodernist pessimism.

By publishing *A Man Without a Country*, an unconventional book that resists strict generic categorization and is generally regarded as the final book he published before his death in 2007<sup>2</sup>,

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of consistency, the spelling “humour” is used even in the quotations by Vonnegut instead of “humor”.

<sup>2</sup> After Vonnegut's death, his son Mark collected, edited and published his father's “New and Unpublished Writings on War and Peace”, under the title *Armageddon in Retrospect* (2008) (Welsh 318).

Vonnegut “made a surprising return to the bestseller lists with a work attracting more attention than anything he had written since *Slaughterhouse-Five*”<sup>3</sup> (Klinkowitz 426). While *Slaughterhouse-Five* “present[s] the reader with a picaresque narrative, framed by a memoir on writing war stories and interspersed with episodes on another planet” (Seed, Introduction 5), *A Man Without a Country* is a quasi-memoir that gives voice to many of Vonnegut’s observations and apprehensions. Throughout the book, he weaves an intricate tapestry that brings together many of his own personal views regarding disparate topics, addressing issues pertinent to politics, war, religion, family relationships, arts, daily American life, creative writing, humanism, progress, and the environment, to cite only a few examples.

In addressing this wide array of themes, Vonnegut’s collection of essays becomes as eclectic as his own life and career; a chemistry major, an anthropologist, a publicist, a science fiction writer, a black humourist, a war veteran, a journalist, a pacifist, a humanist, and above all, a human being. In this regard, the significance of the title becomes evident. In proclaiming himself “a man without a country”, Vonnegut renounces his affiliation with any single race, nation, ideology, homeland, creed, or any divisive boundary, gravitating instead towards an all-embracing conception of humanity. In envisioning a more accommodating world for humans, Vonnegut resorts to laughter and black humour, ultimately resulting in an “unheard-of combination of the serious concerns and narrative strategies of high art with the themes, procedures, and emotional appeals of pop art” (Freese 3). As a staple feature of postmodernist literature, and since Vonnegut repeatedly refers to it, a brief explanation of black humour becomes imperative.

Simply stated, black humour is “[f]inding humour in such grim subjects such as the Holocaust and cosmic indifference to

---

<sup>3</sup> *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the novel that established Vonnegut’s name as a postmodernist writer. It is generally regarded as “a milestone in postmodern American literature, one that offered a nonlinear mode of narration” (Allen 6). It is a semi-autobiographical anti-war novel, while also being infused with elements of science-fiction.

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

human concerns” (Allen 51). It is employed to tackle intrinsically tragic topics, in a light-hearted and mocking tone. The term itself was first applied to certain kinds of American literature and film from the late 1950s onward, although its roots can be traced back to Herman Melville and Mark Twain. It is generally used to denote “a provocative comedy which [is] deployed to convey a sense of the absurdity and disorder of the contemporary world” (Seed, “Black” 159). In his book *Black Humour of the Sixties* (1973), Max F. Schulz defines black humour as “a divergent body of literature produced in the 1960s and still being produced”, characterized by “comic and grotesque treatment of tragic material, [and] employing a mockingly irreverent tone” (ix). Put differently, it is used to refer to humour that is “grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these” (O’Neill 145). It is commonly held that “[b]lack-humour writing possesses a transgressive energy which shows itself in violating literary and legal norms of decorum, reflecting writers’ sense of the inadequacy of conventional realism to express the contemporary world” (Seed, “Black” 159).

Typical subjects of black humour narratives are war, disease, disasters, cosmic absurdities and death. Tragic as these themes are, they are addressed in a manner that “thwart[s] the reader’s expectations of solemnity” (159). As such, “novels labelled as black humour at one time or another are not humorous in the narrow sense” (Green 186). It is worth noting that although satire figures prominently in postmodernist writings, it is black humour that Vonnegut relies on in *A Man Without a Country*. While the former “attacks vice and folly through wit and ridicule” (Nilsson 1), the latter is less vehement in the sense that it does not attack as much as it subtly exposes or brings to the fore what the black humourist takes issue with. Black humour is thus aptly attuned to Vonnegut’s search for optimism.

Throughout *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut repeatedly refers to laughter and humour as defense mechanisms by means of which he can deal with many ambient calamitous

situations, as he succinctly states: “Humour can be a relief, like an aspirin tablet. If a hundred years from now people are still laughing. I'd certainly be pleased” (129-30). Although he uses the term humour rather than black humour, it is evidently the latter since the kernel of the book lies in the convergence of tragic and comic sensibilities. This is evident as early the opening lines where Vonnegut retrospectively celebrates the power of cracking jokes as a means of carving out a place for himself in the world of adults, as he states: “The youngest child in any family is always a joke-maker, because a joke is the only way he can enter into an adult conversation” (1). In a manner that is ostensibly akin to the bildungsroman tradition, Vonnegut starts the book with his childhood. Walking down memory lane, he evokes a scene from his childhood, wherein the serious and the funny converge at the dinner table:

