

Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*:  
A Contemplative Exercise in Good Citizenship

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## Abstract in Norwegian

Denne oppgaven omhandler romanen *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) av Kurt Vonnegut, og hvordan det å lese den blir en kontemplativ øvelse i medborgerskap. Ofte omtalt som Vonneguts mest eksperimentelle og splittende roman, og den umiddelbare etterfølgeren av hans magnum opus *Slaughterhouse-Five*, er *Breakfast* en bok som er både elsket og hatet. Romanen er en eksperimentell postmoderne satire av det amerikanske forbrukersamfunnet. Dessuten retter *Breakfast* seg mot så mange ulike sosiale, politiske og miljømessige uretter, og kanskje spesielt hvordan disse problemene vikler seg sammen, at den representerer en betraktning av selve den menneskelige tilstand i postmoderniteten. Mer dyptgående stiller boken spørsmål ved forholdet mellom fortelling og virkelighet, og kritiserer hvordan fortellingene våre, og vår forveksling av fiksjon og virkelighet, er roten til mye menneskelig lidelse. Vi kan oppsummere romanens litt merkelig, men desto mer tankevekkende normative holdning ved å sitere Vonneguts kunngjøring i romanen: «Jeg valgte å avstå fra fortellerkunst. Jeg ville skrive om livet. Hver person ville være like viktig som alle andre. Alle fakta ville gis samme vekt» (s. 210, min oversettelse). Denne uttalelsen peker både til romanens selvrefleksive og politiske art, og jeg argumenterer for at denne slags kontemplasjon er noe som kreves av vårt samtidige medborgerskap, og at det å lese *Breakfast* blir en øvelse i dette.

Til forskjell fra mer tradisjonelle satirer så har ikke *Breakfast* svarene på problemene den fremhever. I stedet bes leseren inn i kampen, side om side med Vonnegut, og må komme frem til egne oppfatninger og slutninger. Dette skjer i stor grad gjennom romanens gjennomsyrende metafiksjon, og at den fortelles med en ekstremt upåvirket og objektiv stemme, som i møte med livets brutalitet blir både mørk komedie, men samtidig empatisk og medfølende. Romanen bevarer sin kontemplative og politiske vitalitet på tross av sin alder, og jeg argumenter for at den fortjener økt oppmerksomhet nettopp fordi den resonnerer så godt med i vår tid. 2022, 100-årsjubileet til Vonneguts fødsel, og et år før 50-årsjubileet til utgivelsen av *Breakfast*, virker for meg som en passende tid å revitalisere en av Amerikas store postmoderne forfattere.

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And most off all, thank you to Sydneshaugen Lunch Club. I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to spend this past year with. One rarely experiences such a wholesome sense of comradery, kindness, helpfulness, and fun. It is something special to feel so comfortable and at home with such a diverse group of people. I look forward to meeting all of you again, wherever that may be.

- Edward Svihus

While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

Eugene Debbs

I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other.... Nothing would be left out.

Kurt Vonnegut

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## Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut's 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions* is both childlike and profound in its sweeping criticism and examination of contemporary American life. Vonnegut observes with dispassionate objectivity and outrageous silliness his society and himself. In the novel, from here on referred to as *Breakfast*, the problems of the world, and Vonnegut's contemplations of them, intricately entangle with each other, revealing a complex and chaotic postmodern reality. This is done with an ironic unsubtlety, crude drawings, black humor, and a highly experimental metafiction. This was a style Vonnegut found great success with; his writing becoming an early exemplar of literary American Postmodernism. As a form of coping, ironic distance is understandable. Yet, it risks propelling us into a fatalism which does not motivate productive change in society. This is not how I read Vonnegut. He masks great compassion in glib irony, what critic Robert Scholes referred to as him putting "a bitter coating on sugar pills" (as cited in Vonnegut, 1974, p. xxv). This turn of phrase is an apt description of the seemingly dichotomous relationship between Vonnegut's bleak subject matter and style, and his underlying sentimentality. There is an uncanny dissonance between this sentimentality and the potential for futility in Vonnegut's work, and *Breakfast* in particular. By disguising the earnestness of his project, he invites the reader in to struggle alongside him. This is why I call reading Vonnegut a contemplative exercise.

English Professor Lawrence R. Broer calls *Breakfast* Vonnegut's "spiritual manifesto," focusing on Vonnegut's "newfound optimism" and imagination of the individual's responsibility and freedom to take control of their destiny (2011, p. 84). I agree with the label but disagree with the reasoning. *Breakfast* is a very bleak satire of American society, its consumerism, individualism, decline in meaningful social belonging, deterioration of once

hopeful historical prospects, new forms of environmental pollution, racism, sexism, homophobia, war, and so many more societal ills as to encompass a pessimistic treatment of the human condition itself. Instead, I read the novel as a spiritual manifesto in two related senses, as “an act of good citizenship” and as a participatory exercise. “Manifesto” is an apt descriptor of *Breakfast* precisely because the novel invites and challenges its readers to participate in the same contemplative struggles which Vonnegut is struggling with. And “spiritual” is a fitting expression of the novel’s existential condemnation of the current state of American society, and its sentimental longing for meaningful social belonging. When Vonnegut says in a 1973 interview that his motivation for writing is that it should be “an act of good citizenship,” we are wise to suspect he means something more than his stories merely containing some civic lesson and morality (Vonnegut, 1988, p. 72). There is something deeper, more “meta” at play. Literature as “an act of good citizenship” is more than a metaphor. After all, there is no definitive separation between that in humanity which pursues literature and that which pursues social belonging. We understand ourselves through artistic production and reception—literature generating, validating, and challenging our conceptions of society and ourselves.

A mistake I made early on in this project was reading *Breakfast* in search of answers, as one may expect from more traditional corrective satires. Know upfront that *Breakfast* does not have the answers. In *Breakfast* normativity is both established and subverted, often through the contrast between a dispassionate objective narrator, and an incredibly bleak subject matter which implicates the readers judgement. This creates an uncanny space where the reader is implicitly invited to fill in the gaps. My interpretation is that the meaning of *Breakfast* is not to be persuaded, but to participate in its struggle. The novel is



corrective only to the extent you agree that such participatory struggle is good for society, and normative in its broad, even extreme, democratic, egalitarian, and empathetic ethos.

That is not to say that anything goes, we are still bound by the words on the page. But, by exploring the way the novel engages the reader in a participatory process of meaning making we can better appreciate its unique appeal, as it is precisely in the contemplative and self-critical engagement between novel and reader that much of the pleasure of *Breakfast* lies. To extend the metaphor of the title of this thesis, *Breakfast* is a dumbbell with which we may exercise our good citizenship. How you use the dumbbell will vary, which muscles you exercise, how often and efficiently you do so, etc. You might even injure yourself with it or relegate it to that of a paperweight. However, the dumbbell is still a good tool for exercising. And *Breakfast* is a thoughtful exploration of the human condition, and contemplation of profound questions concerning social belonging. Therefore, this thesis reads Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* as a contemplative exercise in good citizenship.

The chapters of this thesis are organized by a selection of three theoretical concepts which function as discussion-ins and highlight different ways reading *Breakfast* is a contemplative exercise in good citizenship. These are in order, chapter one: metafiction, chapter two: satire, and chapter three: history. In the first chapter I argue that *Breakfast's* experimental metafiction, drawing attention to the novel's artificiality, confronts the reader with the distinction between fiction and the real world. This is a central moral stance of *Breakfast*, that much of society's cruelty results from people acting the way characters do in made up stories. In the second chapter I problematize the novel's status as a satire. *Breakfast* is told with an uncanny and humorous moral ambiguity. Because of this some critics read in it a political apathy. However, I argue that this postmodern recognition of the

potential of futility makes the novel's satire even more philosophically satisfying and relevant for contemporary civic contemplations. In the third chapter, I discuss the novel's countercultural treatment of history and its tearing down of American metanarratives. Furthermore, I explore the novel's historical consciousness. Vonnegut reminisces a past outlook on American society which is no longer available to him, contrasting childhood's civic optimism with a contemporary sense of futility. As such the novel explores the postmodern condition of a "loss of historicity" (Jameson, 1991, p. 159) which makes envisioning the purposeful political undertaking towards a better future all the more difficult.

The three main chapters are preceded by a few shorter preparatory sections. First, I discuss Vonnegut's place in the literary canon, as well as the vitality of what is considered his most experimental and divisive novel. Then there is a section on theorizing citizenship, literatures potential for civic contemplation, and the legacy of censorship campaigns against Vonnegut. Next, I comment on the tradition of reader-response theory and establish an explicit and excited focus on the reader. Focus on the reader transitions to a focus on the narrator. In *Breakfast*, author and narrator share both name and biography, and this requires some explication. Finally, I conclude the introductory section with a block citation from the novel, what I call *Breakfast's* "head-clearing mission statement." This citation captures the novel's internal, contemplative, and participatory ethos, and it will follow us like a red thread throughout this thesis.

## The Legacy and Vitality of Kurt Vonnegut and his Experimental and Divisive Novel *Breakfast of Champions*

What is Vonnegut's position in the literary canon? 2022, the 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of Vonnegut's birth, seems like an appropriate time to ask this question. Academic

treatments of Vonnegut's authorship abound. The massive critical and commercial success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) catapulted him into celebrity status, with profiles in *Life* magazine and *60 Minutes*, he was a “hip and rumpled guru who could explain members of the Woodstock generation to their parents” (Sumner, 2011, ch. 7, n.p.). By the end of his career, he had published 14 novels, many more short stories, a few plays, several non-fiction essay collections, numerous open letters, and participated in various public speaking engagements, such as through the anti-war movement, and numerous college commencement speeches. His entire novelistic authorship is still in print. And perhaps most importantly, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been a standard in many US high school English curricula for several decades. With the backing of public education institutions, countless American citizens have read Vonnegut.

And yet, when one surveys the academic landscape, reads anthologies of American postmodern literature, and enters into the Vonnegut-world, one senses “a nagging [...] defensiveness or even inferiority among many Vonnegutians” (Tally, 2012, p. 103). Professor of English Robert Tally explores Vonnegut’s position in the literary canon in his article “Canon-Foder: Vonnegut in the Library of America.” Vonnegut was a countercultural icon, who himself worried that he was underappreciated. Tally argues that perhaps scholars of Vonnegut like to imagine themselves in a similar vein, “bucking the trends of mainstream [academia]” (2012, p. 103). Or perhaps it is Vonnegut's sophomoric appeal, his concern with the “big questions” one commonly stops asking by adulthood, such as “what is the purpose of life?”, and “why are some people rich and others poor?” After all his being widely read in high school might cement his place in the popular culture, but it can very well undermine the status of his authorship as juvenile.

In his early career Vonnegut was written off as a sci-fi author of “pulp fiction” due to his writing about time travel, aliens, robots, etc., and being published in “slick magazines” (Klinkowitz, 1977, pp. 83-85). You need only be acquainted with the ever sour, self-caricature of Kilgore Trout in *Breakfast* to begin this imagination of Vonnegut. Vonnegut himself comments on this snobbery of the critic-class in his 1965 essay “Science Fiction.” Having been put in the “file drawer labeled science fiction” against his will, he would like out “particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal” (1974, p. 1). As an early postmodern novelist, Vonnegut’s avant-garde style, and in particular his penchant towards vulgar language put off early conservative critics. His authorship exudes a “reluctant postmodernism” (Tally, 2011, p. 7), as if he is straddling two literary as well as historical and moral eras. He is stylistically ironic, telling black comedic stories which challenge America's metanarratives of history, moral superiority, and scientific progress. He intimately experienced one of the most horrific scenes of WWII and lived through countless other American atrocities, such as the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and the seemingly endless wars in Vietnam and the middle east. And yet, under all of Vonnegut's sarcastic condemnation, there is a heartfelt sincerity and compassion for humanity. Perhaps it is the dissonance between the darkness in Vonnegut's stories and his underlying sincerity, sentimentality and compassion which put off later critics. That seems to be the case with English Professor Steven Weisenburger (1995), whose criticism of Vonnegut we consider, and attempt to refute in chapter two on satire.

Regardless of Vonnegut’s negative reception by early conservative critics, his perceived lack of appreciation by later critics, or the inferiority complex of some of his literary defenders, the status of the canon itself has in recent history come under scrutiny.

Tally (2012) subverts the debate of Vonnegut's canonization all together by presenting a contemporary history of the western canon as "either entirely abandoned as irrelevant or expanded to the point that it really cannot be thought of as a canon at all" (p. 112). There is a fitting irony in this story, for just as Vonnegut "makes it" by being canonized by the prestigious Library of America publishing house, the canon itself is exposed as a ruse. The point is underscored well in Tally's quippy remark, which simultaneously hints at the civic functions of a literary canon: "Would that the nation cared so much about required or recommended reading today" (p. 112).

There will be disagreement concerning Vonnegut's place in the canon, just as there is debate concerning the status of the canon itself. However, what is more generally agreed upon is the divisive status of *Breakfast* specifically. The "most obviously experimental of all of [Vonnegut's] novels," none other having "provoked such strong and diverse reactions" (Morse, 2009, pp. 41-42). It is a novel "critics love to hate so much that they devote a disproportionate amount of space to denigrating it" writes English professor Donald Morse in his article "The 'Black Frost' Reception of Kurt Vonnegut's Fantastic Novel *Breakfast of Champions* (1973)" (2009, p. 41). Perhaps then it is in a jokingly-pragmatic spirit that Vonnegut himself gave the novel a C-average grade, then again perhaps he meant it (Vonnegut, 1981, ch. 18, n.p.).

The follow-up to Vonnegut's most commercially successful and highly regarded novel *Slaughterhouse-5*, *Breakfast* has been considered by many a low point in Vonnegut's authorship (Marvin, 2002, p. 11; Tomedi, 2013, p. 78). Furthermore, other critics attack *Breakfast* outright because of a perceived apathetic philosophy (Robbins, 2016), its self-indulgence (Cowart, 1990, p. 173), or its "men's room" vulgarity (Weisenburger, 1995, p. 93). I answer these criticisms in time and attempt to flip them on their head in service of my

argument. In this respect this thesis is a polemic of *Breakfast*: an argument in favor of its being more widely read. For, if it is the case that people, both popularly and in literary studies, are not reading *Breakfast* that is a considerable loss. A loss because, as I will argue, *Breakfast* resonates so well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Good Citizenship and Book Burning

“Good citizenship” is a broad and conspicuous concept in the history of western political philosophy. What it means to be a good citizen and the role of a virtuous citizenry in the creation of a good society are ageless questions which resurface in similar and different ways for each generation. As such it is a subject ripe for literary exploration. The classical discussions of good citizenship, going back to the Greek and Roman statesmen, relate the citizen's rights and responsibilities to their society (Banyan, 2016). They argue for which civic virtues are most important, which habits promote said virtues, and how a society can foster them. Examples of civic virtues are honesty, bravery, justice, and equality. These virtues enable individuals to cooperate in service to a greater purpose. In ancient times, the city-state, in modern times the nation-state, and today arguably an extended conceptual notion of liberal democracy itself.

This is what cultural historian David Thayer (2017) calls the political theoretician's aspiration to do no more than “paint a pretty picture of the good citizen” (p. 4). This fear, that civic theory has become disconnected from society's actors, along with a more general fear that “the concept and practice of citizenship... appear to be suffering a deep crisis” (p. vi), motivates his essay “What Is the Use of an Ethical Theory of Citizenship?”, a few propositions from which are helpful for thinking about reading as a civic exercise. First is that “theorizing citizenship at its best is nothing but an extension and clarification of the ordinary act of self-interpretation that is incumbent upon all of us” (p. 3). We can imagine

such “ordinary self-interpretations” as the child's reflexive inquiries of the kind “what is the purpose of life?” or “why are some people poor, while others are rich?” Thunder is framing the discussions of citizenship with an egalitarian, democratic and anti-elitist ethic.

This attention on contemporaneous self-reflection is not to say that the West's Greek and Roman heritage is not relevant, it is. We cannot escape our historically constructed self-understanding. It is what gives shape and meaning to our self-conceptions. There are of course mores of good citizenship within both non-western and non-democratic societies. Vonnegut, having studied anthropology in graduate school, is well aware of this. In fact, several of his stories, *Breakfast* included, satirize American society and its self-importance through a culturally relativist mode of satire. However, for the purposes of reading Vonnegut and the argument of this thesis, it makes sense to start one's thinking within the western democratic tradition. Considering *Breakfast* as a reflection upon citizenship, it should not surprise us that the novel begins with a treatment of this exact history. In a shrewd satirical move, Vonnegut flips the typically validating and constructive quality of history on its head. Instead of being a framework which helps us understand ourselves, it is a cause for our confusion. Vonnegut likens the American iconography of the flag, “*E pluribus unum*,” and the “truncated pyramid with a radiant eye” found on US paper money to “baroque trash [...] the result of playfulness on the part of the founding fathers of the nation” (p. 9). This satire, clearing the way for new understandings of what it means to be an American citizen, has a “people's history” feel to it. And yet it is important to acknowledge the novel, and this thesis's reading of it, as a product of that same western history. *Breakfast* is a novel about a specifically American experience. Despite that, I argue that its value has a universality far beyond the American. Furthermore, the USA as global cultural hegemon sets the agenda for many of the same concerns Vonnegut struggled with

in 1973, all over the globe today (Wiesen, 2020). Had Vonnegut been only praising of American culture, or in some other way participated in American supremacy, then using American hegemony as the basis for recommending it would of course be morally bankrupt. However, as will become crystal clear, Vonnegut's treatment of America is anything but salutary. And any reader who can draw a parallel between *Breakfast's* America and their own society will certainly find much to consider in their own self-reflections of what it means to be a good citizen. The novel's preface challenges "white Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans" (p. 5) to question the culture that has been put into their heads. In our contemporary globalized world, it is perhaps fitting to expand the project to non-Americans who imitate white Americans as well.

Thunder underscores that "human beings are reflective and reflexive by nature" (p. 5), and that when civic philosophizing is segregated to the halls of academia or government, it ceases to be vital. For a theory of good citizenship to be useful it must relate to, and even be created within the lives of its practitioners. That is to say, you and me. This framework is radical in that it elevates the citizenries' participation into the construction of theory. It is after all they who act out citizenship in practice.

Vonnegut cared deeply about his relationship with his audience and believed in the artist's obligation to his society, saying in his 1973 interview that he considered writing "an act of good citizenship, or an attempt at any rate, to be a good citizen" (1988, p. 72). In 1989 he writes in a private letter that "as becomes more obvious every day, good citizenship is highly unpopular (Vonnegut, 2012, n.p.). Between these two citations we find a struggle. It is a struggle between what Vonnegut wants for his country, and what his country gives him in return. This struggle is manifest in *Breakfast*, which understood as such is a novelistic coming to terms with what belonging to your society means. The American promises and



civic virtues Vonnegut learnt in “junior civics [...] at School 43 in Indianapolis” (Vonnegut, 1974, p. 274), versus the complex and often grim realities of today. To give this picture some color, 1973 is 18 years into the Vietnam war, and the height of the Watergate scandal, for many Americans an era defined by a loss of innocence (Meyer, 1982).

That civic loss of innocence, which *Breakfast* expresses with equal parts black humor and compassion, resonates through to today. Whether it is because of the failure of humanity to act on climate change, 20 years of American imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan, historic income inequality leading to historic levels of political apathy, or a more general and pervasive sense of neoliberal futility. In his seminal book *Why Read the Classics?* (2000) novelist and literary theoretician Italo Calvino posits his rule #13 for defining a classic work of literature: “A classic is a work which relegates the noise of the present to a background hum, which at the same time the classics cannot exist without” (p. 8). This is how I experience reading *Breakfast*. It has that uncanny feel of both classical insight and fresh relevancy. A persuasive, if depressing case for Vonnegut's position in the canon of American literature, is the historical and ongoing censorship campaigns waged against him by reactionary and conservative American school boards and parent-teacher associations. I can hardly imagine a greater testament to the vitality and importance of Vonnegut's authorship.