So at the dinner table when I was very young, I was boring to all those other people. They did not want to hear about the dumb childish news of my days. They wanted to talk about really important stuff that happened in high school or maybe in college or at work. So the only way I could get into a conversation was to say something funny. I think I must have done it accidentally at first, just accidentally made a pun that stopped the conversation, something of that sort. And then I found out that a joke was a way to break into an adult conversation. (1-2)

Having mentioned “adult conversation”, Vonnegut shifts to the sordidness of the realm of adulthood. In keeping with the postmodernist emphasis on fragmentation, his idyllic childhood is abruptly interrupted by the advent of the Great Depression. Ironically, and through black humour, Vonnegut proceeds to chart his odyssey by the proclamation: “I grew up at a time when comedy in this country was superb—it was the Great Depression” (2). In so describing such a shattering event, Vonnegut tries to take the edge off its calamitous repercussions, an outcome of which is his being taken out of private school.

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

It must be noted that on the personal level, the Vonneguts were severely affected by the Great Depression. Grappling with their dire economic conditions, they had to sell their lavish home and take their abode in a more modest neighbourhood. This decline in economic circumstances incurably traumatized his parents: "Vonnegut's father thereafter gave up on life, and his mother literally did so in 1944 when she died of an overdose of sleeping pills. Kurt Jr.'s pessimism clearly has its roots in his parents despairing response to the depression" (Allen 2); a pessimism he has constantly struggled to circumvent by creating his own cult of laughter and black humour. A further consequence of the Great Depression was that the father lost faith in arts, and accordingly he sent his son to Cornell University for training as a biochemist. The germs of his becoming a science fiction writer sprouted during that time. At the same time, he contributed to the student newspaper; an experience that had an ever lasting impact on his journalistic style of writing<sup>4</sup> (Klinkowitz 421).

Battling his way out of frustration, laughter becomes Vonnegut's consolatory outlet. As he himself states, he unwaveringly views everything in terms of his wry humour, only excluding very rare topics: "Some things aren't funny. I can't imagine a humourous book or skit about Auschwitz, for instance. And it's not possible for me to make a joke about the death of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King. Otherwise I can't think of any subject that I would steer away from, that I could do nothing with" (3). Typical of the way black humour undercuts expectations of earnestness, Vonnegut describes catastrophes as being "terribly amusing" (3), and goes as far as proclaiming that "the Lisbon earthquake is funny" (3). In no way could such a disaster be funny; yet in so describing it, Vonnegut may be said to offer himself and

---

<sup>4</sup> Like Ernest Hemingway before him, Vonnegut would be influenced all his life as a writer by the simple rules of journalism, using straightforward sentences that are comprehensible to the readers.

the world a sense of assurance vis-à-vis the precariousness of man's existence in a world fraught with perilous happenings.

Nowhere is this precariousness more deeply felt by Vonnegut than in his participation in World War II; a traumatizing experience that has emotionally and mentally maimed him for life. During the course of the war, Vonnegut fought in Europe as an American soldier. He and his fellow prisoners were recruited as corpse-miners, taking the dead Germans from their shelters and stacking them in funeral pyres, as he writes: “[A]s prisoners of war, we dealt hands-on with dead Germans, digging them out of basements because they had suffocated there, and taking them to a huge funeral pyre” (18). However, in 1944 he was captured by the Germans, and was transported to Dresden as a prisoner of war, where he witnessed “the largest massacre in European history” (17). By a stroke of fortune, he survived the 1945 destruction of Dresden by British and American air forces, taking shelter in the underground meat cellar of a slaughterhouse (Giannakopoulos 145; McCoppin 49).

Although *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the novel that most elaborately articulates Vonnegut's experience with the war, explaining that in 1968 he “finally became grown up enough to write about the bombing of Dresden” (17), his war trauma reverberates throughout both his fictional and autobiographical writings. In *A Man Without a Country*, and in his attempt to counter the enormity of such an experience, he shrouds his recollections of it with laughter, as he states: “I saw the destruction of Dresden. I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly one response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief” (3). In other words, “Vonnegut uses the topic of war and his black humour to advocate the existential component of individual responsibility for one's actions in the modern and postmodern world” (McCoppin 47). His idiosyncratic response to such a horrendous experience is an attempt on his part to come to terms with its absurdity. It is as if he feels impelled to find a new means to grasp its horror, and a new form to reflect his newly-acquired awareness of the



**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and  
Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

needlessness of the whole experience. By deploying black humour in recounting it, “he trie[s] to find the psychological truth of his experience” (Abele 74). Be it in *Slaughterhouse Five* or *A Man Without a Country*, and because it is in 1968 and 2005, respectively, and not in the 1940s, “World War II is viewed from a decidedly pacifist perspective” (Klinkowitz 424).