Reading is an invitation to share in the thoughts of people from different cultures and eras. Thus, reading is a powerful tool for expanding one's understanding of the world, for training one's empathy and contemplating good citizenship. Therefore, literacy education is a primary goal of the open and free society, and censorship is an ambition of those who oppose it. “You have insulted me, and I am a good citizen, and I am very real. Yours truly, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.” (Vonnegut, 2012). So ends Vonnegut's letter from 1973 to

Charles McCarthy, chairman of the School Board of Drake, North Dakota. The same schoolboard made national news earlier that year by burning a class-set of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, finding its contents “objectionable.” *Breakfast* suffered a similar fate, its contents being even more explicitly vulgar, profane, and “anti-American.” As late as 1995 it was labeled “pornographic trash” and attempted banned by the Monmouth School District in Illinois (Cahill, 2021). In 2022, American school boards again make news by banning books from their libraries. This time the “objectionable” WWII novel which has grabbed the headlines is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Spiegelman and Vonnegut are in good company<sup>1</sup>.

Earlier in the letter Vonnegut presents himself and his family in a most wholesome fashion, rightly pointing out that his novels are not “sexy” and that instead they “beg that people be kinder and more responsible than they often are.” To the charge that his novels are profane, he can only agree, but that is only because “people speak coarsely in real life.” A major theme of *Breakfast* is the distinction between fiction and reality, and the ways in which our stories may help or harm us. Citizenship is the fiction by which we belong to a nation, and by which we belong to each other. In *Breakfast's* America that fiction is going “defunct,” the “sense of place, nourishing rituals, opportunities for human-scaled enterprise” (Sumner, 2011, ch.7, n.p.) are being crushed under consumerism, individualism, and the anti-civic urges of people like Charles McCarthy. The mistake McCarthy has made is quite simple on Vonnegut's account, continuing from the letter:

I read in the newspaper that your community is mystified by the outcry from all over the country about what you have done. Well, you have discovered that Drake is a part of American civilization, and your fellow Americans can't stand it that you have behaved in such an uncivilized way. Perhaps you will learn from this that books are

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<sup>1</sup> Visit [The Banned Books Project @Carnegie Melon University](#) and [The American Library Association Banned & Challenged Books website](#) for directories and resources on banned books, including *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast* and *Maus*.

sacred to free men for very good reasons, and that wars have been fought against nations which hate books and burn them. If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own. (Vonnegut, 2012, n.p.)

Vonnegut confronts the community of Drake, North Dakota with their belonging to America, to their very citizenship; and he confronts the schoolboard chairmen with the reality of himself: “I am very real.” This proclamation of flesh and blood “realness” turns out to be central to Vonnegut's moral and literary convictions. That Americans treat each other poorly because they in some way conflate reality with fiction.

There is a civic quality to the relationship between author and reader. A paradoxical quality to be sure, as both activities are solitary, yet both reach out in search of human connection, to share and challenge the thoughts of others. This is what I argue Vonnegut does in writing *Breakfast*; he is reflecting upon himself as a person and a citizen, upon citizenship more generally, and even upon these reflections themselves. Literary authorship in general, and particularly the autobiographical fabulation of *Breakfast*, becoming itself a proclamation that “I am very real.” This is also what the reader is invited to do when they read *Breakfast*—to reflect upon their society, themselves, and their self-reflections.

Vonnegut, in his address to the P.E.N. Conference of 1973, an NGO promoting literature and free expression, put it a slightly different way, proclaiming that the purpose of authors is “to make mankind aware of itself, in all its complexity, and to dream its dreams” (Vonnegut, 1974, p. 228). This is one of literature's most powerful effects. If you agree that theories of good citizenship depend on human self-reflection, as Thunder argues, then you have reason to believe that literature has a powerful ability to aid civic contemplations. The contents of civic self-reflections will be as diverse as the citizens who participate in them, and the free and open society must therefore promote literacy and free expression, and

resist the attraction of moral certainty which once again cranes its censorious neck. In this ethical and historical situation, I argue that reading *Breakfast* is an excellent contemplative exercise in good citizenship. We therefore turn our attention to the one who will be doing the contemplating, the reader.

## Y-O-U the Reader

The argument that reading *Breakfast* is an *exercise* in good citizenship implies that something happens to you when you read *Breakfast*. Furthermore, the concept of good citizenship implies that the reading we are concerned with is not some ivory tower elitist endeavor, but instead that of “any old reader” (Harkin, 2005, p. 416). There is something exciting and even liberating in the contemplation of your role as reader in the creation of a text's meaning. It is an awareness which Vonnegut's metafiction and defamiliarization expertly evokes, sentencing the reader to a transactional process, a back and forth of self-reflection and critical encounters with the text. To appreciate reading and analyzing literature in this way I take inspiration from the theoretical tradition of reader-response theory.

Professor of communication Patricia Harkin's article “The Reception of Reader-Response Theory” presents a concise history of its rise in the 1960's and 1970's, its theoretical, practical as well as political ambitions, and its subsequent normalization and loss of interest. Principally concerned with what happens when “human beings engage in a process call[ed] *reading*,” the theoretical position of reader-response theory is that it is the reader that makes meaning (Harkin, p. 411). To understand this, we can consider an opposing response to the intentional fallacy, the problem of judging a text by assuming the author's intent, which plagued the English departments of the past. The New Critics believed they could interpret the intrinsic meaning of a text by positivistic methods,

narrowing their field of vision as far as possible to the text alone, disregarding history, culture, and certainly the reader's affective response (Parker, 2015, p. 331). However, the New Critics still based their interpretations of a text on their responses, and their positivism soon fell out of fashion. In fact, as Harkin argues, “virtually everything that literary theory does today depends from the premise that readers make meaning” (2005, p. 420). In the 60’s and 70’s scholars of culture and literature imagined a future of “boundless possibility”, where interpretations could channel the many liberatory movements of those decades (2005, p. 414). Perhaps it should not bother us too much that reader-response theory has been normalized to the point of disappearing; in fact, it may be seen as a great success for those who care about “the reader” when thinking about and judging literature. This seems to be the contemporary situation when Robert Dale Parker writes in *How to Interpret Literature*, that “all criticism is reader-response criticism” and he introduces the topic by relating it to all the previous chapters on other theoretical schools of inquiry (2015, pp. 330-332). However, one thing at least is lost when reader-response criticism becomes taken for granted, and that is the excitement which “the reader” once elicited in literary criticism, “the productive emotions that attended to the notion that readers make meaning” (Harkin, p. 413). Once upon a time scholars of literature imagined with “populist excitement” a future of “boundless possibility” in which the diverse interpretations of ordinary readers would channel the many liberatory movements of the age (Harkin, p. 414).

As this thesis seeks to understand an effect of reading *Breakfast*, it makes sense to establish an explicit focus on the reader. Moreover, this focus on the reader is metafictionally mirrored in the novel through its direct address to the reader, and narratively through Dwayne Hoover's solipsistic break from reality being triggered by reading a novel which informs him that:

You are an experiment by the Creator of the Universe. You are the only creature in the entire Universe who has free will. You are the only one who has to figure out what to do next—and why. Everybody else is a robot, a machine.... They have committed every possible atrocity and every possible kindness unfeelingly, automatically, inevitably, to get a reaction from Y-O-U. (pp. 253-6)

It has been my experience that reading *Breakfast* through the conceptualization that it is the reader who creates meaning is exciting. To spend 250 pages contemplating your relationship to the story, and the individual's relationship to the world, and then being confronted with the illustration “Y-O-U” (p. 256)<sup>2</sup>, that is exciting, and that excitement is both motivating and productive. The confrontation with oneself becoming a recognition of responsibility, and contributing to the novel’s participatory, even liberatory ambition. Real life and fiction are not the same, and *Breakfast*’s fiction challenges us to see one another as real people and not “bit-part players in [...] made up tales” (p. 210).

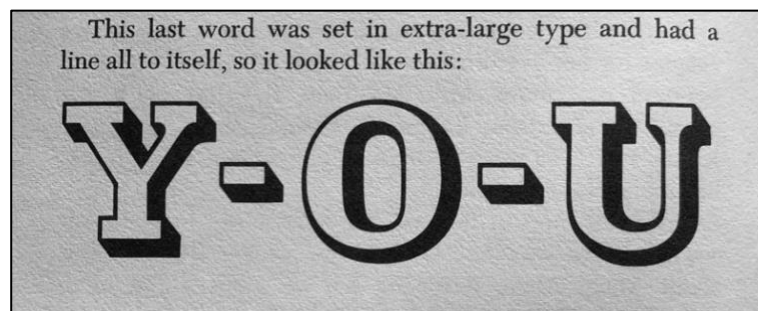


Figure 1, Y-O-U, p. 256

Just as there are indefinitely many Y-O-U's, there are indefinitely many kinds of readers and kinds of reading. Every reading will be unique, the meaning dependent on the history, beliefs, personality, etc. of the reader. You can read *Breakfast* for an easy laugh. Or

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<sup>2</sup> *Breakfast* is an illustrated novel, “with drawing by the author” as it says in the novel's front matter. All the illustrations in this thesis are by Kurt Vonnegut himself and taken from the 1973 Delacorte edition which is cited throughout. The “Y-O-U” illustration is an exception in that it is typographical in nature and not a drawing done in marker.

you can read like an anthropologist, searching for lessons about the human species. Like a historian, puzzling out an American self-portrait of the 1970s, and how that history ripples through our contemporary era. Or even as a psychoanalyst, investigating how humans struggle to find meaning in an absurd reality dominated by consumerism. All these readings, surface-level or complex, create meaning within the paradigm of the reader. This is the liberatory effect Harkin misses, and which I experience when I think about how *my* reading affects the meaning of *Breakfast*.

This creation of meaning intersects with our conception of what it means to belong to our society and what we imagine as good citizenship. Pardon the cliché, it is a kind of dialogue, between text, reader, and context, in which meaning exists. Within this emphasis on the reader there is a political ambition, however that ambition is anything but dogmatic, Vonnegut never giving cut and dry answers to the problems he confronts. In this respect reading *Breakfast* is like a conversation, more concerned with questions and contemplations than it is with answers. We discuss this feature more closely in the next chapter on metafiction.

The takeaway here is that the notion that the reader is the one who creates meaning is exciting, and this excitement motivates this thesis's investigation. How reading *Breakfast*, a fifty-year-old, experimental, and rather strange novel, becomes an exercise through which the reader may contemplate and self-reflect upon what it means to be a good citizen. Next let us consider the reader's natural opposition, the narrator.

### Vonnegut the Narrator

*Breakfast* is generally considered Vonnegut's most experimental novel (Morse, 2009). Particularly the nature of its narration, which in a metafictional double action is told by "Vonnegut" as if commenting from behind his typewriter, and Vonnegut as a character

within the story. *Breakfast* cleverly blends the wholly fictional, with the credibly historical and scientific, and the intimately autobiographical. It is as much about the man who is telling it, as it is about the story he is telling. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that *Breakfast* is mainly about stories themselves. The act of telling stories, and of believing them, being a central theme of the novel. The title, a popular American commercial slogan, hints at what constitutes American stories. As Vonnegut put it himself in his *Playboy* interview, “what passes for culture in my head is really a bunch of commercials, and this is intolerable” (1974, p. 281). Thus, *Breakfast* is a part of Vonnegut's broader anthropological and ethical contemplation that much of what is wrong with contemporary America is so because of its stories. This position is explicated about two thirds through *Breakfast* when Vonnegut declares: “Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life” (p. 210). However, before we continue with readings and analyses based on the notion that Vonnegut is the one telling the story, we need to confront the obvious fact that he is not.

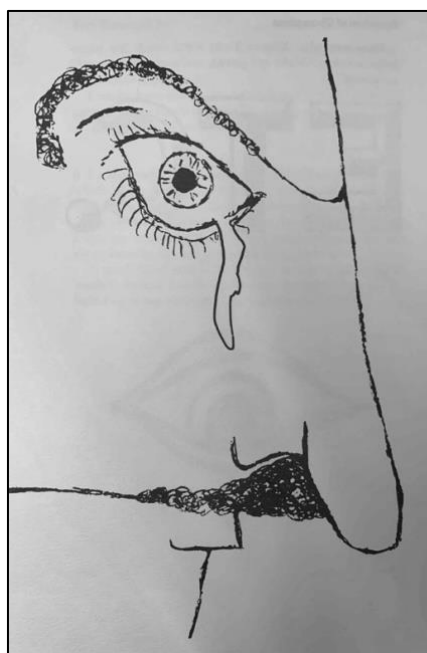


Figure 2, Self-portrait of Vonnegut crying, p. 296



Kurt Vonnegut was an actual person, he was born in Indianapolis in 1922, he died in New York City in 2007, and in-between he wrote the novel *Breakfast of Champions*. The narrator of *Breakfast* is a fictional being which goes by the name *Kurt Vonnegut*, and which exists only in so far as any fictional quantity exists within the minds of readers. The narrator is an imaginary creation, a secret, which the author uses to tell this story (Aadland, p. 14). It is not the biographical Kurt Vonnegut, he is dead, and even when he was alive, he was never the same thing as his words. The narrator exists within the story, it is *Breakfast's* subjective “I”, the wise-crack commentary, and roof-top gaze down upon the story's hapless characters. More generally, it is the very style of the novel, the lens through which the story is projected. The narrator is a Vonnegut-mask of mid-western, cynical yet sincere sensibilities. In classical rhetoric this is understood as a prosopopoeia, a trope which gives voice, face, and life to the text (Aadland, p. 14).

Professor of literature Erling Aadland in *The Narrator and The Writer* (2000) argues convincingly that this titular distinction boils down to the more fundamental distinction between fiction and reality, or between language and the world. He goes on to argue that the most important aspect of the fictional text is its meaning, and that meaning is not a part of reality per-se, but rather that which happens to the reader: a mental or spiritual process of interpretation and understanding (p. 21). That is not to say that we cannot learn about the real world through stories, we can and do (in fact reading *Breakfast* you learn quite a bit about American history, culture and society, and Vonnegut's life), but they are not the same thing. Vonnegut, however, suspects that many Americans are making this exact error in reasoning, “they were doing their best to act like people invented in story books” (pp. 209-10). The existence of a multi-billion-dollar advertisement industry, the astonishing fact that the average American is exposed to 4-10,000 advertisements per day (Simpson, 2017), and

the logic behind selling breakfast cereal with the promise of becoming a “Champion,” seems to back him up.

So, we can say that “Vonnegut the narrator” is the rhetorical tool of Vonnegut the author, which he uses to tell a certain story a certain kind of way. And understood within the paradigm of the reader, both story and narrator are given shape through a transaction between reader and text. That author and narrator share both name and biography complicates the situation somewhat. However, that complication becomes a source of both literary exploration and pleasure. This exploration happens on different levels. It is at its most explicit in Vonnegut's running commentary on the novel and writing process itself, such as in the citation above on “shunning storytelling.” And in the image of his two main characters, Trout caricaturing him as the cynical and dirty “failed artist,” and Hoover caricaturing his newly gained status as “fabulously well-to-do.”

On a deeper level the complication regards the distinction between fiction and reality. In *Breakfast* there is a working paradox between Vonnegut's declaration that he will shun storytelling, and his willingness after all, to tell a story. This paradox proliferates itself throughout the novel, giving it its strange and contemplative feel. *Breakfast's* Vonnegut struggles with the distinction between the fictional and the real, just as he struggles with the promises and realities of America. In this struggling, he invites the reader in to struggle alongside him, and as such reading *Breakfast* becomes a cooperative exercise, an act of good citizenship. This whirlwind of narrator and reader, of *Breakfast* as both a narcissistic and cooperative pursuit, is visible already in its preface, and particularly in what I have labeled the novel's “head-clearing mission statement.” This is a central citation for this thesis and will follow us throughout. I therefore end the introductory chapter, and preface the three main chapters by quoting it at length.

## *Breakfast's* Head-Clearing Mission Statement

*Breakfast's* preface sets up the stakes for the novel to come, but we might also consider it a warning. In six short pages it establishes both in form and content what is considered Vonnegut's most experimental novel. He asks himself what he thinks of the novel, and answers "I feel lousy about it, but I always feel lousy about my books" (p. 4). He goes on to compare himself to "Philboyd Studge," the make-believe author whose onomatopoeic name inspires something less than hope. However, *Breakfast* is in fact not a "cumbersome novel" (p. 4), and the preface exudes a delightfully contented sourness, as if to say, "take it or leave it." Then the preface is signed off in Philboyd Studge's name, and you are left to wonder what exactly is going on. And in a state of wondering, or contemplation, is exactly where you should be. Entering the novel on your toes, you remain there until the end.

So, what is at stake in this experimental and contemplative novel? To start, the pitiful state of an American culture which Vonnegut compares to garbage, and the fifty years of an American life which resulted from it:

► This book is my fiftieth-birthday present to myself. I feel as though I am crossing the spine of a roof—having ascended one slope.

[...]

I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago.

I suspect that this is something most white Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans, should do. The things other people have put into my head, at any rate, do not fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head.

I have no culture, no humane harmony in my brains. I can't live without a culture anymore.

►So this book is a sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which I throw over my shoulders as I travel in time back to November eleventh, nineteen hundred and twenty-two. (Vonnegut, 1973, pp. 4-6)<sup>3</sup>

I call this *Breakfast's* "head-clearing mission statement." Imagining the act of writing as a cleansing, almost purgatory process is thought-provoking, if somewhat paradoxical. Do you get rid of that which you focus your attention on?

This block citation has the strength to encompass the main threads of this thesis. It is an act of metafiction: *this book*, being the result of his taking out the garbage. It is an act of satire: Vonnegut having climbed up on to his roof gazes down upon his country from a new perspective. And it is an act of historical consciousness: a midlife taking stock of himself and his country, and the desire to travel back in time in search of answers. Furthermore, it exudes the novel's potential as a contemplative exercise, that of Vonnegut trying to make his head empty. And it does so with the participatory ethos of suspecting it is something others should do as well. This thesis uses the head-clearing mission statement as a helpful structural device, and by frequently referencing back to it, the hope is that a conceptual and terminological red thread emerges.

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<sup>3</sup> The ellipse indicates an omission by me. Vonnegut's experimentalism in *Breakfast* extends into the visual features of the novel. Most obviously with his illustrations, but also through the novel's typographical formatting. Therefore, where it is relevant, I have chosen to replicate Vonnegut's formatting making block citations.

## Chapter 1: Metafiction for *Breakfast*

More so than plot, character or setting, metafiction and the strange space it creates for contemplative participation on the part of the reader, is substantive of the novel. When you delve into its metafictional reality, reading *Breakfast* feels like equal parts narration and dialogue. As if you are not reading—but *discussing* the story and its meaning. Maybe you imagine that you are discussing it with Vonnegut himself, or someone who goes by the name of Vonnegut, but who you suspect is actually your own creation. This experimental metafiction challenges and invites the reader in to participate in its civic contemplations.

Note the explicit literary self-reflection in Vonnegut's head-clearing mission statement: "This book" is a "fiftieth-birthday present to myself," an attempt to "make my head as empty as it was when I was born," and "a sidewalk strewn with junk." This literary toying with the boundaries between text and reality is called metafiction, "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, 2001, p. 2). Both main characters Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover are lightly veiled avatars for Vonnegut himself, and their story is a lightly veiled exploration of Vonnegut's mid-life struggles and contemplations. Moreover, Vonnegut is the story's author-narrator, commenting on the process of writing this very novel, and blending fictional fabulations with intimate autobiographical detail. Writing has become a meditation, a spring cleaning of the "useless," "ugly" and "out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head," and *Breakfast* is about that meditation. And finally, Vonnegut inserts himself as a character into his fictional world, a "Kurt Vonnegut" who from behind his sunglasses observes the mess he has wrought, confronts Trout with his fictionality, and confronts the reader with their engaging with a story. The novel is a self-conscious puzzle,

and when reading it and writing about it, it is hard not to trip over words like author, writer, “the man,” “the narrator,” Vonnegut, etc., in fact, it is unavoidable. Let this be your metafictional disclaimer. When you read *Breakfast*, you are meant to trip, and in tripping question the relationship between the text and real life.

We begin this chapter by exploring the relationship between metafiction and art's mimetic potential. Human self-reflection is a part of life, as such treatment of human self-reflection in literature through metafiction also comments on the relationship between art and life. We actualize this conceptual understanding through a reading of Kilgore Trout's metaphor of the body bag. Then we begin to analyze Vonnegut's distinctive style in *Breakfast* which can be described as incredibly unsubtle, dispassionately objective, and confidential in a way which draws the reader into a dialogue with the text by drawing attention to its artificiality. Next, we examine the novel's illustrations. There are about 100 of them, all (spare the Y-O-U mentioned earlier) drawn by Vonnegut in felt-tipped pen. These paratextual elements go beyond the limits of language, confronting the reader with image, message, and the distinction between the page and the real world on a visual-visceral level. Finally, we explore what is arguably the novel's most incessant metafictional choice, the characterization of every character by the color of their skin. This move has the effect of toying with the reader's polite sensibilities, making the novel's racial arguments and themes all the more contemplative. Moreover, this metafictional coloration takes on a new and fresh relevancy in the context of the contemporary racial and sociolinguistic discourse. By reading *Breakfast* alongside the sociolinguistic debate on capital b Black I demonstrate the novel's potential for contemporary civic contemplation.

## A Postmodern Overtly Metafictional Novel

In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) Linda Hutcheon argues against the notion that metafiction severs the connection between art and life, arguing instead that it “reforges” this link, but on a new level “that of the imaginative process (of storytelling), instead of on that of the product (the story told)” (p. 3). The postmodern overtly metafictional novel explores a new kind of realism, one which recognizes fiction as fiction, rather than trying to construct a fictional illusion. This is a hallmark of *Breakfast*, Vonnegut constantly reminding you that “this book is made up, of course” (p. 216). In order to explain the popularity and controversy surrounding the overtly metafictional novel in the 1960s and 1970s, Hutcheon draws a parallel between its emergence and a broader art history concerning mimesis. This history imagines a pendulum swinging between the Aristotelian memetic position that “art imitates life” on one side, and the anti-mimetic position held by among others Oscar Wilde that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life,” on the other. Entering the modern era, this aesthetic theoretical dichotomy became increasingly problematized, perhaps most famously in René Magritte's surrealist painting “The Treachery of Images”, popularly known as the “this is not a pipe” painting. Exiting WWII, and entering the post-modern period, the relationship between life and art is further explored and inescapably complicated. The post-modern novel “frequently comments on its own fictionality, interrogates the relationship between narrative and representation, and dissolves or at least questions the possibility of epistemological norms” writes John Brannigan (2017, p. 570). A popular understanding, particularly of post-modernism's normative ambiguity, is that the extraordinary horror and absurdity of WWII shook loose fundamental assumptions about western civilization, and by extension art. I am sympathetic to such a history, particularly in the case of Vonnegut and his experiences in Dresden. Many

readers will be familiar with this history, and it will impact their reading of *Breakfast*. Yet we must always be wary of such historicizations, lest they “misrepresent the complex, mixed and various nature of literary writing” (Brannigan, 2017, p. 570). If the question was once whether art imitates life or life imitates art, the postmodern overtly metafictional novel, and *Breakfast* in specific, disregards the question all together.

Art and the process of artistic creation are a vital part of life. They are the means through which humans self-reflect, even upon their self-reflections. When we read, and especially when we read fiction, reading may slip into something like a dream. Our consciousness melts into that of narration, and we become like a fly on the wall of Kilgore Trout's dirty Cohoes, New York basement apartment. He has just discovered the letter inviting him to the Midland City arts festival, promising to make him famous, and setting in motion the series of events which will end in Dwayne Hoover's solipsistic break from sanity. Trout, Vonnegut's most cynical alter ego, receives the letter as an invasion of his privacy, snapping to his parakeet Bill, “Keep the hell out of my body bag” (p. 32). What is a rather expressive and depressive image of postmodern identity and individualism is immediately undercut by the next line which reads: “A body bag was a large plastic envelope for a freshly killed American soldier. It was a new invention” (p. 32). It is not Trout who says this, there are no quotation marks. It is a side-comment, coming alongside or “above” the story, the focus shifting from story told to the story telling. Moreover, it is said in the objective voice belonging to Vonnegut, the narrator. Word choice such as “freshly killed” and “new invention” are both dispassionate and macabre, participating in a mode of defamiliarization which highlights the absurdity of real life. Body bags are real after all, and in the context of televised war, whether that is in Vietnam or Ukraine, is a highly available image in the minds of readers.



What might have been a throw-away line, instead opens the door to a profound and bizarre self-conscious contemplation of life and death. I call it Vonnegut's metafictional alarm clock. Every few pages or so, just long enough to lull you into alignment with the comfortable artifice of fiction, Vonnegut stumbles into frame, breaking the fourth wall, and in an act of metafictional defamiliarization, muses over his life, his country, and the process of writing the words you are now reading. As discussed in the section on reader-response theory, reading is an invitation to create meaning. An invitation to both share in the thoughts of other people and to challenge them. The overt and experimental metafiction of *Breakfast* makes that invitation explicit by exposing itself as a creation, "I do not know who invented the body bag. I do know who invented Kilgore Trout. I did" (p. 32). The novel tells you it is a novel, and you cannot escape the fact that you are reading a fiction. In this respect *Breakfast* is anti-escapist, a confrontation with reality both on and off the page.

Trout's existential discomfort is extended into and entangled with scientific progress in the domains of war and plastics. It is done with a snide sarcasm which heightens the tragedy and suggests itself to several contemplations. One is that the true purpose of the body bag is concealment, making war palatable to the public through a "see no evil" public relations strategy. Another interpretation is that contemporary society isolates people from one another, plastic becoming a symbol of postmodern anomie. Throughout, *Breakfast* develops the metaphor of plastic as a symbol of the postmodern condition, being able to morph into any which shape, encapsulating life on earth in an airtight "sheath" "resembling mother of pearl" (p. 224), which also threatens total ecocide. The life-mimicking and destroying qualities of plastic snake their way into every possible corner of *Breakfast*. At the level of metafiction when Vonnegut observes "this book is being written by a meat machine in cooperation with a machine made of metal and plastic" (p. 225). And at once

metafictionally, intertextually and philosophically when he revitalizes Dostoevsky for the postmodern world: “It’s all like an ocean!” cried Dostoevski. I say it’s all like cellophane” (p. 228). Through both the literal chemistry of a polymer, and an extended metaphor of plastic, the novel contemplates the relationship between life and the stories we tell. In this respect it entangles its contemplations on fiction with a perspective on the Anthropocene. We explore this image of plastic closer in the next chapter on satire.

A final reading of the body bag scene is as a commentary on Vonnegut's personal discomfort with his recent celebrity. Money and fame are not all they're cracked up to be, as is made most clear through the example of “fabulously well-to-do” Dwayne Hoover, Vonnegut's caricature of himself having achieved the American Dream. This four-word description follows Hoover around, people whispering it behind his back. This detail is picked straight out of Vonnegut's own life, an experience following the success of *Slaughterhouse-Five* he remembers with a shudder, giving the story yet another uncanny metafictional and auto-biographical note (Sumner, 2011, ch. 7, n.p.). Hoover devolves into solipsistic madness triggered by a very “bad idea.” Reading Trout's story “Now it Can Be Told” which informs him, metafictionally, that he is the only human with free will, “everybody else is a robot” designed to figure what he will “do next – and *why*” (p. 253). What he decides to do is violently attack the innocent people who happen to be at the cocktail lounge with him. Trout having exited his body bag some 200 pages earlier, sentences Hoover to a body bag of his own. Metaphorically, the body bag represents the psychological solipsism which Hoover inherits from Trout. Literally, the story implies that Hoover is on his way into a different kind of body bag, the Adult Correctional Institution in Shepherdstown, and eventually Midland City's Skid Row.

“Bad ideas” turn out to be the cause of humanity’s problems. A theory for which Trout will win global acclaim following the events of the novel, a monument being raised in his honor by the “American Academy of Arts and Sciences” which reads: “We are healthy only to the extent that our ideas are humane” (p. 16). This ridiculous and satirical future, only ever hinted at, is the closest the novel ever comes to being a work of science fiction. These “bad ideas” range from Hoover’s solipsism, humanity’s “arbitrary lusts for gold, and [...] a glimpse of a little girl’s underpants” (p. 25), the “cockamamie proprietorship” which means that people named Rockefeller “own vast areas of Earth’s surface, and the petroleum and other valuable minerals underneath the surface” (p. 106), and just about every other social evil. On this account all of *Breakfast’s* satirical targets belong to the same umbrella which is “bad ideas.” In the context of all these ugly things Vonnegut observes in his society, and contemplating his anger at his fellow countrymen he realizes:

I had come suddenly to pity them, for I understood how innocent and natural it was for them to behave so abominably, and with such abominable results: They were doing their best to live like people invented in story books. This was the reason Americans shot each other so often: It was a convenient literary device for ending short stories and books.

Why were so many Americans treated by their government as though their lives were as disposable as paper facial tissues? Because that was the way authors customarily treated bit-part players in their made-up tales. (1973, p. 210)

Here Vonnegut expands on his oeuvre-defining anthropological theory on the importance of stories. That through our stories humanity pretends to understand life—that there are beginnings and endings, fortunes which raise and fortunes which fall, etc. And this is *Breakfast’s* principal metafictional trick, that it is a story about the danger of stories. In this respect reading *Breakfast’s* overt metafiction is a peculiarly psychological experience.

Perhaps it is not strange then that mental health, and the connection between mental health and stories is such a dominant theme in *Breakfast*:

Dwayne's incipient insanity was mainly a matter of chemicals, of course. Dwayne Hoover's body was manufacturing certain chemicals which unbalanced his mind. But Dwayne, like all novice lunatics, needed some bad ideas, too, so that his craziness could have shape and direction. (p. 14)

Hoover believed he was the only real human being alive, while Trout, from inside his body bag did not believe anybody knew he was alive. It is only through confrontation with Hoover's violent break that Trout realizes that what he does and says actually matters. That "even *he* could bring evil into the world—in the form of bad ideas" (p. 14). Trout is unaffected and cynical for 95% of the novel, is the only character with "enough imagination to suspect that he might be the creation of another human being" (p. 239). It is first when he sees that his actions affect others, that he actually exists in a world alongside other people, that he experiences catharsis and is given a reprieve from his cynicism. Vonnegut's proclamation in his letter to the book burners: "I am a good citizen, and I am very real" echoes through the story's morality, penetrating the metaphorical body bags we place ourselves and others in when we treat them like characters in a story.

*Breakfast* pursues this moral contemplation through both image and metaphor as above, and through a paradoxical style of being incredibly unsubtle, yet shrewdly confidential. Through varied techniques such as direct address, defamiliarization and illustrations, the novel draws the reader in while holding them at arm's length. This push and pull draws attention to the text's artificiality and activates the reader in a contemplation of the relationship between themselves and the narrator, and between fiction and real life. The first line of the first chapter (following the preface), reads: "This is a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast" (p. 7). It is

explicitly metafictional, the demonstrative “this” insinuating both storyteller and listener. The text recognizes itself, the specific “this is a tale” construction toying with the classical fairytale convention, further acknowledging its own make believe-ness.

Three paragraphs later there is a line break between paragraphs which is emphasized by a rightward pointing arrow (see Figure 3), this paratextual feature continuing throughout the novel<sup>4</sup>. These arrows are a feature of *Breakfast's* experimental style, they are never explained, and highlight the text on the page rather than lull you into its fictional artifice. My hypothesis is that the line break and arrow indicate a pause in the process of writing—Vonnegut hitting the enter key on his typewriter twice, giving the text space to breath.

Following the arrow, which literally points you on your way, the insinuation of storyteller and listener is explicated, “Listen: Trout and Hoover were citizens of the United States of America, a country which was called *America* for short” (p. 7). Direct address in the imperative mood of the verb “to listen” creates a bond between narrator and reader. Suddenly you are inside the circle, and you better pay attention, because Vonnegut has something important to say. However, the implication of importance is immediately undercut by the triviality of what follows. You do not normally introduce characters by reference to their citizenship, and any reader of *Breakfast* would know that *America* is the United States of America for short. Vonnegut is toying with the reader's expectations, creating a playful sort of in-the-know naivety, which he uses for the entirety of the Novel to both humorous and persuasive effect. The precise construction “Listen: [...]” is repeated

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<sup>4</sup> I found over 300 such arrows using the search function in an electronic edition of the novel. Vonnegut is known for his short and snappy sentences and paragraphs, this large number demonstrating that point. However, in the eBook the arrows are replaced by page centered ellipses. This editorial choice is strange to me, as a rightward facing arrow, literally pointing you on your way, creates a very different effect than a page centered ellipse in-between paragraphs.

multiple times throughout the novel, demanding attention, and putting the reader to work through what feels like both a conversation and a contemplative exercise. This is what Hutcheon calls the paradox of the reader: the reader's confrontation with the fiction's artifice, simultaneous with their participation in its co-creation (1980, p. 36).

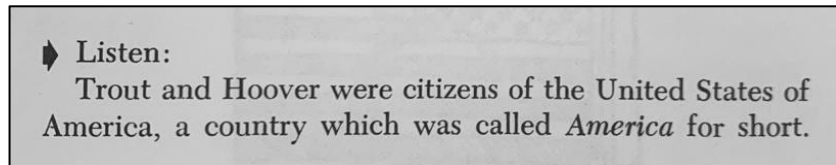


Figure 3, *The rightward facing arrow*, p. 7

That that which follows “listen” is banal highlights an analysis of life in 20<sup>th</sup> century America as banal itself. Stating the obvious becoming another form of metafiction and a means of Vonnegut's comedic voice and satire. One interpretation is that while the nationality of the main characters should not be important; all humans having equal value under the presumed western, liberal, humanist paradigm; nationality is in fact of supreme importance and that is unfair. To pretend that it is not would be wrong, and the dispassionate and objective voice of the storyteller slants the discussion towards that recognition. Moreover, it calls the bluff of an American moralistic superiority, also called American Exceptionalism, which so totally saturates American history, society, and culture to the point of it becoming invisible. The USA is put in its place alongside “the one quadrillion nations in the Universe” (p. 8) in an act of existential and culturally relativistic satire.

The construction “Listen: [...]” is but one example of *Breakfast's* metafictional style. Vonnegut addresses reader, character, and himself, in many different ways throughout the novel. What the different techniques have in common is that they engage the reader in the co-creation of meaning, bringing the act of reading into the telling of the story. When you realize that your reading is a part of the story *Breakfast* is telling, then you have entered the

metafictional hall of mirrors. This space is confusing, entertaining, and highly contemplative. A contemplation that is ripe for the taking in context of the above citation is questioning one's own citizenship and place in the universe. Why should it matter what nation you are born in? Some readers may find satisfactory answers to these kinds of questions, I however do not, and in my failing, the contemplative pleasure of the dialogue follows me throughout the story. Contemplations which are given neat and tidy answers end, while the ones we struggle with follow us much further. The novel's metafictional narrative happens in my head as I read and *feels* like a dialogue. The novel's illustrations on the other hand confront the reader visually; a more visceral effect, which is what we examine next.

### Indexical Illustrations, ▶With Drawings by the Author

Nationalistic farce brings us to another substantiating metafictional feature of *Breakfast*: its illustrations. In the novel's preface, as if Vonnegut is making a confession, he addresses both reader and himself:

I am programmed at fifty to perform childishly—to insult “The Star-Spangled Banner,” to scrawl pictures of a Nazi flag and an asshole and a lot of other things with a felt-tipped pen. To give an idea of the maturity of my illustrations for this book, here is my picture of an asshole: (p. 5)

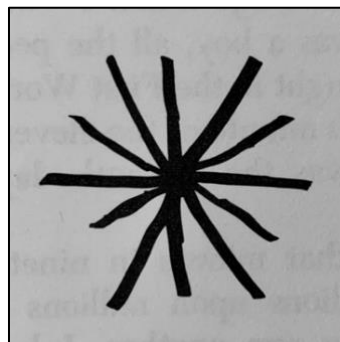


Figure 4, *An asshole*, p. 5

An argument for paratext as metafiction was given above. Additionally, the crude hand drawn quality, and the sheer quantity<sup>5</sup> of illustrations in *Breakfast* both contribute to and overwhelm its narrative. One line of reasoning is that Vonnegut has lost faith in the ability of language to properly communicate the garbage which fills his head, and he is resigned to the doodling out of those ideas which have become trapped.

Another way to see the combination of text and image is as an example of the text's indexicality. That is, the quality with which the text seems to say "Here! Look at this!" and then shows you what it is on about. A show *and* tell kind of storytelling. The story literally points to itself, what we have called its metafiction. In this case it is the drawings which are both pointed out and do the pointing and that pointing constitutes both the storytelling and the story told. Note that the above citation points to both the mode, "to scrawl" and means, "with a felt-tipped pen" of the doodles. Here Vonnegut comments on a very basic aspect of the artistic process. Some negative reception of *Breakfast* cites Vonnegut having become self-absorbed due to his recent fame (Cowart, as cited in Morse, 2009, p. 41). Such a critic might cite this passage and wonder why the reader should care about Vonnegut's amateurish doodles. One response is through Hutcheon's (1980) appreciation that an explicit focus on process is a way of literature exploring the relationship between art and reality more broadly. This perspective appreciates that Vonnegut's readers actually do care about his process, both because it is entertaining, and as a means of thinking about the relationship between art and life, and between themselves and the text. Another response to this criticism of being self-absorbed is that the novel welcomes such incredulity. That it is good that the reader disagrees with Vonnegut, using it as an exercise in critical thinking

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<sup>5</sup> Between 115-118, depending on whether you count the ones in the front matter or not.



rather than passive reception. This is similar to English professor Charles Berryman's interpretation of *Breakfast* as a parody of the postmodern novel, saying of Vonnegut's self-portrait in *Breakfast*: "we should laugh at the vanity of the narrator" (as cited in Morse, 2009, p. 45).

It is undeniably shocking to see a drawing of a Nazi flag or an asshole—a visceral kind of shock that is not limited by language. The drawing of a Nazi flag is striking, perhaps even more so today, fifty years further removed from WWII, and in an era of increasing political polarization where the derogative label "Nazi" has taken on new meanings and is more liberally used than it would have been in 1973. It being mentioned alongside the American flag, with little moral distinction, is about as unsubtle an act of political satire as is possible. It continues the relativization of "America" and critiques its nationalism through the lampooning of its symbols. An important, if easily overlooked lesson here is that Vonnegut is not just mocking a specific American jingoistic nationalism, he does that too, of course, but more generally he questions the illusionary foundations of nationalism writ large, a "bad idea." We explore this contemplation of nationalism more closely in chapter 3 on history.

Yet, it is the infamous doodle of an asshole which has become the novel's leading trademark in the popular culture. It features on the cover of many of its publications and on numerous articles of Vonnegut-merchandise. Thankfully, the Vonnegut readership has coined it "the asterisk." There is something positively liberating about such a mischievous drawing. It doubles down on a childlike and carefree attitude as if to say that assholes are a part of life whether you like it or not, in fact everyone's got one. The confrontation with the asshole, treated with the same objective and nonplussed attitude as the slogan for a brand of breakfast cereal, America's history of violent conquest, or the Holocaust, defamiliarizes the reader from "truths" which they have come to take for granted. *Breakfast's* Vonnegut

regularly takes on a child-like and innocent voice, or if you will, tells us the story as though we were children. Showing us society through the eyes of a child, its absurdity becomes blatant. It is a form of metafiction which the drawings underscore. *Breakfast* is in fact a picture book, and picture books are typically for children, and typically morality lessons. This may sound patronizing, and perhaps it is. But only to the reader who lacks self-irony. The novel is told with a voice that recognizes that it is being read, another feature of Hutcheon's paradox of the reader. The sympathetic reading of such patronization is that *we*: author, text, and reader, are laughing at ourselves together.