Debunking the concept of war in general has thus become a salient feature of Vonnegut’s writings. His concern is not only with “the killing of civilians but, just as importantly, the aftereffects that follow the veteran home; the particular manner in which those left behind are nonetheless infected by war” (Abele 68). This is why he believes that propagating altruism becomes an obligation to which he must attend. As McCoppin explains:

Vonnegut continued to promote altruism in a modern and postmodern world, and it is for this that he should be remembered and valued as essential to the American canon. Vonnegut’s novels condemn war...[and] have a humanist aim. He revolts against war by teaching his readers to value altruism. His characters learn self-actualization by respecting and valuing other personal responsibility. In a time of war, Vonnegut asks his readers to maintain a position of pacifistic altruism. (64-65)

To achieve this end, he undermines any purported aspect of heroism in the war experience, humourously calling those who propagate these illusory ideals “old poops”: “Here are old poops who will say that you do not become a grown-up until you have somehow survived, as they have, some famous calamity.... Storytellers are responsible for this destructive, not to say suicidal, myth” (131). Typical of his thematic concerns, his writings “disrupt the ideal of a noble war that serves to preserve a democratic society” (Abele 68). In contradistinction to the way “[p]ostmodernism emphasizes the sublime unrepresentability of...manmade disasters” (Mitsi et al., Introduction 8), Vonnegut represents them in a light-hearted tone that he enlists in an unyielding search for optimism even in the most somber of times.

Along similar lines, he humourously charts a dichotomy between his “bad uncle” and his “good uncle”, imagining himself killing the former for his romanticized perception of the war, claiming that “a male can’t be a man unless he’d gone to war” (131-32). If the other uncle deserves the epithet “good”, it is simply because of his altruistic intentions, and for his search for hope in the midst of the ambient desperation, as Vonnegut explains:

But I had a good uncle...who was an honest life-insurance salesman in Indianapolis. He was well-read and wise. And his principal complaint about other human beings was that they so seldom noticed it when they were happy. So when we were drinking lemonade under an apple tree in the summer...Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, ‘If this isn't nice, I don't know what is’. (132)

Following in the footsteps of his “good uncle”, Vonnegut upholds the same sense of optimism, and through the postmodernist technique of metafiction<sup>5</sup>, he directly addresses the reader, requesting him/her to be attentive to his/her sense of happiness: “And I urge you to please notice when you are happy” (132).

Just as Vonnegut attempts to alleviate the harrowing experience of World War II through black humour and by tenaciously holding to optimism, he adopts a similar attitude towards the Vietnam War, denigrating it as the outcome of “scruffy” and “stupid” motives (20), yet, prompted by his hopeful stance, he celebrates how it has helped enhance American music: “Now, during our catastrophically idiotic war in Vietnam, the music kept getting better and better and better” (67). Very much like literature and humour, music becomes a means of solace,

---

<sup>5</sup> As a postmodernist technique, metafiction draws attention to the artificiality and fictionality of art. In other words, “metafiction calls attention to its own artificiality in order to question the implicit claims of ‘realistic’ writers that they are describing a stable world extant outside of language” (Allen 52).

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

making life better and helping him keep his memories of the war at bay:

Back to music. It makes practically everybody fonder of life than he or she would be without it. Even military bands, although I am a pacifist, always cheer me up. And I really like Strauss and Mozart and all that, but the priceless gift that African Americans gave the whole world when they were still in slavery was a gift so great that it is now almost the only reason many foreigners still like us at least a little bit. That specific remedy for the worldwide epidemic of depression is a gift called the blues. (67)

His admittance that the American people are hated is expressed in a less vehement tone by indirectly celebrating the African Americans' legacy of the blues, thereby shifting the attention away from the former's abhorrent acts.

Along similar lines, his adversarial stance towards different institutions and discourses is sidestepped, and, in its lieu, he revels in the sublimity of music: "No matter how corrupt, greedy, and heartless our government, our corporations, our media, and our religious and charitable institutions may become, the music will still be wonderful" (66). Accordingly, he not only desires it to be his epitaph, but he goes as far as hailing it as a sign of the existence of God: "If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph: THE ONLY PROOF HE NEEDED FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD WAS MUSIC" (66). Although Vonnegut says it jokingly, it reveals his skeptical stance towards organized religion.

In postmodernist terms, religion becomes a metanarrative, or interchangeably a grand narrative; that is, a concept that refers to any theory that claims to provide indisputable universal explanations and to be unconditionally valid. In the *Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as being chiefly characterized by a "multiplicity of perspectives" (37), whereupon meaning becomes incompatible with any unitary consensus. It is in this context that Lyotard considers metanarratives to be restrictive. Along similar lines, Vonnegut

exposes the debilitating repercussions of organized religion and its inherent hypocrisy. It is worth noting, however, that he is not rebelling against organized religion as much as he does not adhere to any (Allen 10). Like most humanists, he “[has] little use for speculation about supernatural realms and [sees] organized religions that attempted to do so as creating needless division in the world” (Niuse 1). Moreover, he draws the reader’s attention to the way religion, racial prejudice and politics converge to exploit people, as he puts it: “In case you haven’t noticed, our unelected leaders have dehumanized millions and millions of human beings simply because of their religion and race. We wound 'em and kill 'em and torture 'em and imprison 'em all we want” (87). Having made such a proclamation, he follows it, tongue-in-cheek, with the statement: “Piece of cake” (87). In Vonnegut’s viewpoint, the way human beings are brutalized to satisfy the leaders’ lust for power is an atrocious act that can hardly be atoned for. Nonetheless, he euphemistically describes it as a “piece of cake”, attempting to sugar-coat its dreadfulness. In the very same terms, he feels sorry for the way soldiers are dehumanized “not because of their religion or race, but because of their low social class. Send 'em anywhere. Make 'em do anything. Piece of cake” (87). It is worth reiterating that Vonnegut does not reject religion per se, nor is he critical of religious people; rather he debunks any discourse that poses a threat to the welfare of humanity. Put differently, he “caution[s] his readers about the fundamental flaws in fundamentalism, religious or otherwise. Fundamentalism threatens the fate of humanity” (Thomas 31).

To cite an example of his rejection of fundamentalism, be it religious, political or pertinent to any other domain, Vonnegut quotes a letter addressed to him, implicitly hinting that the American administration of his time is as fundamentalist as al-Qaeda, emphasizing how the former twists the truth and propagates an ideal of freedom that is sham. Al-Qaeda’s appalling deeds are not more atrocious than the exploitation that is meted out on Guantanamo prisoners:

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

A man from Little Deer Isle, Maine wrote me and asked: What genuinely motivates al-Qaeda to kill and self-destruct? The president says, 'They hate our freedoms'—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other, which surely is not what has been learned from the captives being held in Guantanamo, or what he is told in his briefings. Why do the communications industry and our elected politicians allow Bush to get away with such nonsense? And how can there ever be peace, and even trust in our leaders, if the American people aren't told the truth? (Vonnegut 110)

In response to such unsettling questions, a recourse to black humour becomes Vonnegut's means of mitigating his dejection, while at the same time exposing the incompetence of those who hold the reins of power, describing "[taking] over the federal government, and hence the world, by means of a Mickey Mouse coup d'etat" (110). In Vonnegut's viewpoint, that the United States propagates and stands for democracy and freedom "matter[s] little if the reality of some people's lives contradict[s] those ideals" (Thomas 34-35). In this context, he posits socialism vis-à-vis Christianity: "Christianity and socialism alike, in fact, prescribe a society dedicated to the proposition that all men, women, and children are created equal and shall not starve" (Vonnegut 11). In so stating, he seeks to expose what he regards as the inherent falsity of both since neither works to achieve this humanistic goal to perfection, citing Stalin and Hitler as adherents to the latter. Vonnegut also quotes Marx's postulation that "religion is the opium of the people", contending that when Marx said these words in 1844 the Americans had not freed their slaves yet (12). He ultimately ponders: "Who do you imagine was more pleasing in the eyes of a merciful God back then, Karl Marx or the United States of America?" (12). Left unanswered, it is evident that, from his point of view, it is the former. In keeping with the way humanists are skeptical of religious assumptions, Vonnegut prefers to stay away from theological debates, as he contends: "How do humanists

feel about Jesus? I say of Jesus, as all humanists do, ‘If what he said is good, and so much of it is absolutely beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not? But if Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be a human being’ (80-81). Put differently, what matters to him most is the welfare of humanity.

In contradistinction to these metanarratives, Vonnegut, impelled by his altruistic motives, lays the foundations of a new made-up religion: Bokononism, named after Bokonon, whose real name is Lionel Boyd Johnson (Thomas 32). The main gist of “Bokononism is that truth is provisional, not fixed” (Allen 63), and accordingly it fosters diversity and freedom. Although Vonnegut’s explication of it is enunciated in his novel *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), *A Man Without a Country* is interspersed with quotes attributed to Bokonon, which contribute to the light-hearted and often humorous tone that Vonnegut maintains throughout the book. For example, he invites the readers to sing along with him the following calypso which he quotes at the outset of *A Man Without a Country*:

Oh, a sleeping drunkard up in Central Park,  
And a lion-hunter  
In the jungle dark,  
And a Chinese dentist,  
And a British queen--  
All fit together  
In the same machine.  
Nice, nice, very nice;  
Nice, nice, very nice;  
Nice, nice, very nice--  
So many different people  
In the same device. (ivx)

In addition to investing the text with a musical nuance, it is evidently a hymnal celebration of diversity and equity where hierarchies and demarcations dissolve<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> A rock band from Los Angeles named “Ambrosia” turned Vonnegut’s words into a song for their first album.