Thus, these silly drawings about serious matters become a communal contemplation. Patronage takes on its more wholesome meaning as that of a father telling a joke at everyone's expense. This kind of comradery is both anti-elitist and empathetic towards the common person, without sparing him or his society their duly deserved judgment. Trout's solipsism inducing novel "Now it Can Be Told" foils this communal ethic of "we" through its binary opposition to "you." Explaining the true purpose of the universe Trout writes that "The Creator of the Universe" has created all of culture, invented all religions, started all wars, and programmed all humans to commit "every possible atrocity and every possible kindness unfeelingly, automatically, inevitably, to get a reaction from Y-O-U." (p. 217). The comedic double-take being that it is not Hoover we are really talking about here, but rather the reader and a culture of hyper individualism. After all, Trout's story is true, the universe of *Breakfast* is in fact created for you the reader. This self-reflective point is emphasized by the very simple "Y-O-U" illustration (see Figure 1)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This illustration stands out for two reasons. It exists within the mise-en-abyme of Trout's novel, and it is not a drawing, but rather a typographical illustration.

Vonnegut warns us that *Breakfast* contains many rude drawings. However, there are many more entirely innocent ones. Drawings of consumer goods, animals, road signs, articles of clothing, religious symbology, hypothetical tomb stones, sports and military medals, etc. The second to last doodle in the novel is in fact the abbreviation “ETC.” (p. 280), potentially undercutting the story’s significance, while also suggesting its universality and continuation. “Etc.” becomes a kind of postmodern *afictional* mantra, a manta which is repeated several times throughout the novel<sup>7</sup>. Stories have neat endings, whether they are “happily ever after” or tragedy, real life on the other hand just keeps on going on. We explore the significance of the “etc.” and its relationship with the molecular structure of plastic in the next chapter. As a form of indexical metafiction, the illustrations, alongside the frequent reference to real places, people, events, brand names etc., explore the chaotic multiplicity of postmodern life.

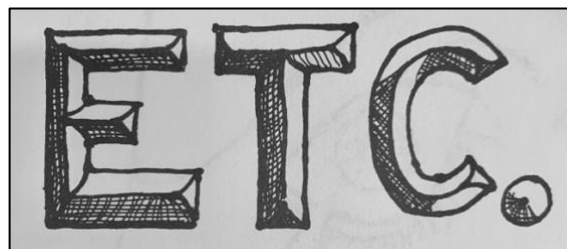


Figure 5, ETC., p. 280

If *Breakfast's* metafiction functions as an alarm clock, waking the reader from their artificial slumber and confronting them with the potential danger of our stories, then the novel's illustrations are arguably the loudest alarms as such. However, there is one metafictional move Vonnegut makes throughout the novel which rivals even the drawing of an asshole and a Nazi flag and that is the consistent and incessant pointing out of each

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<sup>7</sup> By *afictional* I mean the sense that real life, the world outside of the written word, is fundamentally distinct from the fictional world inside a text. In this sense non-fiction is still fiction, imposing a story upon reality. Aldous Huxley conveys a similar notion in the first line of his 1955 novel *The Genius and the Goddess*: “‘The trouble with fiction,’ said John Rivers, ‘is that it makes too much sense. Reality never makes sense.’”

character's race by way of their skin color. We read this feature of the novel next, linking the novel's metafiction to its treatment of race.

## Metafiction in Black and White

Good citizenship is characterized by a profound, even spiritual sense of belonging to one's society and both treating and being treated with respect by one's co-citizens. Racism denies us this basic human need, victimizing people as *citizen* in name only. Returning to the head-clearing mission statement, “ugly” fictions have been put into Vonnegut's head, yours too by implication. Racism, one of *Breakfast's* most prominent and explicit themes, is one such fiction. The treatment of race entirely saturates the novel and *Breakfast's* America, from its descriptions of NYC gang culture to the explication of a midwestern “sundown town,” to the very historical fabric of the USA:

The sea pirates were white. The people who were already on the continent when the pirates arrived were copper-colored. When slavery was introduced onto the continent, the slaves were black.

Color was everything. (p. 11)

In *Breakfast* color *is* everything. In this subchapter, we explore *Breakfast's* metafictional and satirical exposure of American racism. It is simple enough to satirize the racist, turning his prejudice against him, and making him a fool. Yet what good would that do? The deeper moral lesson lies in the reader reflecting upon the nature and history of racism within themselves and their society. Moreover, as the political and socio-lingual landscape of characterizing citizens by their race has moved a long way since 1973, we make the reading contemporary by connecting it to the contemporary sociolinguistic debate regarding capital b Black.

You cannot read the novel without first tripping over, and then attempting to come to terms with its incessant pointing out of the characters' race. Just about every character in

the novel is introduced by name, occupation, and the color of their skin. Here are two representative examples: “Dwayne had a black servant named Lottie Davis.” (p. 14), and “Dwayne’s waitress at the Burger Chef was a seventeen-year-old white girl named Patty Keene” (p. 135). This basic construction is repeated dozens of times throughout the novel, at least once per character introduction. It does not matter how insignificant or central a character is, Vonnegut will tell you if they are Black or white. There is an indexicality to it. Imagining a Black man, the novel matter-of-factly points out what humans matter-of-factly see, that he is Black. By breaking polite convention, the objective voice of the storyteller draws attention to the concealing effect of everyday language. And by this exposure the story becomes uncomfortable. Pointing out a person's skin color is not uncomfortable because we would not otherwise have noticed it, but rather because it makes us notice that we prefer to pretend that we do not notice it. This is the reason why much political activism seeks a state of discomfort in its audience, confronting everyday citizens with their deeply held status-quo maintaining fictions. *Breakfast* achieves this textually, insinuating the everyday concealing effects of language by its experimental linguistic non-conformity, which draws attention to both the text's artificiality and the artificiality of society’s racial constructions.

One interpretation of the repetition of describing characters by their skin color is that it highlights the triviality and irrationality of race and racism. Repetition both tires us and strips away meaning from that which is repeated. A straightforward analysis is that Vonnegut makes fun of our concern with skin color by pointing it out ad-nauseum. This reading is in the progressive spirit of a 1990s “egalitarian colorblindness” (Mazzocco, 2017, pp. 23-25, 37-38). He is emptying his head of race in order to, moving forward, not concern

himself with it. For the polite, predominantly white society this has been understood as respectful and inclusive.

There is honor in the child's empty headedness, no surprise then that Vonnegut wishes to reclaim it. No surprise too that he employs the blunt and naïve voice of a child to contrast and moralize society's failures. Children have a special ability and privilege, due to their lack of socialization, to say things you're not *supposed* to say. For example, pointing at a stranger and broadcasting their dark skin. However, I read a different and more politically charged and contemporary effect in this color-characterization. Vonnegut is emptying his head of a malicious color-blindness which perversely and ironically perpetuates American racial injustice. Is that not a more literal consequence of the repeated pointing out of skin color? As with all of the garbage Vonnegut crafts his story out of, he is not really throwing it out, but instead honing in. Moreover, the novel does not just target a feigned color-blindness: that which is exposed by our cringing discomfort when a child points out a Black person's skin color. It also targets a more deceptive color-blindness which does not recognize white as a color at all, but instead treats it as neutral, which perversely further marginalizes Blackness by treating whiteness as default. It is one thing to be given a poor lot in life, as is the case with most of the Black characters in *Breakfast* (most of the white ones too). It is quite another to suffer that lot in a ghettoized society, surrounded by material wealth you have little access to, and which fetishizes the fantasy that all its citizens have an equal shot. This is the America of the 1970s as Trout witnesses it in New York City, New York; Midland City, Ohio, and in-between.

NYC has its racial gangs which Vonnegut, a citizen of NYC at the time, sympathizes with as all they want to do is “defend themselves and their friends and families, something the police wouldn’t do” and “catch the attention of the Government, so that the

Government would do a better job of picking up the garbage and so on” (p. 77). Note the “and so on,” an example of the “ETC.”-ethos discussed earlier. This dichotomy between the grave and mundane is typical of Vonnegut and reflects the same dichotomy in social and political reality. To belong together as citizens, requires both physical security and municipal garbage collection.

Likewise, Midland City, Ohio has its “reindeer problem” the LaSabre couple's code word which “allowed them to speak of the Black problem in the city, which was a big one, without giving offense to any black person who might overhear” (p. 164). Vonnegut roots the reindeer problem in structural and historical causes. Fundamentally, Black Americans were seen by their society as machines. First enslaved machines, then freed machines, but machines all the same. We return to the novel's theme of imagining people as machines in the third chapter. Black people came to Ohio and found work during the Great Migration. But Shepherdstown, neighbor of Midland City, the ironically named location of the ever in-the-background adult correctional facility, “got smart quick” (p. 239) and set up as a sun-down town. Vonnegut sets the stage for understanding historical racial injustice in midwestern America by having Hoover reminisce his father recount the gruesome lynching of an innocent Black father in Shepherdstown during the Great Depression. The irony of a town where a Black father was once murdered in front of his family for accidentally staying the night, now serving as the home to criminalized young Black prisoners forms the shameful backdrop of *Breakfast's* America.

At this point I want to take a short sidetrack and draw attention to a different effect of Vonnegut's metafiction. Shepherdstown does not exist. Neither does its prison, Midland City, nor any number of locations and events in *Breakfast's* historical world-building. However, they might as well. The matter-of-fact presentation, combined with the mimicry

of American signifiers, “Americanisms,” creates the inescapable conclusion that “even if this exact story is not exactly *true*, ones just as bad and pretty darn similar certainly are.” I find myself googling names, events, phrases etc., because you never know when Vonnegut is referencing “real life,” or he is making up his own version of it. This is its own kind of exercise in good citizenship, the reader always on their toes, questioning what is real and what is make believe. More profoundly, this investigation gets the ball rolling about the relationship between author, narration, and reality more broadly speaking. In *Breakfast* Shepherdstown is real, in America there are many Shepherdstowns.

In Midland City, the satirical representation of a mid-western American city, “nobody white had much use for black people anymore” (p. 164). This sentence sounds silly on purpose and is representative of Vonnegut's laconic and child-like style. However, we may also read it as an example of the anthropological voice he established in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. To view humanity, and America in particular, as the Tralfamadorians do, is a concise description of *Breakfast's* satirical voice and cultural relativism. The dispassionate and objective voice distancing both narrator and reader from the painful injustices of their society, permitting instead laughter at its inanity. He does the opposite of his creations Harry and Grace LaSabre, the kindhearted white Americans. Rather than politely brushing the problem under the rug, he forces his reader's attention upon it. However, there is here a fundamental contradiction, one which serious Vonnegut readers are sure to face sooner or later. Does Vonnegut promote a form of fatalistic apathy, a “do-nothing ethos” (Weisenburger, 1995, p. 176) by letting the reader off the hook? We explore this criticism of Vonnegut's observational ethics closely in the next chapter on satire. First however, we make this racial reading of *Breakfast* contemporary by relating it to the recent sociolinguistic debate regarding capital b Black.



## Capital b Black

Vonnegut writes about American race relations in the same dispassionate voice as he writes about everything in *Breakfast*. He does this in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in a society which is coming off the heels of a hard-fought civil rights movement, which was punctuated by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Despite the successes of this struggle, racism, in all its insidiousness lives on in America. Fifty years following the publication of *Breakfast* the problems of systemic racism and how we talk about it have again taken a prominent position in American and global society. Indeed, America as global cultural hegemon sets the agenda for many such conversations worldwide (Wiesen, 2020). Countless reports on systemic racism within education, employment, housing, policing, etc. have moved the landscape and made recognition of insipient historical-structural causes widespread. Understanding such structures and negotiating the relationship between one's history, society and individuality is not easy. It is a struggle between a potentially fatalistic, deterministic world, and the human will to change it. It is a problem that goes to the core of the human condition and is therefore the subject matter of much great literature.

Vonnegut, associated with the existentialist school of philosophy, tells stories which focus upon this seemingly impossible struggle. As Vonnegut-scholar Susan Farrell writes, "Vonnegut [...] admires human beings who refuse to accept a determinist philosophy, who try to change the universe, although he fully realizes that such attempts might ultimately prove futile" (2008, pp. 436-437).

Then the police murder of George Floyd in 2020 gave unprecedented visibility and energy to racial justice politics, particularly through the mass organization of citizen activism under the declamation "Black Lives Matter." For many, color-blindness, polite ignorance and "reindeer problem" code speak is no longer acceptable. Respect and inclusion require new

ways of talking about race, and the struggle against futility was given new possibility.

Following Floyd's murder several major publications, including *The New York Times* and the *AP*, declared they were updating their style guides to “capitalize Black in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense, conveying an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community[...].” (Daniszewski, 2020). Capitalizing Black when talking about people has become culturally sensitive and a sign of respect. We find historical precedent in W.E.B. DuBois's successful letter writing campaign to the *NY Times* to capitalize Negro as a sign of “racial self-respect.” However, “Negro” fell out of fashion during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, taking on a subservient connotation. This is a simple lesson in the power, meaning and history of what we name things. Capital b Black is also clarifying when you want to discuss the common experience of Black people where some are African American, and others are born elsewhere. It is a descriptive and useful word; one many public intellectuals and activists have been calling for. However, at this point you may suspect the *AP* and *NYT* of fashionable and expedient politeness. After all, people have been capitalizing Black for decades (Wachal, 2000). This suspicion is probably healthy. Continuing the exercise: the *NYT* and *AP* will capitalize Black but not white. A surface argument against capital “w” is that it is a convention amongst some white supremacy groups. The more general argument is that white people do not have a “shared culture and history” the same way Black people do (Coleman, 2020). On the point of lacking a shared culture and history Vonnegut must agree. Or at least that the culture he does have “does not fit together nicely.”

In 2021, having read *Breakfast* for the first time in some ten years, I was struck by how contemporary Vonnegut's racialized language sounds. There is something very *now* about the matter-of-fact racial identification of his characters. I do not like phraseology like

“he was *ahead* of his time.” I do not accept the assumption that history works this way. In fact, such progressivist views of history are dangerous as they can blind us to the causes of a very real fear of “going backwards,” as there is no forwards or backwards in history. This is a fear common today, and one of my motivations for reading *Breakfast* through a concern with good citizenship. Vonnegut does not capitalize Black, that was not on the table in 1973. Yet, what he does with race in *Breakfast* resonates with the calls for capitalized Black and the surrounding debate discussed above. This point can be highlighted by considering the arguments for capitalizing white. First however, a short aside is necessary on the novel's use of the N-word.

Vonnegut writes the N-word 29 times in *Breakfast*. This places it in a particular socio-cultural literary context, most commonly associated with the controversy surrounding the teaching of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. I discussed earlier the history of censorship of *Breakfast* by reactionary conservatives for its “pornographic” nature. However, today it is progressive liberals who might find the novel objectionable. The discourse on the use of the N-word is fraught, and I will keep my participation brief. *Breakfast* is an anti-racist novel, to claim otherwise is to act in bad faith. *Breakfast*'s use of the N-word accurately depicts historical as well as present-day American racism. It is used in a few distinct ways. One, as a reflection of American history, whether that is the legacy of slavery, or the historical entanglements of sexism, racism and early consumer culture. In the consumer culture history of Midland City “The Barrytron Ltd. Robo-Magic automatic washing machine” promised women to do the N-word work for them, which “the white men wouldn't do [...] of course. They called it *women's work*, and the women called it *Nigger work*” (p. 245). Second, it is used by present-day white Americans either out of malice, or because they find it normal to call certain areas the “Nigger part of town” (p. 41). And thirdly, it is said by the

narrator in the same dispassionate and objective voice as everything else in the novel. It confronts and defamiliarizes what is taken for granted: “a Nigger was a human being who was black” (p. 41). 1973 is 49 years in the past, and the way we talk about race in literature, and in particular the use of the N-word has changed a lot. However, the common humanity of Black, white, and any other racial category must never be taken for granted. Reading *Breakfast in 2022*, despite or even because of its use of the N-word, does not let you.

Professor of philosophy and law Kwame Appiah argues that capitalizing white would undercut racist gestures which would “no longer be a provocative defiance of the norm” (Appiah, 2020). However, many are uneasy with such equivalency because of the arguments that white and Black people experience race so differently (Wong, 2020). Others contend that lowercase white is anti-Black because it defaults whiteness and allows white people to avoid responsibility and sit-out public conversations about race (Nguyễn, 2020). The debate is complex and capital w White risks being reduced to a posturing of which “side” you are on. Big or small w there is a push within contemporary racial justice movements that white people should “grapple with how they operate in a racial way, too,” as articulated by professor of English Koritha Mitchell (Wong, 2020). In that respect, I argue that reading *Breakfast*, as argued above, is a good place to start.

There is an equivalency in the way *Breakfast* constantly introduces its characters by name and skin color. It is jarring, a perpetual reminder that reading and real life are not the same thing. The overtly metafictional novel is at its best when it exposes this contrast between fiction and reality, opening up a space for the contemplative creation of meaning within the reader. However, the implication of the falsity of color-blindness in the text only underscores *Breakfast's* entirely unsubtle message that life is not fair for Black Americans. Race so saturates American life we risk overlooking it and/or hushing it down when it

confronts us for the sake of politeness or comfort. Vonnegut makes clear that *Breakfast* is a struggle with a culture he, a “skinny, fairly old white [man]” (1973, p. 7), can no longer stand. As with everything Vonnegut, it is tempting to trace his cynicism and racial awareness to his experiences in WWII. The horrors of Dresden and the racial ideology of the Nazi's, combined with his German name and heritage may have primed him to think of himself in racial terms. “Color was everything” is both mocking and sincere, truth told through exaggeration. Certainly, other things matter too, in *Breakfast* we explore many factors which through entanglement govern the individual and society. But as in real life, as it has been in America since even before its founding, race is always there. In real life we see color, however mainstream polite society has until very recently tried to minimize its visibility through a “speak no evil” strategy. In *Breakfast*, we read it, as it is unavoidably printed on the page in black and white.

## Chapter Conclusion

*Breakfast's* substantive metafiction and its paradoxical narcissistic and participatory ethos is both contemplatively pleasurable and highly experimental. One way of understanding it is through the metaphor of an alarm, waking the reader up from fictional artifice, confronting us with the distinction between story and life. This is a major theme of *Breakfast*: the role of stories to human wellbeing, and a general skepticism towards the stories which compose modern American life, the “bad ideas,” ranging from nationalism to advertisement slogans to racism. Another appreciation of the novel's metafiction is the narrator's unobtrusive, confidential, and dispassionate voice. This in combination with the illustrations, makes the exploration of the relationship between fiction and reality, and the recognition of Y-O-Ur role even more unavoidable. We investigated the “impolite” and contemporary sounding effects of the novel's characterization of skin color and related this

to the contemporary sociolinguistic debate concerning capital b Black. What this example points out quite well is how exposing the concealing effects of everyday language has political ambitions. Polite white society's discomfort at the explication of a person's skin color is not because it is made aware of it, but rather because it is made aware that it prefers to pretend it is not. *Breakfast*'s metafiction creates an uncanny space for the reader to participate in a cooperative process of literary self-reflection upon society, the human condition, the role of stories, and even our capacity to self-reflect. Through its substantive metafiction, reading *Breakfast* becomes a contemplative exercise in good citizenship. The novel pursues both moral and political ambitions, as well as laughter. Consequently, we explore its classification as a satire next.

## Chapter 2: Satire, an Honest Appraisal of the Grand ETC.

The absurd horror of the first half of the twentieth century, and the subsequent skepticism of absolute moral truth, necessarily changed the basis for literary humor, and in particular satire. English professor Kevin Brown (2009) retells this interpretive history as some critics arguing that in postmodernity “no moral stance can be taken through satire; instead, satirists now write merely for pleasure, not to instigate any change in morality” (p. 171). What complicates our reading of Vonnegut is that he is clearly concerned with both public and private morality, and yet his exhaustive postmodern uncertainty makes it difficult for critics to pin him down. This is a recurring problem for Vonnegut scholars. In my introduction, I agreed with the label “spiritual manifesto,” yet I disagree with Lawrence R. Broer (2011) that *Breakfast* exhibits a “newfound optimism” on the potential of human freedom. Furthermore, I agree with English professor Kathryn Hume (1982) that “human consciousness, helpfulness, [and] decency” are fundamental virtues in Vonnegut's oeuvre (p. 224). However, I disagree that *Breakfast*, having traversed the metaphorical Heraclitan river of instability, comes out the other side finding these virtues truly stable, as Hume argues. Nevertheless, despite potentially stifling postmodern uncertainty, and even though Vonnegut does “not assume that there is a common set of values held by [his] readers” (Brown, p. 171) there are still things that should, even must be said. The Vietnam war is a persistent background feature of *Breakfast's* moral landscape: “Viet Nam was a country where America was trying to make people stop being communists by dropping things on them from airplanes” (pp. 85-6). Moral opinion on the war will vary, but this presentation of the logic behind dropping things on people from airplanes to change their minds is shrewdly defamiliarizing, poignantly unsubtle, and brilliantly satirical. It is precisely because of the uncertainty and unstable qualities of contemporary ethical contemplation that *Breakfast's*

participatory ethos is so credible. Dropping things on people from airplanes does in fact not change people's minds, it kills them.

The interpretive history of Vonnegut as a postmodern satirist can be more confusing than revealing. This point itself highlights the high potential for disparate interpretations his authorship motivates. In order to examine the peculiar intrigue of *Breakfast's* satire I begin by considering Steven Weisenburger's (1995) theory of the modern American satire, and his simultaneous disparagement of Vonnegut and *Breakfast* in particular. *Breakfast's* satire is concerned with the more basic or fundamental features of both society and literature. The novel does not merely target a specific social problem or two. Instead, it targets dozens, and more importantly, it targets the way in which they entangle with the mess of postmodern chaos which is real life. Moreover and more contemplatively, it targets the false order stories impose on that chaos, *Breakfast's* Vonnegut instead attempting to "bring chaos to order" (p. 210). I argue that this entangled and chaotic quality is part of the novel's brilliance and makes it especially suitable for contemplating contemporary citizenship. Additionally, we consider *Breakfast's* argument and metaphor that life on earth in the postmodern world corresponds to the reiterating property captured by the "etc." in a diagram of a molecule of plastic.

Next, we explore the satirical uncertainty which this meta-level targeting entails through the categorization of Vonnegut as a misanthropic humanist. We follow this up with an existentialist interpretation focusing on *Breakfast's* lonely intercontinental trucker, and his observation that "the only kind of job an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way" (p. 86). Finally, we expand on the image that reading *Breakfast* is like opening the garbage can of American society and dispassionately observing its contents. The novel employs a dispassionate, objective and scientific voice which contributes to its



contemplative and uncanny satirical mode. I use this observational appreciation to defend the novel against a criticism which attempts to flatten *Breakfast* to a “schtick” of artless jokes. Moreover, I defend it against what is probably the sharpest criticism of *Breakfast* as a satire and arguably of Vonnegut's authorship in general. That is the charge that it succumbs to a fatalistic “do-nothing” ethos. If the moral take-away from reading Vonnegut is apathy, then how can we consider it “an act of good citizenship”? This criticism opens new and exciting ways of understanding the novel, whether you condemn its fatalism or agree with my attempt to salvage it. I argue that it is precisely its satirical-observational quality which opens the door for the reader to participate in the novel's moral contemplations, which truly makes its reading a contemplative exercise in good citizenship.

### Revealing The Great Cover-Up

According to Weisenburger (1995), traditional definitions of satire postulate four minimum requirements (pp. 14-29): “1. *Satire is rhetorical*,” meaning they are concerned with rational argument and persuasion. “2. *Satire requires an object of attack*,” typically a *type* of morally questionable person, or broader social quantity; that which the argument is pointed towards. “3. *Satire is corrective*,” and “4. *Satire is normative*”; one does not attack merely for the sake of attacking, but rather to ameliorate some moral delinquency in society. By these four postulates it is rather tricky to clearly define *Breakfast* as a satire. Depending on your perspective and interpretation the novel will either fulfill all, none, or some of these statements. And that is part of Wiesenberger's point, that moving into postmodernity and the postmodern novel, the traditional interpretive theories of satire come up short.

*Breakfast* is rhetorical, but not in the straightforward manner of the classical examples of satire, the ones the definition was made to account for usually are. Typically, a

satire's argument is clear, so that the reader will be persuaded in the desired direction. Some theoreticians go so far as to consider the satire to be essentially propagandistic (Weisenburger, pp. 15-6). We cannot say that of *Breakfast*, indeed this thesis's appreciation of the novel rests on the idea that reading *Breakfast* exercises the reader in their own, personal, and independent moral reflections. If you go searching for a clear-cut moral argument in *Breakfast*, what you find is chaos and complexity instead. It is simpler to say that *Breakfast* has an object of attack, and according to Abrams and Harpham (2012), we can analyze a satire based on what kind of target it takes. Whether it is "an individual," "a nation," or even "the entire human race" itself (Abrams and Harpham, p. 352). *Breakfast* is best understood by this final description, targeting America's cultural self-delusions, the ills of capitalism, consumer culture, racism, sexism, homophobia, environmental degradation, war, and even the act of storytelling. However, it is not that easy. The novel's contemplative engagement with the reader, particularly through its metafiction and dispassionate observational style, sets the reader up to engage with the satirical targeting in wholly untraditional ways. The purpose of *Breakfast* is not to be persuaded, rather it is to participate in a struggle. We can extend the reasoning from above to postulates three and four. The novel is corrective insofar as you believe this participatory struggle on the part of the reader is desirable, and it is normative in a broad democratic and empathetic sense.

Professor of Literature Robert R. Tally (2011) captures a similar experience of *Breakfast* as a satirical treatment of America in both a very broad and fundamental sense:

*Breakfast of Champions* represents a postmodern iconography in itself, the breakdown of signification amid the breakdown of a character's mind and the breakdown of American industrial society in general, represented by the collapse of a midwestern city's economy into a fragmented, consumerist culture where roadside

attractions and toxic chemical spills are more vibrant than any meaningful work in town. (p. 15)

It is as if Vonnegut wished to establish a baseline, to satirize all of existence as it appeared before him. Is that not the point of the head-clearing mission statement? Vonnegut entering his second half century as one begins the day with a bowl of breakfast. Tally's analysis of *Breakfast* is that of a regression of breakdown. Through the ills of the external world repeating themselves at different levels down into the individual, *Breakfast* becomes Vonnegut's portrait of postmodernity—"an iconography in itself." There is in this regression a philosophical stance on Vonnegut's part, his satire recognizing and reflecting on the complex entanglements of modern society.

One way of imagining Tally's analysis of *Breakfast* is through the Russian matryoshka doll. This metaphor highlights the layering of *Breakfast's* disparate targets. An example is the connection between American consumerism and environmental pollution. The relationship between them is not immediately visible, yet, hiding inside one we find the other<sup>8</sup>. The stacking doll analogy also allows us to play with the order of regression. Are we cracking open the pretty doll of consumerism's creature comforts? In *Breakfast's* case that could be a Barrytron Ltd. Robo-Magic automatic washing machine shaped doll. Inside this pretty doll we find its ugly consequence, the toxic sludge which is seeping into Sugar Creek. Or are we opening the ugly doll of pollution, and inside it exposing the culprit of mass consumerism? That depends on your perspective, your position in the world and where you are looking. *Breakfast's* satire seems to say that if you want to look at one, you should probably take a look at the other. Finally, the stacking analogy highlights the obscuring

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<sup>8</sup> This example is illustrative of how the reading and meaning of the same story changes over the course of time. In 2022 the connection between consumerism and pollution is common knowledge. In 1973 this literary connection would have been more fresh.

effects of our contemporary and entangled reality. In the example above, some people get the pretty doll, in fact they make millions of dollars producing them. They never see the toxic sludge, because it is hidden behind layers of corporate bureaucracy and historical injustice. In *Breakfast* that would be fabulously well-to-do Dwayne Hoover and the other guests of the Midland City arts festival. On the other hand, Kilgore Trout and the downtrodden residents of Midland City's Skid Row see only the pollution, slowly suffocating on the poisonous gas emanating from the factory, unable to afford whatever it is producing.

However, this analogy begins to breakdown when one more fully considers the multifarious, complexities of the contemporary world. The connections are not uniform and hierarchical, but chaotic and entangled. A different metaphor is the one Vonnegut uses, that of plastic. Vonnegut illustrates and contemplates the molecular structure of a polymer, saying it goes “on and on and on, repeating itself forever” (p. 227). This seems to be a better model for understanding the contemporary condition, a model both *for* and *of* this new age. Vonnegut draws the analogy to its ultimate conclusion, arguing that “any story about people” shares this plastic quality since “life is now a polymer in which the Earth is wrapped so tightly” (p. 228). The treatment of the chaotic nature of reality, and how it relates to our stories, is one of *Breakfast's* most intriguing facets.

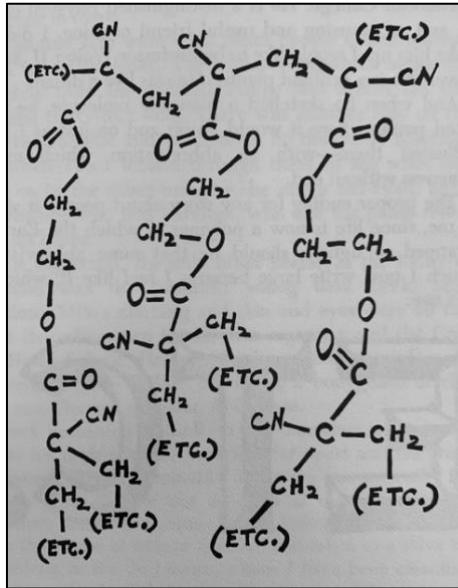


Figure 6, Diagram of a molecule of plastic, p. 227

The narrator argues that life today is best understood by its chaotic entanglements, which he analogizes to the qualities of plastic. In opposition to this plastic theory of life is the false order fiction imposes upon reality. Arguably it is this deceptive nature of stories which is the most constant target of *Breakfast's* satire. An illustrative example is the totalitarian nature of history—the false sense that mainstream capital h History is something stable and true, which in turn is used to exploit and marginalize the powerless. We investigate the issue of history in *Breakfast* in the next chapter of this thesis. The treatment of this deception is what Weisenburger calls “the satirist reveal[ing] language as the great cover-up” (1995, p. 26), a concept he uses to describe the postmodern satire. It is similar to Hutcheon’s metafictional paradox explored in the previous chapter, where the reader confronts the text’s illusionary quality, while at the same time maintaining it. I argue that this is what the head-clearing mission statement suggests, the novel’s targeting the world on a meta level, “the things other people have put into my head.” And Vonnegut spells it out again with his typical unsubtlety about two thirds through the novel:

Why were so many Americans treated by their government as though their lives were as disposable as paper facial tissues? Because that was the way authors customarily treated bit-part players in their made-up tales.

And so on.

Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done.

If all writers would do that, then perhaps citizens not in the literary trades will understand that there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead. (p. 210)

An immediate reflection we can make on the above citation is the extreme democratic ethos with which *Breakfast* is written, “every person” and “all facts [being] given equal weightiness.” Moreover, this is a principled articulation of the scientific objectivity I read in *Breakfast*. Rather than force order upon the world through “storytelling,” Vonnegut attempts to convey the chaos that *is* the world. Reading a story this way has the potential both for humor and philosophical introspection. It allows the reader to reflect upon how much of our conception of the world is a fiction, Vonnegut attempting to reflect the chaotic afictional nature of reality in the novel. Such reflections can inform contemporary contemplations of good citizenship. The traditional civic conceptualizations, what Thunder calls “the pretty picture of the good citizen” (p. 4), are after all fictions.

Vonnegut clearly believes that imagining that the real world is orderly like it is presented in our stories is bad for society, and that authors have a responsibility to their fellow citizens to reveal it as such. Revealing the “great cover-up” in Weisenburger’s words (1995, p. 26). A simple example of Vonnegut’s suspicion that the false order of fiction is

harmful and repeats itself like a polymer, spreading bad ideas through society and into people's heads, is the concept of Skid Row:

Every American town of any size had a neighborhood with the same nickname: Skid Row. It was a place where people who didn't have any friends or relatives or property or usefulness or ambition were supposed to go.

People like that would be treated with disgust in other neighborhoods, and policemen would keep them moving. They were as easy to move, usually, as toy balloons. (p. 183)

Poverty and poor neighborhoods are very real of course, yet even their existence relies on historical circumstance, and certain political and moral beliefs; one's which Vonnegut finds highly problematic. However, the name "Skid Row," and the way people in other neighborhoods treat its residents, are also the consequence of preconceived, potentially fictitious ideas. We think it is normal, even natural that every town has a Skid Row and that we should treat poorly its poor and dirty inhabitants. The dispassionate and outsider perspective of Vonnegut asks us to question this received truth. The illustration of the road sign is clever because it exposes its fictitious reality. Local governments would not put up such a sign because skid row is not a real place, and yet "every American town" has one.

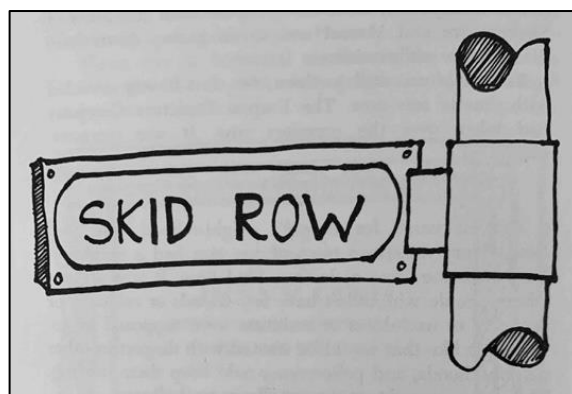


Figure 7, Skid Row road sign, p. 184

Post-industrial America, poverty, consumerism, racism, etc. are satirical targets in a more conventional sense. However, the novel's targeting fiction itself, the "bad ideas" which storytelling naturalizes in society is more convoluted. Vonnegut's "shunning storytelling"

and embracing chaos poses some challenges for a satirical analysis. Firstly, chaos is chaotic, and any analysis must make choices about selection and interpretation, and thus impose order upon the story. Vonnegut does this too, if in a more roundabout way which explicitly acknowledges the limits of storytelling. Secondly, it requires an effort on the part of the reader to participate in the exposing of fiction as such, and to go along with the philosophical move that Vonnegut's "bring[ing] chaos to order" is at all possible or desirable. Reading Vonnegut we are never far from paradoxical dichotomy, whether that is a story which shuns storytelling, or his oeuvre defining "misanthropic humanism." It is this latter feature of *Breakfast's* satire we investigate next.

### Misanthropic Humanism and the Intercontinental Truck Driver

*Breakfast's* satire, of both society and the fictional order of stories, depends on the reader to participate in meaning-making reflections. Vonnegut rarely gives away the point for free, and a contemplative reading regularly butts up against the question of whether Vonnegut is "kidding or not." In reply to this question Trout answers, "I won't know myself until I find out whether *life* is serious or not" (p. 86). This mode of satirical uncertainty may be understood as an expression of Vonnegut's "misanthropic humanism" (Tally, 2011). Tally's witty dichotomy, on its surface contradictory, nonetheless hints at Vonnegut's satirical black humor, contemplative mystique, and "paradoxical politics" (Robbins, 2016). A humanist who hates humans, some explanation is in order. In *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* (2011), Tally periodizes Vonnegut's novels by time and philosophical theme. His bold and overarching argument is that Vonnegut's novels step past the "now dubious" "nineteenth century" goals of the "great American novel" (p. 17), instead offering an iconography of the USA in the postmodern age. One senses here



some academic positioning, keeping in mind Vonnegut's declined status in academia, Tally attempting to attribute some "greatness" onto Vonnegut after all.

Misanthropic humanism can be understood as a state of frustration between a genuine love for one's fellow humans, and a thoroughgoing pessimism that humanity is fundamentally self-destructive. This uncomfortable balancing act saturates *Breakfast*, and we can trace this disposition in the novel on several levels, from the global down to the intimate and personal. An example:

The intercontinental truck driver Trout hitch-hikes with is incredibly lonely. He can go anywhere, but he has nowhere to call home. "He wanted Trout to have a rich social life so that he could enjoy it vicariously" (p. 104), but is disappointed that despite Trout's stationary job, he too has no real friends:

"You walk down the same streets every day," the driver told him. "You know a lot of people, and they know you, because it's the same streets for you, day after day. You say, 'Hello,' and they say 'Hello,' back. You call them by name. They call you by name. If you're in a real jam, they'll help you, because you're one of 'em. You belong. They see you every day." (p. 104)

Both the image of literal, physical belonging, "walking the same streets", and the spiritual importance of friendship, someone knowing your name, haunts *Breakfast's* America.

Homelessness and nameless are defining features of its iconography, satirizing a very sorry state of society. We never learn the trucker's name, a hunter/fisherman in his previous life, he mourns the environmental destruction he witnesses wherever he drives: "His truck was turning the atmosphere into poison gas, and [...] the planet was being turned into pavement so his truck could go anywhere" (p. 85).

The image of the encapsulation, of both human and earth, is repeated several times in the novel. We saw it in the case of plastic above, and in the next chapter we consider Perma-stone, a covering of false stone to make old houses look new. The driver includes in his environmentalist appraisal the ongoing war in Viet Nam. His brother works in a factory which makes the chemicals which “kill all the foliage, so it would be harder for communists to hide from airplanes” (pp. 85-6). The Trucker concludes, “Seems like the only kind of job an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way” (p. 86). Awfully bleak, yet Trout rescues the gloomy atmosphere by jokingly pointing out that since God is not a conservationist neither is he, and the Trucker agrees seeing as there is nothing about conservationism in the Bible.

In ecological and existential terms, the universe being absurd, your best efforts are very likely to be futile. What is the lonely truck driver to do in the face of chaotic global economic and historical forces which shape (and kill) the world? Everyone has to make a living after all. Vonnegut's consistent ability to eloquently and concisely convey the chaotic entanglements of psychology, economics, ecology, mass-culture, history, politics, etc., is remarkable, and deserving of critical appreciation. It is particularly impressive in its higher-level conveyance of a new realism reflecting the postmodern condition.

Trout's response is representative of Vonnegut's trademark cheerful fatalism, a philosophical aesthetic which Tally explores through Nietzsche's concept of the “amor fati”, the love of fate (2011, p. 71), and Nietzsche's famous quotation that in a depressing and difficult age “[...] what is needed more than cheerfulness?” (as cited in Tally, 2011, p. xii) How you take this cheerful fatalism likely determines how you judge the effectiveness of Vonnegut's satire, and by association his goal that writing should be an act of good citizenship (Vonnegut, 1988, p. 72).

Misanthropic humanism presents itself as an answer to English professor Micah Robbins's (2016) political criticism of Vonnegut. Robbins sets up Vonnegut's outspoken socialism and anti-war politics, contrasting it to his perceived "do-nothing ethos," a phrase he borrows from Weisenburger (1995), and argues that Vonnegut's comedic fatalism ultimately denies the possibility of spirited and organized progressive social change. In this interpretation, humor devolves into little more than a coping-mechanism which has the perverse and counterproductive effect of seducing the reader into a state of political apathy. Any reader who wishes to take Vonnegut's satire as a serious and valuable entry into political discourse must tackle this criticism. It is not merely the opinion of ivory tower nay-sayers; it is an internal part of *Breakfast* with which Vonnegut himself struggles. We will explore this criticism of Vonnegut further, and bring in Weisenburger's analysis, in the next sub-chapter.

First a sidenote on suicide. Camus begins his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* by stating "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (1975, p. 11). The image of suicide looms large in *Breakfast*, both as global metaphor, as in the example of the intercontinental trucker, narratively as in the case of Dwayne Hoover's wife who drank Drāno (a brand of drain cleaner), biographically when Vonnegut references his mother's actual suicide, and most troublingly in the explicit and implicit metafictional hinting towards Vonnegut's own suicidal thoughts. Suicide was a major concern of Vonnegut and the Existentialists; its absurd rationality becoming a fulcrum around which human freedom may be investigated. Camus continues, "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (p. 11). One can easily read *Breakfast* in response to this question. We can also extend the question of suicide to Robbins' "Do-

nothing” political critique of Vonnegut—suicide being the most extreme form of giving up on the possibility of positive change.