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

Another example of levity is discerned in his comment on man's destiny in a quote that sounds like a nursery rhyme and reads as follow:

We do, doodley do, doodley do, doodley do,  
What we must, muddily must, muddily must, muddily must;  
Muddily do, muddily do, muddily do, muddily do,  
Until we bust, bodily bust, bodily bust, bodily bust. (94)

In so stating, Vonnegut remarks that human beings must live the moment happily, taking in stride all the setbacks they are likely to encounter, and doing whatever is required from them until they meet their end. A key to happiness for Vonnegut lies in the therapeutic impact of arts, even if they are not lucrative when taken as a profession. With his typical humourous tone he states:

If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something. (24)

Not only do these words shed light on the uplifting impact of arts, but they also attest to his conviction that human beings are endowed with creative abilities by means of which they can render their lives more meaningful.

In addition to Bokonon's quotes, *A Man Without a Country* is punctuated with a wide array of illustrations that Vonnegut brings to bear on the ambient pessimism in an attempt to mitigate it. These illustrations, described by Vonnegut as "hand-lettered statements" (141), are products of Origami Express, a business partnership that he had ventured on with one of his friends: "I paint or draw pictures, and Joe makes prints of some of them, one by one" (141). For example, his optimistic stance is pronounced at the



very beginning of the book when he asserts that sooner or later, evil shall be vanquished unless the angels become members of the mafia: “There is no reason good can’t triumph over evil if only angels will get organized along the lines of the mafia” (iii). Even more optimistic is his proclamation: “I wanted all things to seem to make sense so we could all be happy, yes, instead of tense. And I made up lies, so they all fit nice, and I made this sad world a paradise” (6). In so admitting, Vonnegut seeks to find consolation in a world replete with manifestations of human precariousness. His concern for the happiness of all human beings, “so we could all be happy”, testifies to his humanism. In fact, “he really cared.... How human beings acted toward one another and the planet really mattered to him, and, whether the odds looked bad or not, he would not change his behaviour and join the crowd...in decadent self-gratification” (Davis 5). Although there are times when he gets beset with a foreboding sense of helplessness, he still clings to laughter and humour as a means of salvation, and the legacy he desires to be remembered for, as he states: “There may have been so many shocks and disappointments that the defense of humour no longer works. It may be that I have become rather grumpy because I’ve seen so many things that have offended me that I cannot deal with in terms of laughter.... All I really wanted to do was give people the relief of laughing” (129-30).

Among the other humorous statements that Vonnegut sporadically weaves into the book are: “Funniest in the world: last night I dreamed I was eating flannel cakes. When I woke up the blanket was gone” (22); “[e]volution is so creative. That’s how we got giraffes” (46), “[w]e are here on earth to fart around. Don’t let anybody tell you any different” (54); “[d]o you think Arabs are dumb? They gave us our numbers. Try doing long division with Roman numerals” (64). By including these statements, Vonnegut seeks to help his readers take a breather from their sordid existence, channeling their consciousness towards laughter.

An important metanarrative that Vonnegut seeks to relieve the people of through laughter is progress. Paradoxically as it may sound, progress comes at the expense of the suffering of the human



**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and  
Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

soul. In his writings, it is obvious that “[w]hat humans call progress has come at the expense of its soul; technological development occurs in inverse proportion to human connectedness” (Glover 194). In *A Man Without a Country*, he succinctly states: “Progress has beaten the heck out of me” (56), further explaining that “[i]t took away from [him] what a loom must have been to Ned Ludd”(56), which is the typewriter. In this context, he celebrates being a Luddite:

I have been called a Luddite. I welcome it. Do you know what a Luddite is? A person who hates newfangled contraptions. Ned Ludd was a textile worker in England at around the start of the nineteenth century who busted up a lot of new contraptions-mechanical looms that were going to put him out of work, that were going to make it impossible for him with his particular skills to feed, clothe, and shelter his family. In 1813 the British government executed by hanging seventeen men for ‘machine breaking’, as it was called, a capital crime. (55-56)

Vonnegut is thus proud of clinging to the old ways, lamenting how progress is encroaching upon humanity’s everyday life in a manner that is often detrimental. Distraught as he is, his faith in humanity’s potential to respond to the avalanche of progress does not falter. Addressing the reader and calling him/her a “miracle”, he states:

Today we have contraptions like nuclear submarines armed with Poseidon missiles that have H-bombs in their warheads. And we have contraptions like computers that cheat you out of becoming. Bill Gates says ‘Wait till you can see what your computer can become’. But it’s you who should be doing the becoming, not the damn fool computer. What you can become is the miracle you were born to be through the work that you do (55).

While Vonnegut presents “a poignant critique of the follies of man, [and] a sense of the absurdity of life” (Tally 113), he adds “an element [of] hope” to it (113).

In a similar manner, Vonnegut views technology with a pinch of salt, ascribing his skeptical stance to his being a chemistry major at Cornell University, and crediting himself with having “brought scientific thinking to literature” (Vonnegut 16). With his background in science, “Vonnegut was fascinated by the technological wonders he saw ...fascinated but also disturbed” (Allen 18). His ambivalent feelings towards the sweeping advances in technology impel him to bemoan the loss of human interaction, yet at the same time he dwells on the imperative of keeping up with the ongoing radical transformations. In a humourous analogy, he expresses the inevitability of responding to technology as follows: “I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex” (17). Vonnegut’s feelings about scientific progress “parallel his reservations about being labelled a science fiction writer” (Allen 19). This is evident when he states:

I became a so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I’d offended that I would not get credit for being a serious writer. I decided that it was because I wrote about technology, and most fine American writers know nothing about technology. I got classified as a science fiction writer simply because I wrote about Schenectady, New York.... There are huge factories in Schenectady and nothing else. (16)

Even in writing about how technology is often displacing human beings, Vonnegut’s hopeful stance persists to glisten. Although he proclaims that “anyone who has studied science and talks to scientists notices that we are in terrible danger now”, and that “[h]uman beings, past and present, have trashed the joint” (70), he believes in the ameliorative potential of humanism.

In response to the question “[d]o you know what a humanist is?”, Vonnegut underscores his sense of duty towards his fellow human beings: “We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honourably as we can without any expectation of rewards or

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and  
Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

punishments in an afterlife...We humanists serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community” (79-80). In so asserting, Vonnegut reveals his sense of obligation towards his fellow beings. For him, “humanism [is] a means for building a better world, a world beyond senseless divisions and beyond war” (Niose 2). To a great extent, it is “humanism that nourishes Vonnegut’s optimism” (2).

Prompted by his humanism, and on account of humanity’s existence on a “planet [that] is in a terrible mess” (131), he deems it necessary to apologize to his fellow human beings, particularly to the younger generation, for withstanding many follies and deceptions propagated by those in power: “I apologize to all of you who are the same age as my grandchildren. And many of you reading this are probably the same age as my grandchildren” (130). Using black humour, he draws attention to their being duped by the government, or, as he puts it, for being “royally shafted and lied to by our Baby Boomer corporations and government” (131).

Mentioning corporations, it is worth noting that on account of his first-hand experience with them, Vonnegut sees them as hazardous entities wherein individual freedom is sacrificed for professional advancement and progress. This is related to the time when, after dropping out of the graduate program in anthropology at the University of Chicago, he had to work as a publicist for the General Electric Corporation. Back then, his brother Bernard was already working there on the principle of seeding clouds with silver iodide to produce rain (Allen 4; Klinkowitz 421 ).

Against a backdrop marked by a celebration of technological breakthroughs, Vonnegut, tongue-in-cheek, pays tribute to the power of “guessing”, hailing “the leading characters” in history books as “the most enthralling and sometimes most terrifying guessers” (Vonnegut 81), and positing them in contradistinction to the real educated and enlightened ones who fall into oblivion. In his critique of how leaders often seek to keep the masses subservient, he employs black humour in exposing how they resort to guessing:

Persuasive guessing has been at the core of leadership for so long, for all of human experience so far, that it is wholly unsurprising that most of the leaders of this planet, in spite of all the information that is suddenly ours, want the guessing to go on.... Some of the loudest, most proudly ignorant guessing in the world is going on in Washington today. Our leaders are sick of all the solid information that has been dumped on humanity by research and scholarship and investigative reporting. They think that the whole country is sick of it, and they could be right....They want to put us back on the snake-oil standard. (82)

Having made such a proclamation, he proceeds to comment on how humanity bears the brunt of the decision-makers' lust for power, employing a tone charged with wry humour and irony:

Loaded pistols are good for everyone except inmates in prisons or lunatic asylums. That's correct.

Millions spent on public health are inflationary. That's correct.

Billions spent on weapons will bring inflation down. That's correct.

Dictatorships to the right are much closer to American ideals than dictatorships to the left. That's correct.

The more hydrogen bomb warheads we have, all set to go off at a moment's notice, the safer humanity is and the better off the world will be that our grandchildren will inherit. That's correct.

Industrial wastes, and especially those that are radioactive, hardly ever hurt anybody, so everybody should shut up about them. That's correct.

Industries should be allowed to do whatever they want to do: Bribe, wreck the environment just a little, fix prices, screw dumb customers, put a stop to competition, and raid the Treasury when they go broke. That's correct. That's free enterprise. And that's correct.

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

The poor have done something very wrong or they wouldn't be poor, so their children should pay the consequences. That's correct.

The United States of America cannot be expected to look after its own people. That's correct. The free market will do that. That's correct.

The free market is an automatic system of justice. That's correct. (83-85)

Having put forth all these contentions in a sardonically humorous tone, he becomes greatly alarmed about the fate of the upcoming generations: "What can be said," he asks, "to our young people, now that psychopathic personalities, which is to say persons without consciences, without senses of pity or shame, have taken all the money in the treasuries of our government and corporations, and made it all their own?" (88-89).