When you read *Breakfast*, you sway in and out of the story and the story above the story. This is an effect of *Breakfast's* “no fourth wall” metafictional style, the most slippery feature of which is that Vonnegut knows that the reader knows that Vonnegut knows, etc. The novel constantly toys with the limits of fiction and metafictional regression, and two thirds of the way through the novel, the threat of Vonnegut's mental health and possible suicide comes to a head. It seems Vonnegut feels obliged to promise his readers that he is ok: “I am better now. Word of honor: I am better now” (p. 194). The confidential tone is typical of the novel. The making of a promise, however, very much breaks from the novel's overall objective and observational mood. It is as if I do not believe that Vonnegut believes it, and is instead motivated by a sense of duty. There is something deeply sympathetic and civically virtuous in the collective struggle to find life worth living, particularly when we cannot be entirely sure. “Collective” because we participate in it as we read; it is the reader Vonnegut gives his word of honor too, the act of which has clear civic-duty connotations. Then there is the fact that Vonnegut actually did attempt suicide in 1984, ten years following *Breakfast's* publication (Streitfeld, 1991).

Existentialist contemplations, whether under the label of misanthropic humanism, environmentalism, or suicide, are part of a complete reading of the novel as a satire. Moreover, such contemplation gives the reading political vitality and makes it more pleasurable. Furthermore, this existentialist contemplation is related to the text's political ambitions. The sense of belonging to one's society, and above all the virtue of kindness, being potential sources of purpose. Moving forward I argue that *Breakfast's* meta-level satirical targeting is pursued through the employment of a dispassionate, scientific, and

observational style. For the sake of argument imagine a clear distinction between observing life, as an objective scientist does, and expressing life, as a storyteller does. There is of course no such clear divide, the scientist must interpret, and the storyteller must observe. Yet, this distinction helps pin down the uncanny quality of Vonnegut's dispassionate and objective satire.

## Observing the Contents of the Garbage Can

In the head-clearing mission statement Vonnegut imagines "crossing the spine of a roof" and gazing down onto "a sidewalk strewn with junk" (p. 6). This is an image of a satirist, who from his elevated perspective sees more clearly the world down below. What is vital to remember, however, is that *Breakfast* is not only targeting society "down there," but it also targets its author and itself. After all, it is "*this book*" that is "a sidewalk strewn with junk." Through both symbol and metaphor, Vonnegut crafts his novel out of the garbage which American consumerism produces, and that garbage has a lot to say about the culture that created it. It is what America is made of—its mythology even. You need not look further than the novel's title to begin this analysis. "Breakfast of Champions" is the popular slogan of General Mills' breakfast cereal Wheaties. Fords, *Reader's Digest* magazines, and Wheaties breakfast cereal: these are some of the consumer goods that constitute an American culture. The very sound of them becoming a cacophonous background hum of America, and Vonnegut cannot stand it anymore. He imagines writing as a cleansing act, "trying to make [his] head as empty as it was when [he] was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago" (p. 5). The quest for something sacred and enduring in a world of profane and disposable consumption. However, you do not empty your mind of that which you focus most sharply upon. If anything, the novel revels in it, overflowing with references to consumer products, brands, slogans, and idioms; there must be over a hundred. Again, the novel itself is a

product of this very same culture, a truth Vonnegut's incessant referencing of brands and consumer goods does not let you forget.

Michael Crichton, writing for the *New Republic*, said of the Vonnegut novel "[it] is not cute or precious. It is literally awful, for Vonnegut is one of the few writers able to lift the lid of the garbage can, and dispassionately examine the contents." (as cited in Tomedi, 2013, p. 120). This is what I have called Vonnegut's dispassionate or scientific objectivism, and I believe it answers many of the criticisms surrounding Vonnegut's authorship. The gaze into the garbage can, or onto the "sidewalk strewn with junk," is both funny and disgusting, demoralizing and empathetic. I read much negative criticism of Vonnegut, including Weisenburger (1995) and Robbins (2016), as those critics wanting Vonnegut to take a clear normative stance on the contents of the garbage. They seem to say, "just come out and say this garbage is very gross already." However, for those who appreciate it, there is something "tangy" (p. 37), borrowing a phrase from Kilgore Trout, about the room for participation such dispassionate examination invites.

Weisenburger's *Fables of Subversion, Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* (1995) is a historical and theoretical project. He distinguishes older "generative satires," which more closely conform to the traditional formalist definitions, from the new "degenerative satires," which do not. The new satire lacks a "a steady narrative voice, specific "targets," and fixed norms or corrective goals" (p. 14). Instead Weisenburger focusing on the "carnavalesque *topos*," (p. 28) a term taken from earlier satires of hedonism and mob-rule, giving it a new postmodern and American flavor of the simulacra-qualities of a mass-culture where "nothing is what it seems" (p. 25). One way of conceiving of the difference is that the generative satire seeks order, taking "for granted satire's ability to punish vice and uphold liberalist norms" (p. 27). While the degenerative satire questions

whether order is at all possible, exposing language as the “great cover-up” (p. 26) and resisting the naturalization of metanarratives. Paradoxically, they use language to criticize the status-quo maintaining nature of language. Weisenburger's reflections, particularly on the carnivalesque and black humor (pp. 92-4) are helpful when reading *Breakfast*; however, the explicitly negative way in which he uses Vonnegut in his literary history raises some questions for this thesis.

Weisenburger gives Vonnegut credit as an important early writer of black humor, yet he goes on to backhandedly label his acclaim as “hype” (p. 27), and his innovations as “seemingly avant-garde but really quite conventional” (p. 259). In the first case he charges that Vonnegut's style boils down to little more than a “schtick” of artless “jokes.” This criticism is rather unfair as Weisenburger seems to purposely misread an obvious self-deprecating joke Vonnegut makes in his Playboy interview (pp. 92-94). Weisenburger's final conclusion on Vonnegut, and *Breakfast* more specifically is that despite Vonnegut's empathy for humanity his novels “fail to find an enabling lie” and “lack the courage to explore its degenerative negative satire” (p. 178). The issue as I see it is Weisenburger's mistake that Vonnegut's stories should search for such an “enabling lie” in the first place. That is the logic with which fiction imposes order onto life, and as I argue *Breakfast*'s satire targets that very notion. In Weisenburger's own terms, perhaps Vonnegut is more degenerative than he gives him credit for. I read *Breakfast* as the narrator wishing he could give his readers the answers he himself has been unable to find. Is that not equally courageous, to seek some truth and fail to find it, and nevertheless tell a story? In fact, to tell a story about that very failure is a kind of courage. This is in line with an existentialist search for meaning in a meaningless world and is the source of the profundity readers find in Vonnegut's famous meiosis, “So it goes,” from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and “And so on” and “Etc.” in *Breakfast*. To argue that

such fatalist exclamations in the face of life are cowardly or apathetic is to entirely miss the point. Instead, *Breakfast* compares life on earth to the reiterating quality of a polymer chain, a grand “Etc.”. Life imagined this way is neither rhetorical, targeting, or normative, in the sense of a traditional satire, yet it is nonetheless investigating American society and the human condition with satirical intent.

Weisenburger's argument begs for a normative “tying of the bow” at the end of the novel, which would only serve to undercut its participatory power. When you tell someone what or how they should think you rob them of the exercise of thinking for themselves. That is a powerful effect of Vonnegut's observational voice. Moreover, *Breakfast's* search for an “enabling lie,” despite the extraordinary futility and even failure the story expresses, makes it and its satire only more avant-garde and contemplative.

Additionally, Weisenburger criticizes the political vision in Vonnegut's authorship. The line of attack is that Vonnegut “shortchanges” any social vision for simple jokes whose “sum is identical to its parts” (pp. 92-94). It is strange that Weisenburger's project, which is so concerned with the carnivalesque nature of American postmodernity, is unable to see how Vonnegut's portrait of America as a quilt of inanity, does not actually say something quite profound. Professor Micah Robbins (2016) continues this political criticism, borrowing the phrase “do-nothing ethos” from Weisenburger to do so. The accusation that Vonnegut's satire is defeatist is of obvious concern to this thesis, with its focus on the political concept of good citizenship. The criticism has its origins in Vonnegut's open skepticism towards art's ability to affect real socio-political change. On the topic of the power of literature to affect politics, Vonnegut said of the Vietnam anti-war movement: “Every respectable artist in this country was against the war. It was like a laser beam. We were all aimed in the same direction. The power of this weapon turns out to be that of a custard pie dropped from a



stepladder six feet high” (Hoppe, 2003). This is also a well-worn debate, particularly in leftist intellectual circles, where the relationship between art and politics is forever in contention. Answering this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will make two brief points on the matter. The first is, that even if Robbins and Weisenburger are correct and these stories do embody a do-nothing ethos, that does not mean that the story was not worth telling. It is odd that Robbins should in one line state that Vonnegut's novels “expose the sometimes subtle pathologies that produce unparalleled suffering in the contemporary world, and they do so in such a way as to stir lasting sympathies in his audience” (2016), and not at least acknowledge that that in itself contains the seeds of political change, never minding if Vonnegut's stories are fatalistic or not. A similar point was made by Jean Paul Sartre in his 1948 *What is Literature?*:

And if we are told that we are acting as if we were quite important and that it is quite childish of us to hope that we can change the course of the world, we shall reply that we have no illusions about it, but that nevertheless it is fitting that certain things be said, even though it be only to save face in the eyes of our children; and besides, we do not have the crazy ambition of influencing the State Department, but rather the slightly less crazy one of acting upon the opinion of our fellow citizens. (p. 230)

There are especially two points from this citation that are helpful for appreciating *Breakfast* as a satire. The first is the conviction that in the face of possible or even probable futility, “nevertheless it is fitting that certain things be said.” The phrase “do-nothing ethos” is an oversimplification which does not help us think about the kinds of problems we face in the modern world, and hence the way in which *Breakfast* satirizes it. If the novel is apathetic, it is because it is observing a world in which apathy is commonplace, even a natural reaction. Just because Vonnegut does so with dispassionate objectivity, does not mean that his satire is itself apathetic. The second point is his belief that literature should appeal to “our fellow

citizens.” Robbins argues that Vonnegut's authorship lacks progressive potential and may be counter-productive to its political ambitions. In my opinion, that is to undervalue the participatory power of reading *Breakfast*, a novel which attempts to embody the chaotic nature of the postmodern condition. When Vonnegut opens the garbage can of American society, readers recognize its contents. Furthermore, it is not the case *Breakfast* is without any “enabling lies” as Weisenburger claims, it is in fact saturated by the extreme democratic ethos that “every person would be exactly as important as any other” and “all facts would also be given equal weightiness” (p. 210).

## Chapter Conclusion

On its surface *Breakfast* is a satirical treatment of the American consumer society, as is evident from its title. More profoundly, it is a treatment of the human condition as explored through a contemplation of the false orderliness of fiction. Those fictions are both literary, such as in Vonnegut’s suspicion that humans treat each other poorly “because that was the way authors customarily treated bit-part players in their made-up tales” (p. 210), and they are commercial, such as the mass culture of American consumerism which is filling up our heads. *Breakfast*'s paradoxical origin is the contemplation of fiction as a sort of lie, Vonnegut’s subsequent resolve “to shun storytelling” (p. 210), and the fact that he nevertheless tells a story. Life as opposed to fiction, in *Breakfast*'s assessment, is better understood as chaos, and the novel develops a metaphor of life on earth as akin to plastic, endlessly repeating itself, and attempts to capture this postmodern complexity through its storytelling. Stories pretend at order, life on the other hand is a grand “ETC.”

*Breakfast* is a story which claims to “shun storytelling.” Another peculiar and defining dichotomy of the novel’s satire is its misanthropic humanism. We investigated this philosophical oeuvre through the example of the intercontinental trucker Trout hitchhikes

with. “The planet was being turned into pavement so his truck could go anywhere,” and yet he has no place to call home. This societal pessimism is taken to its limits through the novel’s contemplations on suicide, both on the individual and global level. By appreciating the narrator's dispassionate objectivity as a form of honest satirical appraisal, rather than fatalistic apathy, we can appreciate another subtle profundity of the novel. Vonnegut, opening the lid of the trashcan seems to say, “this is the world.” That dispassionate appraisal expresses the novel’s compassionate and democratic ethos that “every person would be exactly as important as any other.” As such *Breakfast* is a contemplative exercise in good citizenship, and a serious encounter with the often-stifling effects of postmodern complexity, particularly in the political domain. Apathy is a natural reaction to the world, and yet we must be willing to gaze into the garbage can. How we understand what we see when we look at the present state of the world, whether that is in 1973 or 2022, depends on our historical consciousness. Therefore, in our final chapter we investigate *Breakfast's* treatment of history.

## Chapter 3: A People's History

Vonnegut, despite the apathy Weisenburger (1995) and Robbins (2016) read in his satire, was a political writer who imagined, and wanted to help create a better future. In his 1973 *Playboy* interview, responding to the question of why he writes Vonnegut says, "My motives are political. I agree with Stalin and Hitler and Mussolini that the writer should serve his society. I differ with dictators as to *how* writers should serve" (1974, p. 237). *Breakfast's* political ambitions begin as many political ambitions do, by looking backwards, "travel[ing] in time back to November eleventh, nineteen hundred and twenty-two" (p. 6). In his head-clearing mission statement Vonnegut explicitly says that he is going back in time. Yet, the novel's plot plays out entirely in present day 1970s America. Is that not a bit strange? Not if you recognize that history is not really in the past per se, but a story about the past which is told in the present. As Grmuša (2009) points out "it is in human nature to try to endow the world with meaning, which is why scholars impose a coherent although artificial order upon reality" (p. 129). Vonnegut's fiction both implicitly and explicitly plays with and challenges popular conceptions of history and even the possibility of a stable historical understanding. We see here clear links between *Breakfast's* treatment of history and a more general skepticism of order as explored in the previous chapters. In Grmuša's analysis Vonnegut exposes American cultural and political assumptions of absolute truth, both moral and historical, subverting them to comical and political effect.

Human confrontation with history, and how it colors our perceptions of the past, present and future, is what history didactics calls historical consciousness (Kvande & Naastad, 2013, p. 45). Understanding one's relationship to history is a fundamental aspect of one's identity. It will affect how you understand yourself, your society, and your place in it. As such, a well-developed historical consciousness is understood as "empowering"

(Kvande & Naastad, 2013, p. 106), and an important feature of good citizenship (Knutsen, 2015). Take as example the recent rise in “Great Again” nationalist rhetoric in the West as popularized by US president Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. The logic is simple, “we used to be great, however we are not anymore, but by looking back we can be again.” Here the role of history in politics is evident. Moreover, in this example history's totalitarian and marginalizing capacity shines through. Who is “we,” which history are we looking back to, and whose perception of “greatness” is it that counts? In this chapter I read *Breakfast*, its treatment of history and expression of historical consciousness as a contemplative exercise in good citizenship.

We begin by reading *Breakfast's* first chapter, a sweeping and sarcastic history lesson of the USA, “America for short” (p. 7). It is purposefully controversial, highlighting the hypocritical and unpleasant aspects of American history many prefer to brush under the rug, or worse, jingoistically celebrate. In this sense it is a “people's history”<sup>9</sup>, a historical narrative told “from below,” which focuses on the poor, oppressed and generally marginalized. It puts America in its place, activating contemplation and reflection of what it means to be an American, a good citizen or even just a person. Then we consider *Breakfast's* historical consciousness. Vonnegut's authorship is often associated with his innovative use of time travel in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *Breakfast*, on the other hand, explores a postmodern

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<sup>9</sup> “People's history” is a narrative label conveying an historical, political, and moral stance, and is perhaps best known through historian Howard Zinn's 1980 book *A People's History of the United States*. However, “people's histories” go back much further, and are frequently associated with early Marxist histories of the French Revolution. As a tradition it is in direct opposition to the “Great Man theory” of history. *Breakfast* embodies the same concern with how history has treated the poor and oppressed. As an aside, Vonnegut and Zinn both fought in WWII, became two of the fiercest anti-war voices on the left during the Vietnam and Iraq wars, and even became friends.

state of the “loss of historicity,” which is understood by Fredric Jameson as an especially “antipolitical” trait of postmodernism (Jameson, 1991, pp. 158-159). It is an odd and alienating sensation akin to being stranded or homeless, one that *Breakfast* exhibits with contemplative subtlety. We explore this peculiar historical dissonance through Vonnegut's relationship to Phoebe Hurty, the woman to whom he dedicates the novel. Furthermore, we consider side character Wayne Hoobler, a poor Black American who “ached to be a useful machine” (p. 188), and Vonnegut's more general “bad chemicals” theory of human history and suffering.

### ‘Some Terrible Mistake Had Been Made’

*Breakfast* retells American History with humor and gall. In its first chapter it lays a foundation of historical fatalism upon which the rest of the novel's analysis of America is built. In the process of lampooning the symbols and received truths of a patriotic mainstream American education, Vonnegut writes:

The undippable flag was a beauty, and the anthem and the vacant motto might not have mattered much, if it weren't for this: a lot of citizens were so ignored and cheated and insulted that they thought they might be in the wrong country, or even on the wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made. (p. 9)

A “terrible mistake” is a sardonic and humbling phrase. It sets up the notion that things ought to have been different, and it does so with an ironic duality. It is easy to claim “ought,” people do that all the time. However, in Vonnegut's matter of fact, childlike style, a universal “ought” is expressed. As if God had made a mistake. The unfairness, never seizing, grinds around the nave of “vacant” American half-truths and banalities. “Citizen,” a member of a political community, is supposed to mean something. But “a lot of citizens” are alienated from that political belonging, reduced to citizen in name only. This ironic inversion further ridicules the false metanarratives of the USA, such as the American Dream or the

moral superiority of capitalism, an economic system where “everybody in America was supposed to grab whatever he could and hold on to it” (Vonnegut, 1973, p. 13). This characterization is typical of Vonnegut's defamiliarizing style, making the taken for granted historical status quo seems strange and barbaric. The novel explicitly names “communism,” the “theory that what was left of the planet should be shared more or less equally” (p. 12), but it never names capitalism, instead leaving the step of putting two and two together up to the reader. “Grabbing vs. sharing”: a political, economic and historical debate presented with childlike naïveté contributes to the novel’s satirical didactics. Vonnegut has that special knack for making his point strongly and without subtlety, and yet it not coming off as browbeating.

The dissonance between a typical historical consciousness, and the absurd sarcasm that “a terrible mistake had been made” makes clear that citizenship is not enough. Had the history of the USA Vonnegut was taught in middle school been true, then surely the situation would be different. This reasoning heightens our consciousness, using history to make a political argument. It is those who have been ignored, cheated, and insulted, both by their society and their history, those to whom the grand “mistake” has been made, that Vonnegut judges his country by.

*Breakfast* frequently employs a cultural relativism at the expense of the USA, in this example its economic system. However, it is not a book about capitalism vs. communism. What is noteworthy about this literary explication of competing economic ideologies is that the framework of “capitalism vs. communism” almost totally saturates western historical consciousness. In 1973, and through to today, the legacy of the Cold War colors how we understand and view history. If Vonnegut could have flipped a switch and turned America socialist, perhaps he would, his socialist inclinations were no secret (Farell, 2008, p. 472).

But *Breakfast* is not really about Vonnegut's political fantasies. In *Breakfast* the ambitions of Eugene Debs, Vonnegut's political hero, are dead and buried. Capitalism has won, and Vonnegut is taking stock. After all, the novel is named after a capitalistic slogan. The story begins fully zoomed out, observing the globe, allowing the narrator to poke fun at America's "superiority." But almost immediately, it zooms in on a small group of Americans as they make their way through their "terrible mistake" of a country.

Tearing down the USA's flag, anthem, statues and other "baroque trash" (p. 9) is humorous and educational in its highlighting that capital h History is something like a fiction. However, Vonnegut is grasping for something to believe in and probably would not mind America's "aristocrat[ic] [... hocus pocus from ancient times" if it "had mentioned fairness or brotherhood or hope or happiness, had somehow welcomed them to the society and its real estate" (pp. 9-10). What is worse, History is pernicious when it allows society to cloak in "nonsense" that which should rightly be called "evil" (p. 10). This is the status-quo against which Vonnegut's historical consciousness is wrestling. Public school history education, while being something Vonnegut deeply treasures, is directly targeted in the opening of *Breakfast*:

But some of that nonsense was evil, since it concealed great crimes. For example, teachers of children in the Unites States of America wrote this date on blackboards again and again, and asked children to memorize it with pride and joy: (p. 10)

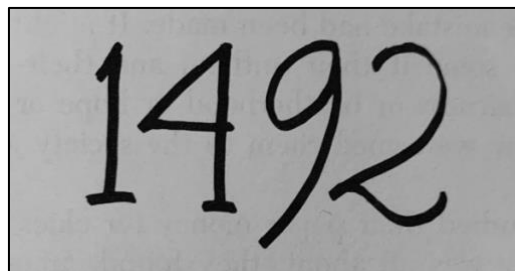


Figure 8, 1492, p. 10



Vonnegut paints an innocent classroom tableau which through defamiliarization exposes education's totalitarian manufacture of the citizenries' historical consciousness. Any the nostalgia for an American patriotic education is swiftly undermined. America was not discovered, "instead 1492 was simply the year sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill [millions of human beings]" (p. 10). This whimsical blasphemy serves several functions. It confronts Americans with uncomfortable truths about their citizenship—the violent history of America's conquering ever-latent in all American history and society.

This history lesson also signals Vonnegut and his readership's position in the 1970s counterculture, creating an in-group of people who desired to talk and joke about uncomfortable truths. Likewise, it allows modern and future readers to both laugh and cry at themselves, their societies, and question similar received truths. Perhaps most profoundly, through defamiliarization and an anthropological voice, it makes the case that society and history are the products of humans. Things are the way they are because people made them so. And there is reason to be skeptical of the stories we are taught in middle school. Moreover, in an age where fascistic-nationalistic "Great Again" political rhetoric, understood here as an abuse of history, is on the rise, the role of a skeptical and exercised historical consciousness is all the more important. *Breakfast's* "people's history" may be more mainstream today than it would have been in the 1970s. But precisely because of the novel's age, as well as Vonnegut's position in American social history, it can serve as civic instruction against contemporary reactionary voices who cloud their arguments in a general critique of modernity. To those who argue that society would flourish if only we could return to "the good old days," *Breakfast's* history lesson stands in opposition. It was not true then, and it is not true today. When a contemporary reader recognizes themselves and their

society in a novel from fifty years ago, they are empowered in a very special way. James Baldwin said of this communal experience of literature:

You read something you thought only happened to you, and you discover that it happened over 100 years ago to Dostoyevsky. This is a very great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that he is alone. This is why art is important. Art would not be important if life were not important, and life *is* important. (1989, p. 21)

There is a living quality to great art, transcending time, and teaching us something about ourselves, both our past and our present. Calvino (2000) recognized this in his reflections on how classical works of literature both transcend history and take on new meanings dependent on which age they are read in (p. 3-9). Furthermore, Baldwin's citation underscores the liberating and egalitarian qualities of literature. Authorship and reading becoming acts of solidarity—good citizenship in the language of this thesis. As an aside, Baldwin's curt and unjustified assertion that "life *is* important" accurately captures a core of *Breakfast's* existential and political position. There is no justification—the assertion, like the human who makes it, stands alone. It is its standing alone, without justification that gives it its power.

In liberal western societies it is not normal to imagine injustice, poverty, racism etc. as a "mistake." It is the sort of thing a child might say, the oddness of the notion triggering reflections within the reader. In fact, the western and American ideology of meritocracy contributes to a widely held belief that people's destinies are no mistake but rather their own creation. *Breakfast* challenges this rational heartlessness, and wishes to imagine bonds of affection, rather than justifications of injustice, as the core of good citizenship. There is in the civic contemplations of *Breakfast* a sense of limbo between utopia and dystopia. Humans can love each other and be kind, yet inevitably they hate each other, do war and

kill. It is fair to say that Vonnegut desires to imagine utopia, but his appraisal of the world will not let him get away with it. When Trout is confronted with the inexplicable cruelties of the world, he smirks: “There was only one way for the Earth to be [...] the way it was” (p. 102). This is related to what literary and cultural critic Secvan Bercovitch called the American myth of the lost Eden (Tally, 2011, pp.19-20). The myth describes an American striving for an imagined lost paradise; beginning already with the New England Puritans, but which repeats itself through the American Revolution, Vonnegut's contemporary hippy readership, and into today with amongst others the MAGA-movement. The loss of Eden is a form of historical consciousness, one which Vonnegut struggles with. *Breakfast's* America is neither utopian nor dystopian, such dichotomies are examples of the false orderliness of fiction and being cleared out like so much other garbage. Next, we explore the uncanny homelessness *Breakfast's* expresses in its place.

## An Exercise in Historical Consciousness

Historical consciousness, a meta understanding of one's own relationship with history, is an important element of understanding and developing a sense of good citizenship (Knutsen, 2015). Reflections upon what it means to be a good citizen are in large part determined by one's historical understanding, and particularly the shared national history you learn in public school. No wonder national patriotic history and public education is such a hotly debated topic (Keller, 2017). One perspective on Vonnegut's head-clearing mission is that *Breakfast* is a definitive confrontation between the “buoyant civic optimism [Vonnegut] learned in grade school during the Great Depression” (Sumner, 2011, ch. 7, n.p.), and an adult awareness that much of what you were taught in school is in fact baloney. This is the lack of culture Vonnegut laments in his head-clearing mission statement.

We can begin this investigation of *Breakfast* as history-exercise by thinking about the national ethos of the American Dream.

Vonnegut biographer Gregory Sumner describes *Breakfast* as “a commentary on the American Dream as the insurgent hopes of the sixties collapsed” (2011, ch. 7, n.p.). We can interpret this citation in a couple ways. First, the “fabulously well-to-do” Dwayne Hoover is the novel's unmistakable satirical caricature of the American success story, who despite his material success suffers from both chemical and spiritual degradation. This fits well with critiques of the American Dream which point out the dream's harsh reality and injustice. The exposing of the American Dream as something cruel rather than good goes to the core of Vonnegut's humanism, socialism, and authorship more generally (Sumner, ch. 11, n.p.). This treatment places Vonnegut in a proud literary tradition associated with authors such as Arthur Miller and John Steinbeck, all three of whom investigated the spiritual vacuousness of building a society around the “dream” of winners and losers.

Second, *Breakfast* can be read as a commentary on the historical nature of the American Dream itself. This nuancing sees the dream as a product of history which shifts across time. From the hopeful and egalitarian civic idealism of Phoebe Hurty to the perverse and cruel social Darwinism of Ayn Rand. It is quite natural that our dreams change along with our historical conceptions. I can imagine this historical movement by first looking at Norman Rockwell's paintings “The Four Freedoms,” which romantically portray New Deal aspirations for a more egalitarian future for humanity. Here the American Dream is imagined as something closer to solidarity, family, and neighborliness. It is an American leftist working class nationalism which is even harder to imagine today than it would have been in 1973. We can travel forward in time and imagine this previous civic imagination having been replaced by a Reagan era “bootstraps” iconography. Or, moving into

contemporary history, you can imagine the burlesque imagery of Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. What these divergent images show is that the historical conception of the American Dream has shifted. In our age, assuming the selfish and egotistical ideals which *Breakfast* struggles against. This is, to be sure, a leftist critique and fantasy. However, it is important to acknowledge the leftist streak in *Breakfast*, Vonnegut's authorship more generally, as well as my own inclinations. When we talk about good citizenship and the good society, we simultaneously butt up against these political ideologies. These labels, and our concepts of citizenship more generally are historical constructs, and *Breakfast* is written with a backwards, as well as forwards looking historical appreciation.

Billy Pilgrim's becoming "unstuck in time," and the Tralfamadorian fourth dimensional experience of all of history simultaneously, gave *Slaughterhouse-Five* an avantgarde appeal, and helped cement Vonnegut's place in American literary history. There is no unsticking of time in *Breakfast*, however the notion that all of the events in the novel have passed by the time the book rests in your hands is hinted at through Vonnegut's metafiction. An example is Vonnegut's contextualization of the American landscape. Hoover eats a hamburger "across the street from where the new John F. Kennedy High School was going up. John F. Kennedy had never been in Midland City, but he was a President of the United States who was shot to death. Presidents of the country were often shot to death" (p. 133). The joke works because it plays with both the history of presidential assassinations, and the tradition of naming US high schools after dead presidents. A similar joke was made earlier in the novel at the expense of Thomas Jefferson High School, which was "named after a slave owner who was also one of the world's greatest theoreticians on the subject of human liberty" (p. 34). These matter-of-fact descriptions of high schools named after dead presidents project a historical consciousness. Vonnegut contemplates his country as he

writes about it. How does one square the circle of Thomas Jefferson? How does one cope with the fact that American Presidents are *often* shot to death? And what about the presumption that more presidents will be shot in the future? *Breakfast's* historicity is not "above time" as in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, rather it confronts the past with both nostalgia and skepticism.

Tally (2011) argues that *Breakfast* straddles a gap between two temporal conceptions (pp. 5, 40). One is a modernist homelessness; standing on solid historical ground, this traditional historicity knows what it has lost and is therefore able to imagine its future in relation to its past. The other is a postmodern lack of historical grounding, where not only have we lost something, but we are not even sure if we had it to begin with. In Fredric Jameson's words, "to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (1991, p. ix). It is in this gap, this schizophrenic, fragmented, often intertextual, and metafictional mind-space that Vonnegut's satirical, historical, and civic contemplations are happening. Reading *Breakfast* one gets the sense that the narrator is stuck with someone else's fantasies and memories. Both good and bad, the narration devolves into skepticism of the images of America, and their relevancy to real life. Vonnegut clearly explicates this in his head-clearing mission statement. "Ugly things" "out of proportion with life" have been put in his head by "other people." Those people might have been your middle school history teacher, a great Russian novelist, or the Coca-Cola company. It is through this lens of historicity that the head-clearing mission statement, and the novel's sentimentality, becomes most clear.

*Breakfast's* America is not our society, yet the mourning for a previous generation's political horizons resonates through to today. I may wish that American society lived up to

its past political visions of the “New Deal” and the “Great Society.” It does not, but that historical consciousness still impacts my perception of America. And any imagination of the future depends on how you understand your past. Therefore, any spirited political ambition towards and definition of good citizenship will also contain a backwards looking pursuit. In that pursuit the narrator goes searching for a home, somewhere to belong. Maybe he can find it in the American middle west of his childhood? That is after all where he sets the novel, *Midland City*, a thinly veiled avatar for his beloved Indianapolis. Maybe he can find it if he clears away all the commercial junk that pretends to be a culture inside his head, leaving what is sacred behind to shine in its absence? Then again, maybe he cannot find it, because it was never there to begin with. On that argument the novel is instead a journey into an unmoored postmodern condition, which makes the purposeful imagination of a better future more difficult. We explore this postmodern loss of historicity next, beginning with Vonnegut's compassionate memory of Phoebe Hurty and her promised American paradise.

### Phoebe Hurty's American Promise

An entrance into thinking about good citizenship in *Breakfast* is through its dual historical condemnations and nostalgias of America and American mythologies. Vonnegut yearns for a more gentle past, a past, however, he suspects never existed. You can read this in his prefaced “sidewalk strewn with junk” as he travels back in time. You experience it through the novel's myriad of both romantic and depressive references to American geography, history, civic institutions, architecture, etc.—the nostalgia all the more bittersweet in its continual contrasting to the consumerist, fragmentary and schizophrenic American present.

Vonnegut, in an act of autobiographical self-examination, dedicates *Breakfast* to Phoebe Hurty, and in doing so frames the novel as America's failure to fulfill her promise<sup>10</sup>. Hurty was an advice-columnist and advertisement copywriter who mentored Vonnegut in his youth. Vonnegut nostalgically reminisces that she was “funny” and “liberating” and “taught us to be impolite in conversation not only about sexual matters, but about American history and famous heroes, about the distribution of wealth, about school, about everything” (p. 2). Here we see the beginnings of Vonnegut's historical and political consciousness, his satiric inclinations, as well as a concise thematic synopsis of the novel to come. Vonnegut goes on to say of his own style that he attempts to “imitate the impoliteness which was so graceful in Phoebe Hurty” (p. 2). He believes this came naturally to Hurty because she grew up during the Great Depression and that she “believed what so many Americans believed then: that the nation would be happy and just and rational when prosperity came” (p. 2). Vonnegut imagines what the previous generation might have imagined, and it is hopeful and optimistic. Nonetheless, he subverts the nostalgia with the present, “I never hear that word anymore: *Prosperity*. It used to be a synonym for *Paradise*” (p. 2). This conflict between the promise of the past and the futility of the present comes to a head as Vonnegut memorializes his childhood mentor, “Now her sort of impoliteness is fashionable. But nobody believes anymore in a new American paradise. I sure miss Phoebe Hurty” (p. 2). Explicitly nostalgic, bittersweet, and regretful, Vonnegut, just like anyone, has had history thrust upon him. The hopes and dreams of Phoebe Hurty are not available to him, yet the temporal and cultural continuation between past and present creates an uncomfortable and uncanny dissonance. What is available to him, however, is the memory

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<sup>10</sup> The promise being both Hurty's and America's.



of Phoebe Hurty, an affective social bond, as opposed to her civic hopes and dreams, which are not.

This dissonant effect is easy to spot in *Breakfast's* heavy-handed satirical tableaux contrasting the past with the present. An illustrative example is when Trout enters Philadelphia, and the sign signaling “The City of Brotherly love” is framed by an “old white woman fishing through a garbage can” and “a little rubber duck, lying on its side on the grating over a storm sewer” (p. 102). Trout's response is one of fatalistic acceptance, a lifetime of failure having whipped the incredulity out of him, “everything was necessary” (p. 102). Here is the historical consciousness that *Breakfast* explores. The civic virtues of the past (brotherly love), the harsh realities of the present (the old homeless woman), and the helplessness of being caught in between. In fact, you can argue that the feeling out of this dissonance is the purpose of the entire novel, a different phrasing of the clearing out the garbage metaphor. Seen from this perspective, the novel as an exercise in historical consciousness becomes clearer.

We can think about Hurty's American paradise in terms of its mythologies. Certain myths are totemic, immediately recognizably “American.” The American Flag, Abraham Lincoln, and the Statue of Liberty, are but a few, all of which *Breakfast* satirizes with blasphemous abandon. Other myths reach more intimately into people's daily lives. The YMCA which hosts AA meetings (p. 269) and night classes for self-improvement (p. 248), the Boy Scouts of America with its civic pedagogy (p. 261), and the canonical reading of *Ivanhoe* in public school (p. 138). These myths are also satirized, if more venerably. Then there are the “defunct” myths that Vonnegut eulogizes, the Indianapolis *Times* “a good paper” (p. 2), the old Monon Railway, and the Keedsler Opera House where “Jenny Lind, The Swedish Nightingale” once sang (p. 182). He mourns their loss, echoing the word “defunct” from the

preface into the epilogue, even giving it its own paratextually marked paragraph<sup>11</sup>. A one-word paragraph, it is as though he is tasting the word and how it expresses the loss the entire novel struggles with. And the flavor is that of corporate America, a whole way of life disappearing behind business lingo shorthand: “defunct.”

All of these myths, false, deluded and wholesome, are being strangled under the weight of an increasingly all-consuming American consumer-culture, which not incidentally, gives the novel its title. “Breakfast of Champions,” slogan of the General Mills cereal Wheaties, is one example in the hundreds of consumer products and corporate brands, slogans and idioms which saturate the novel. This too is a mythology. If you read *Breakfast* without any prior knowledge or ironic sensibility, you would think that American citizenship was made up of Fords, Burger Chef restaurants and Perma-Stone house siding. And *Breakfast* seems to say, “yes, actually it is,” and if you agree with Vonnegut, you find that intolerable. This is another form of *Breakfast*'s exhaustive defamiliarization of American society. English professor Paul Geyh calls this a demystification—Vonnegut “drawing back the curtain” of American mythology, exposing the historical illusion behind (2017, p. 168). The example of Perma-Stone is particularly apt in the sense of strangulation, as it is a covering of false stone to make old houses look new. This is an illustrative example of the essential difference between appearance and substance, or in the terms of the head-clearing mission statement, between the “junk” Vonnegut wishes to throw out, and the potential for something “humane” and “sacred” instead.

When culture and society become dominated by consumerism, the constant hunger for something newer and better, it is perhaps not strange that we forget how to “think

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<sup>11</sup> The epilogue does not appear in the 1973 hardcover publication of *Breakfast* which is cited throughout this thesis. It appears in subsequent editions, including the Dial Press 2006 edition I have read it in.

historically,” in Jameson's words (1991, p. ix). Just as Billy Pilgrim became unstuck in time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, so too American society, preoccupied by newness, has become stuck in the now. Dwayne Hoover, during his schizophrenic touring around Midland City, visits his new Burger chef restaurant, and is served by the seventeen-year-old Patty Keene:

She was a brand-new adult, who was working in order to pay off the tremendous doctors' and hospital bills her father had run up in the process of dying of cancer of the colon and then cancer of the everything.

This was in a country where everybody was expected to pay his own bills for everything, and one of the most expensive things a person could do was get sick. [...]

►Dwayne appreciated Patty Keene's brand-newness, even though he was not sexually attracted to women that young. She was like a new automobile, which hadn't even had its radio turned on yet. (pp. 135-6)

This brief encounter is a satirical presentation of American superficiality in combination with an obsession with newness. Keene being compared to a car is an apt image of the consumer society infiltrating on the domain of human relationships. One can almost imagine Hoover perceiving her youthful glow like the glare off a newly polished car. Moreover, the interaction demonstrates American society's perverse intersection of both sexism and the injustice of America's economic structures and health care system. A “brand-new” adult is a dispassionate phrasing, which when describing a human becomes gross and out of place. Cars are “brand-new,” human beings are something else. Whether it is due to his quickly deteriorating mental health or living in a society which commodifies both sickness and the beauty of youth, Hoover has become separated from other humans. Another example is Bonnie MacMahon, the cocktail waitress he will attack at the end of the novel. She believes she is a close friend of Hoover. But their relationship is built on something other than humanity—that is business. “Here is how Dwayne knew her and her husband Ralph: They had bought nine Pontiacs from him over the past sixteen years. 'We're a Pontiac family,'

they'd say" (p. 194). "We're a Pontiac family" is a fitting, if depressing expression of contemporary conceptualizations of familial belonging.

In Phoebe Hurty's America, standing on firm historical ground, you could point out the source of people's despair: their lack of economic wealth. Vonnegut, with the knowledge of hindsight, knows that despite incredible economic wealth, paradise never came. In fact, the irony which informs his pessimism, is that both America's and his personal wealth, were built on top of the horrors of WWII. This dichotomy between the optimism of the past and the pessimism of the present is entangled with American consumerism and civic imagination. Tally (2011) argues that the American inability to think historically is "haunting, almost elegiac," as the loss of a shared history leads to the dissolution of a "perceived community" (p. 5). This theme saturates *Breakfast*. We see in the preface how Vonnegut experiences community with Phoebe Hurty, but throughout the rest of the novel we fear such communal belonging is disappearing, going defunct. In its place is the kind of relationship Hoover shares with Patty Keene and Bonnie MacMahon.

The historical dissonance of American postmodern consumer culture as represented by Pontiac families, brand-new adults, Thomas Jefferson High Schools, and the failure of Phoebe Hurty's American Dream, makes imagining a better future all the more difficult. *Breakfast* presents this status quo through the imagery of the "asphalt prairie" (p.95) of the American middle west. And nowhere in *Breakfast* is this historical dissonance, the sensation of being stranded, told more innocently and hence painfully as in the story of Wayne Hoobler and the American Dream he calls "Fairyland."