Though Vonnegut is apprehensive about the fate of humanity against a backdrop fraught with an avaricious lust for power, nihilism and existential conundrums, he relentlessly struggles to maintain his optimistic belief that there is still some scope for salvaging the planet and the human race through individuals who retain their humanity. This is obvious when he follows the above-mentioned statements with the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, a nineteenth-century Hungarian obstetrician who greatly reduced maternal death when he insisted that physicians wash their hands before conducting examinations: "[T]he dying stopped—imagine that! The dying stopped. He saved all those lives" (Vonnegut 92). With such a simple yet heroic gesture, Vonnegut urges humans to be like him in their altruism and wisdom, and accordingly he states: "Save our lives and your lives too. Be honourable" (93). In dwelling on the potential of saving the world and humanity, Vonnegut not only gives voice to his optimistic stance, but he also propagates his ideal of "the secular saints"; that is, "compassionate, unselfish human beings who help others and who, as he explains...make 'being alive almost worthwhile'" (Farrell 101).

If this means anything, it lends credence to his ardent humanism, by means of which he counters the impending sense of meaninglessness. Even if he shares the existentialist conviction that there is “no identifiable meaning or purpose to existence ...and [that] the workings of the world remain inscrutable –life happens unpredictably and pointlessly” (Allen 10), he does not give up on “the possibility of being human with grace and dignity” (12). In contradistinction to the ambient postmodernist fragmentation, he venerates family ties and, most importantly, extended families. “Why are so many people getting divorced today?”, Vonnegut ponders, and the answer he gives is: “It’s because most of us don’t have extended families anymore” (47-48). In so asserting, Vonnegut calls attention to the importance of extended families in alleviating the postmodernist man’s feelings of loneliness and alienation, proclaiming that “[a] husband, a wife and some kids is not a family. It’s a terribly vulnerable survival unit” (48). Prompted by his humanism, he urges people, particularly “lonely Americans” (Allen 6), to cement family ties and acknowledge the importance of an extended family, which is often subverted by modern ways of living. In the same light-hearted tone, he states: “I wish I could wave a wand, and give every one of you an extended family, make you an Ibo or a Navaho-or a Kennedy” (49). These are the examples he cites of extended families. On the other side of the spectrum, and by recourse to a mocking tone, he mentions George and Laura Bush as having their own extended family, comprised of “judges, senators, newspaper editors, lawyers, bankers” (49). The implied meaning is that they are incompetent enough to manage the affairs of the American people, and consequently they have to rely on their entourage. This is evident when he says: “They are not alone. That they are members of an extended family is one reason they are so comfortable. And I would really, over the long run, hope America would find some way to provide all of our citizens with extended families-a large group of people they could call on for help” (49).

In another instance, and as a staunch humanist, he laments the state of affairs in America of his own day, stating that “there is

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reason” (71), ascribing that to the way Americans are corrupted by power: “Because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts us absolutely” (71). Having said so, he tempers his critique by employing black humour, and calling his fellow humans “chimpanzees who get crazy drunk on humour” (71). He calls upon Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln, whom he regards as iconic figures for their ability to employ humour to make the American people aware of their own foibles: “Both of them made the American people laugh at themselves and appreciate really important, really moral jokes” (75). To further criticize his own times, he believes that they would have had inexhaustible subject matter to deride had they witnessed the America of his own day: “Imagine what they would have to say today!” (75). The more life tightens its grip on him, the more he appreciates the curative potential of humour. It becomes a protective shield against impending perils, as he puts it: “Humour is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself” (129). Although he is wary that life might get too tragic to be assuaged with jokes and laughter, he is content with being remembered for his humour. In this context, he also mentions Twain’s relentless endeavour to cling to laughter as a defense mechanism:

Finally, you get just too tired, and the news is too awful, and humour doesn't work anymore. Somebody like Mark Twain thought life was quite awful but held the awfulness at bay with jokes and so forth, but finally he couldn't do it anymore....

It may be that I am no longer able to joke-that it is no longer a satisfactory defense mechanism. Some people are funny, and some are not. I used to be funny, and perhaps I'm not anymore. There may have been so many shocks and disappointments that the defense of humour no longer works. It may be that I have become rather grumpy because I've seen so many things that have offended me that I cannot deal with in terms of laughter.... This may have



happened already. I really don't know what I'm going to become from now on.... If a hundred years from now people are still laughing. I'd certainly be pleased. (129-30)

It thus becomes evident that in *A Man Without a Country*, "the chief defense against despair, as elsewhere in Vonnegut's work, is humour" (Allen 50). Believing that the "biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments" (Allen 50), Vonnegut acknowledges that making jokes is no easy endeavour: "It's damn hard to make jokes work....[A] joke is like building a mousetrap from scratch. You have to work pretty hard to make the thing snap when it is supposed to snap" (128).

Amidst a disintegrating postmodernist world where nothing "remains stable and fixed, [and any] structure ... is subject to constant shifts and deferrals, entropy and erasure" (Huber 80), Vonnegut does not spare an effort to counter his dismal milieu with a light-hearted tone. While "Vonnegut's staunch humanism and idealism have ... found immense success with an audience eager to read something that is optimistic whilst also retaining a level of political engagement" (Simmons xiii), at the same time they "positioned him at odds with an increasingly postmodernist ... critical fraternity throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s" (xi). Although readers and critics alike have often "found it difficult to discern 'the real Vonnegut' amidst the serious polemics and the famously dark humour, and between the science fiction stories and the opinion pieces" (Glover 195), he is deservedly remembered for his optimistic stance: "Central to much of Vonnegut's output is the notion of hope" (195). With his humanism reigning supreme, he invests his readers with a similar "notion of hope".

In the concluding lines of *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut quotes his conversation with the graphic artist Saul Steinberg, wherein the latter distinguishes between the artist who responds to his own art, vis-à-vis the one who "responds to life itself" (Vonnegut 135). Vonnegut is definitely one who responds to it, with all its ebbs and flows. In a postmodernist world where



**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and  
Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

many presumed certainties and long-taken-for-granted truths are overturned, Vonnegut's stance becomes reassuring.

To conclude, this paper has endeavoured to shed light on how Vonnegut tempers his critique of the postmodernist world in *A Man Without a Country* by resorting to laughter and black humour. Employing a tone of levity, he battles his way out of desolation, unremittingly struggling to maintain an optimistic tone against a backdrop fraught with absurdities, horrors and the threat of human annihilation. Every time his optimistic stance starts to wane, his humanism comes to his rescue, reminding him that some humans still retain some potential to rebuild their already disintegrating world. Often tragic and humourous at the same time, the essays of which the book is comprised represent a generic hybrid that gives voice to Vonnegut's darkly humourous yet optimistic outlook on life.

### Works Cited

- Abele, Elizabeth. "The Journey Home in Kurt Vonnegut's World War II Novels". *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 67-88
- Allen, William Rodney. *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*. University of South Carolina, 1991.
- Davis, Todd. "Flabbergasted". *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 3-9.
- Farrell, Susan E. "Art, Domesticity, and Vonnegut's Women". *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 91-111.
- Freese, Peter. "The Critical Reception of Kurt Vonnegut". *Literature Compass*, vol.1, no.14. 2012. 1-14.

<https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00862.x>

- Green, Daniel. "A World Worth Laughing At: 'Catch-22' and The Humour of Black Humour." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1995. 186-96. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533048>.
- Glover, Chris. "Somewhere in There Was Springtime": Kurt Vonnegut, His Apocalypses, and His Post-9/11 Heirs. *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 193-212.
- Giannakopoulos, Giorgos. "Out of the Ruins of Dresden: Destructive Plasticity in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*". *Ruins in the Literary and Cultural Imagination*. Edited by Efterpi Mitsi, et al. Palgrave, 2019. 145-58.
- Huber, Irmtraud. *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies*. Palgrave, 2014.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester University Press, 1984.
- McCoppin, Rachel. "God Damn It, You've Got to Be Kind": War and Altruism in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut. *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 47-65.
- Mitsi, Efterpi, et al., eds. *Ruins in the Literary and Cultural Imagination*. Palgrave, 2019.
- . Introduction. *Ruins in the Literary and Cultural Imagination*. Edited by Efterpi Mitsi, et al. Palgrave, 2019. 1-20
- Nilsson, Johan. *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion*. Palgrave, 2013.
- Niose, David A. "Kurt Vonnegut Saw Humanism as Way to Build a Better World: [ALL Edition]." *Telegram & Gazette*, Apr 13, 2007. 1-3. *ProQuest*,

**Kurt Vonnegut's *A Man Without a Country*: Searching for Hope and Optimism in a Postmodernist World**

**Dr. Jaidaa Gawad Hamada**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

- <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/kurt-vonnegut-saw-humanism-as-way-build-better/docview/268989399/se-2>.
- O'Neill, Patrick. *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour/Narrative/Reading*. University of Toronto Press, 1990.
- Klinkowitz, Jerome. "Kurt Vonnegut". *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*. Edited by David Seed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 420-27
- Schulz, Max F. *Black Humour of the Sixties. A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World*. Ohio University Press, 1973.
- Seed, David, ed. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- . "Black Humour Fiction". *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*. Edited by David Seed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 159-170
- . Introduction. *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*. Edited by David Seed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 1-8
- Simmons, David, ed. *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Palgrave, 2009.
- Simmons, David. Introduction. *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. xi-xv
- Tally, Robert T., Jr. "Apocalypse in the Optative Mood: Galápagos, or, Starting Over". *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 113-131.
- Thomas, Paul L. "'No Damn Cat, and No Damn Cradle': The Fundamental Flaws in Fundamentalism According to Vonnegut". *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. Edited by David Simmons. Palgrave, 2009. 27-45.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *A Man Without a Country*. Random House, 2007.

Welsh, Jim. "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1922–2007): A Tribute". *The Journal of American Culture* , vol. 31, no.3. September 2008. 318-19.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2008.00680.x>