### Wayne Hoobler, Stranded on the Asphalt Prairie

The cruel irony of the American Dream is told most intimately through secondary character Wayne Hoobler, the black ex-convict whose dream was to work for main

character, and fabulously well-to-do Dwayne Hoover. Their names are so similar that Hoobler has taken it as a sign from God that he should work for him. However, this nominative fantasy is a cruel irony of history. Hoover's white family emigrated west during WWI and changed their name out of embarrassment because in Ohio Hoobler was a Black name (p. 130). Hoobler's family lost their farm in the Great Depression, which in turn was awarded to the Hoovers in a legal settlement. In *Breakfast's* present the farm is most famous for its "Miracle Cave," a phony American roadside tourist-trap imbued with a made-up story as a stop on the Underground Railroad. What should be Hoobler's inheritance is the initial source of Hoover's wealth. The irony is palpable, a story of American racial injustice in miniature. Hoover has plastered the highway with signs for Miracle Cave and runs constant newspaper and radio adverts for his car dealership proclaiming "YOU CAN TRUST DWAYNE" (p. 98), which Hoobler reads over and over while in prison, drawing from it a prophecy of a better life—*his* American Dream:

[Hoobler] had a feeble will to survive. He thought the planet was terrible, that he never should have been sent there. Some mistake had been made. He had no friends or relatives. He was put in cages all the time.

He had a name for a better world, and he often saw it in dreams. Its name was a secret. He would have been ridiculed, if he had said its name out loud. It was such a *childish* name. (p. 97)

That name is "Fairyland," and it is on display inside Hoobler's head whenever he needs a sprinkling of hope. It is written in lights, resembling a lit-up billboard advertisement.

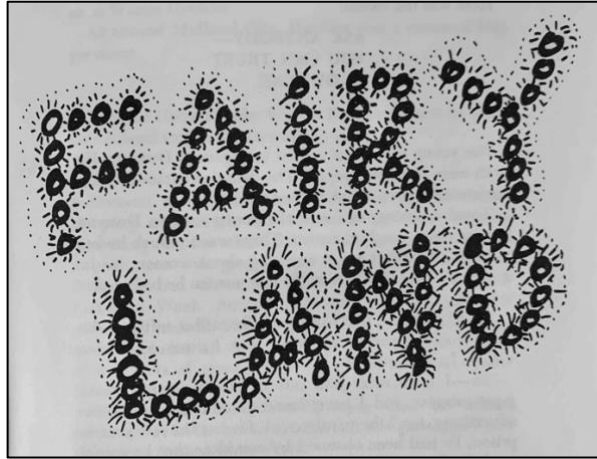


Figure 9, *Fairyland*, p. 97

However, Hoobler's faith in Dwayne is no message from God, rather it and "Fairyland" is the product of an entangled American history of racism, consumerism, and phony fictions.

Hoobler has been released from prison the morning of the opening of the arts festival. He has no family, friends, or place to call home. It is a fitting and depressing image of postmodern American anomie that he is relegated to wandering the parking lots of Midland City.

Parking lots, interstate highways, median dividers, and American car culture more generally, is a running feature of the novel's environmental history. The visual metaphor of the American middle west as an "asphalt prairie" (p. 95) is a profound image of both the tides of history, and American homelessness and isolation. The intercontinental trucker told a similar story, "the planet was being turned into pavement so his truck could go anywhere" (p. 85). He could go anywhere, but like Hoobler, has nowhere to call home. This history is also evident in the multiple descriptions of Sugar Creek. Main character Dwayne Hoover mournfully reminisces the only surface of water in an otherwise "flat city, flat township, flat county, flat state" (p. 93). Today all that flatness is covered in asphalt, and the lonely image of natural beauty from Hoover's childhood has been turned into a pitiful and polluted stream running through a concrete trough on the side of the highway. After all Hoover is a

car dealer, his world consisting of different Pontiac models and traversing parking lots from the one business he runs to the other. The trucker's observation that "the only kind of job an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way" (p. 86), echoes through the story. Hoover is in the process of a schizophrenic break from reality, the end result of which is him believing that all other human beings are machines. The most striking image of his deteriorating mental health is when the asphalt he walks across turns into a rubber membrane, dimpling beneath his feet as he "bloop[s] across the used car lot" (p. 96). It is no accident that both Trout's body bag and Hoover's blooming portray loneliness, isolation, and mental sickness through images of plastic. That is after all what life has come to resemble in Vonnegut's America.

And so, stranded in this asphalt prairie, the poor Black Hoobler is loitering around Hoover's car dealership:

He needed work right away, or he would starve to death. So he was showing Dwayne how hard a worker he was.

He had been in orphanages and youth shelters and prisons of one sort or another in the Midland City area since he was nine years old. He was now twenty-six.

► He was free at last! (p. 96)

The sarcasm of pitting the core American ideology of "being free" against the brutality of its economic system and unjust social order is brilliantly unsubtle. And despite Hoobler's best effort Hoover sees right through him, and he cannot help it, his mind is being molded like soft plastic by a dangerous combination of bad chemicals and bad ideas. However, Hoobler finds charity and comradery with the Black cook- and waitstaff at the arts festival. They insist he look through the peephole between the kitchen and cocktail lounge, to get a "good look" at the all-white members of high society, "the animals in the zoo" (p. 213) as they call

them, turning a racist trope on its head. But Hoobler looks away, he cannot understand what he is seeing. The cognitive dissonance of his precious “Fairyland” and his experiences are too much. The waitstaff pin a “Support the Arts” button which resembles the masks of comedy and tragedy from ancient Greek theatre on Hoobler before allowing him to leave, and caution: “Wear this at all times [...] and no harm can come to you” (p. 213). Here is an American allegory of the cave and biblical reference<sup>12</sup> which parodies the juxtaposition between race, class, and “high” culture in America. The pastiche functions by contrasting the big c Culture of arts festivals and Greek theatre with the lowliness of American society. Through the peephole it is the Black workers who perceive society clearly. And with a small token of American consumerism, the event pin, Hoobler is shielded from reproach. White America, even (or especially) the liberal and high-minded art crowd that Vonnegut mingled with, whether ignorant or polite are not color blind. They see color very well. What they are blind to is their own ignorance, a little round pin blinding them to their distinction between servant and scoundrel.

Hoobler's story is tragic. He is ignored by Hoover, and that breaks his heart (p. 99). “He ached to be a useful machine” in a land with no use for him (p. 188). The image of “humans as machines” saturates *Breakfast*, Vonnegut's deterministic suspicion informing the novel's fatalism. In the case of Black Americans, the image is extra poignant, as slaves have been defined as “human beings [used] for machinery” (p. 11). That history moves sarcastically into the modern era as “even after slavery was eliminated, because it was so embarrassing, [slave owners] and their descendants continued to think of ordinary human beings as machines” (p. 11). Even Hoover's ignoring Hoobler is mechanic in this Vonnegutian

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<sup>12</sup> Psalm 91:10. According to Jewish tradition Moses proclaims God's protection as he ascends Mount Sinai.



sense, as he is deterministically spiraling towards a schizophrenic break from reality brought on by the “bad chemicals” in his body teaming up with the idea that he was the only real human being on earth.

The image of bad chemicals in charge of human machines is expanded to a grand theory of human history. JFK's assassin and the people of Germany during the Holocaust<sup>13</sup> were “confused by some of the same bad chemicals which troubled Dwayne” (p. 133). Vonnegut imagines humans as “huge, rubbery test tubes [...] with chemical reactions seething inside,” which certainly comports with his childhood experiences of people suffering from syphilis, and his adult experiences that when he is depressed a “little white pill” will cheer him up again (p. 4). As uncomfortable as this philosophical thought experiment may be, it is a kind of compassion, the novel never swaying from its resolve that humans must at least try to act humanely. It is not that Vonnegut lets people off the hook, but rather that he grapples with an existential futility. It is precisely because of our chemical determinism that the stakes of what we believe in are so high.

The contemplations on bad chemical and American ruthlessness also tell a contemporary history of 1970s USA. *Breakfast* is published in an era of drug related moral panic, two years following the launch of the “war on drugs” by the Nixon administration in 1971. Trout navigates NYC “a dangerous place to be [...] because of chemicals and the uneven distribution of wealth and so on,” and coldly observes the bad chemicals people eat, sniff, inject into their veins, and even stuff up their assholes (pp. 70-1). Vonnegut continues, “They lived in ugly places where there were only ugly things to do. They didn’t own doodley-squat, so they couldn’t improve their surroundings. So, they did their best to make their

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<sup>13</sup> These historical events are now between 60 and 80 years in the past—capital H history. In 1973 these events, particularly the assassination of JFK, would hold a much more contemporary position in people's minds.

insides beautiful instead” (p. 71). We have here a compassionate and sweeping political and sociological theory of suffering and history as the result of poverty, ugliness and “bad chemicals” in control of human machines. One interpretation of this image of humans as machines is that in the logic of capitalism and the consumer society that is what humans are reduced to, “a cog in the machine” to borrow the popular idiom. We might even extend this image into a historical consciousness of the Anthropocene. As earth is being flattened and wrapped in asphalt and plastic, humanity is conformed into a mechanical ideal of production and consumption.

What makes Hoobler's story even more tragic, is that he *aches* to be a machine. He cannot imagine any alternative. It is what society demands of him, it is what his nation's history has foretold, and it is the logic behind the economic rationality of turning the world into a parking lot. If only Hoobler is given an opportunity to prove himself, either by washing car window screens, or ducking Hoover's punches, perhaps he too can become fabulously well-to-do. However, his family history in cahoots with America's history and the color of his skin has condemned him to hiding behind a dumpster, hoping against reason that the myths of that same American history will come true. “Fairyland” may be a comfort to Hoobler, but it is also both a fiction and a lie. We cannot judge Hoobler for creating a life-sustaining fantasy for himself, but we can judge a culture and society which promises him the moon, but cannot even give him a modest employment. Hoobler survives Hoover's violent rampage at the end of the novel, which along with other fragments in *Breakfast*, build on the idea that Black people have at least some advantage in America. Through the peephole, they see more clearly through certain American untruths. After all it is Vonnegut's suspicion that *white* Americans are the ones who need to be clearing out their heads. In this way a Black experience of America becomes a lens through which the injustice and historical

cognitive dissonance of the USA becomes visible. In typical Vonnegut style, race is deeply entangled with all the other targets of his satire. Whether that is American history, asphalt prairies, capitalism, urban drug abuse, and even the philosophical possibility that human fate is as deterministic as the workings of a machine.

## Chapter Conclusion

*Breakfast's* portrait of America is painted with copious references to its history. Whether that is through its mischievous blackboard drawings which parody a mainstream patriotic education. Or the more contemplative explorations of the deterioration of American social belonging due to the entanglements of consumerism, pollution, historical racism, economic inequality, drug use, etc. The novel's story is anti-totalitarian—told in the spirit of a people's history which challenges American metanarratives. However, it is written with a historical consciousness which finds itself homeless, expressing a loss of historicity which is emblematic of the postmodern condition. The novel conveys an historical consciousness with finds itself stranded on the asphalt prairie of the American present, and hence struggles to provide a political vision for the future. It is a very human urge to wish to reclaim the past, whether that is the civic optimism of Vonnegut's boyhood, the American Eden of Wayne Hoobler's "Fairyland," or the modern-day political visions of "Making America Great Again." However, Vonnegut cannot hold on to Phoebe Hurty's hopes and dreams; they do not belong to him, and they do not fit nicely in his head. They do not belong to the contemporary reader either, and *Breakfast* provides few satisfying alternatives.

What the novel provides instead is sweeping the reader up into a whirlwind of self-critical contemplation of their relationship with their historical understanding. That critical self-examination becomes part of the pleasure of reading. Your understanding of history will

affect your experience of the present, and how you envision the future. It might be as Trout suggests that “there was only one way for the earth to be, [...] the way it was” (p. 102). However, the potential for futility, rather than prescribing a fatalistic outlook, only increases the importance of the ideas we fill our heads with. *Breakfast*’s historical consciousness challenges us to grapple with the world as it is, to do so with a compassion for the suffering, and with the extreme democratic ethos which echoes through the novel that “every person [is] exactly as important as any other” (p. 210). By engaging the reader in a struggle between historical futility, and the will to nevertheless pursue humanity, the political meaning and potency of the novel remains vibrant across time—a contemplative exercise in good citizenship.

## Conclusion

Reading *Breakfast of Champions*, I found myself with the strange suspicion that its satirical didactics were somehow *on me*. That by reading the novel I participated in its meaning making through self-reflections which are incumbent upon the contemporary good citizen and necessary for an understanding of good citizenship more broadly. This participatory experience, which is both funny, frustrating, and contemplative, suggested itself to an explicit focus on the reader and act of reading. Through the tradition of reader-response theory, I found an excitement in the participatory relationship between text and reader. That excitement brought with it a political ambition, one which is amplified by the novel's participatory ethos. Literature allows us to share the thoughts of others across space and time, and through these thoughts reflect upon ourselves and even our own self-reflections. In the words of Italo Calvino, it "relegates the noise of the present to a background hum" (2000, p. 8), and in the words of James Baldwin, it "is a very great liberation for the suffering, struggling person, who always thinks that he is alone" (1989, p. 21).

*Breakfast* is an experimental postmodern novel which satirizes the American consumer society of the 1970s, and more profoundly is sweeping in its targeting of social ills and contemplations on the human condition. On the one-hundredth-year anniversary of Vonnegut's birth his position in the literary canon is somewhat precarious. Previous scholarship has focused on his role as an early American postmodernist who incorporated a thoroughgoing humanistic compassion and sentimentality with a bleak and often futile outlook on humanity. The follow up to Vonnegut's magnum opus *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast* has received much negative reception and criticism. Its reception is likened to a "Black Frost" by Morse (2009), who retells a story of critics who consider it a low point in

Vonnegut's authorship—an overly narcissistic, self-indulgent, childish, and even nagging novel. Weisenburger (1995) attempts to reduce *Breakfast's* satire to merely a string of jokes, going as far as ascribing Vonnegut a “do-nothing ethos,” a label Robbins (2006) picks up in order to further diminish his oeuvre as politically apathetic. How can I praise Vonnegut as a great satirist, and his novels as politically vital if they promote indifference? By focusing on Vonnegut's most experimental and divisive novel, I have attempted to demonstrate how reading *Breakfast* is a participatory activity, understood in this thesis as a contemplative exercise in good citizenship. Particularly through its metafiction, its dispassionate and objective voice, and its moral open-endedness, the novel's satire invites the reader in to struggle alongside Vonnegut with core questions of the human experience, both personal and communal, the American social order, and ultimately the role of fiction in either helping or harming humanity and our understanding of the world and ourselves.

Vonnegut sets out on an ostensibly narcissistic journey in *Breakfast*. The substance of its narration being the contemplative back and forth between the story told and the storyteller. This metafiction functions as an alarm, waking the reader and confronting them with the inherent distinction between fiction and reality. Whether through crude illustrations, skin color explications, over-explanations, or Vonnegut's fourth-wall breaking quips from behind his typewriter, the reader is forced to come to terms with the novel's artifice. Parallel with the story's plot you enter a dialogue with Vonnegut; this is where much of the novel's civic contemplations take place. Vonnegut challenges the reader, often through defamiliarization to recognize the propensity of language to conceal and maintain social inequalities, such as America's history of racial injustice.

However, the novel's substantive metafiction also begs the question of who you *really* are conversing with, the final conclusion being that it is in fact Y-O-U. *Breakfast* turns

the metafictional mirror around, confronting the reader with their responsibility to treat other human beings as real and not “bit-part players in [...] made up tales” (p. 210). For just as *Breakfast* satirizes consumerism and racial injustice, on a deeper level it satirizes the philosophical error in reasoning that real life is as it is portrayed in our stories. This is one of the novel’s metafictional tricks. Its satire points both outwards, targeting the world, and inwards, targeting itself. Vonnegut attempts to model this realization through the proclamation that he will bring “chaos to order,” and through the metaphor that life today is analogous to the plastic molecule which we have encapsulated our earth in. Stories have shape and meaning, life on the other hand is like the “ETC.” in the diagram of a polymer chain, it just goes on and on and on, plastically adapting itself to the world as it is. As a satire, the novel is deeply skeptical of art’s ability to positively affect the world, but even if we are a grand “ETC. and even if story books do not change the world, there are still things that should be said.

I have also read in *Breakfast* a treatment of history which satirizes and tears down traditional American metanarratives in the spirit of a people’s history. The hopes and dreams of Phoebe Hurty do not belong to Vonnegut, and *in Breakfast* he struggles with an historical dissonance we can compare to being stranded on the asphalt prairie of the American present. How one understands one’s relationship to the past will impact one’s political ambitions for the future, and in this homeless postmodern condition that vision becomes all the more difficult. Vonnegut approaches history with the same skepticism as he does fiction’s false orderliness. Too often history is a story which is used to marginalize the poor and maintain the status quo. Acknowledging the uncomfortable and alienating sensation of being stranded or homeless in relation to one’s history can be liberating for the reader, and readers of *Breakfast* today will still find laughter in the novel’s blasphemous

historical lampoonery. *Breakfast's* investigation of Vonnegut's historical consciousness is a mirror which the reader can reflect their own consciousness in. It is powerful to appreciate that your outlook on the future is in part historically determined, and contemplative readers of *Breakfast* will find both parallels and differences between their experience of history and the world, and Vonnegut's. The novel is after all 50 years old, yet it conveys with surprising freshness topics one recognizes in contemporary social discourse, whether that is the rise of "Great Again" nationalist politics, the sociolinguistic debate concerning capital b Black, or the alienating effects of the American Dream, mass consumerism, and wrapping the Earth in a layer of plastic.

In contemporary open and free democratic societies there is a recognition that contemplations on what it means to belong to a good society, and to be a good citizen, are incumbent upon the citizenry itself; they must come "from below" so to speak. Such civic reflections cannot be controlled in either a well-meaning or totalitarian, propagandistic fashion. When they are, they cease to be authentic, and they inevitably encounter, and butt up against the human spirit of self-reflection and contemplation. This is a very unsatisfying situation for those who desire clear cut answers in a morally ambiguous world. They do not want their metanarratives disturbed; whether they are the stories which cover-up the USA's hypocritical, oppressive, and racist history, or the stories which naturalize the systems of capitalism and consumerism which propagate social and economic inequality, alienate humans from each other, sap life of meaning, and pollute the earth to devastating effect. It is uncomfortable when literature confronts us with these injustices and with the hardness and vulgarity of real life. Some people would rather burn books than have their worldview challenged, or worse yet, the worldview of their children. But alas, the world is ambiguous.



And even so, it is a silly thing to regret—the world just *is*, and books do not usually change it very much after all.

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of Vonnegut’s birth, and one year preceding the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Breakfast*, I find immense contemporary resonance in the contemplative exercise that is reading this strange novel. It is my hope that this thesis may participate in a revitalization of Vonnegut’s authorship for our age. We live in an era which expresses a deep futility towards the possibility of building a better tomorrow. In fact, today much cultural and political awareness expresses itself as a fear of the future—as a precarious and dangerous prospect which those who can, must prepare for, and those who cannot, are at the mercy of. Vonnegut felt this too. These feelings are entangled with our perception of history, and it might be correct to say that Vonnegut’s time has come again. It seems to me that the “End of History” political and historical consciousness which rose to prominence after the fall of Soviet Russia and the rise of neoliberal and technocratic optimism entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, made Vonnegut’s misanthropic humanism, fatalism, and sentimentality seem trite, out of place, and even alien. However, today we are experiencing a burgeoning cultural and political awareness of the extreme economic inequality and meaninglessness offered by the dominant social and political structures. Furthermore, there is a desperate yearning for new modes of political and communal belonging, which has led to a rise of populist nationalist politics which incidentally and purposefully echo the very worst ideological impulses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And perhaps most frighteningly, we are even further down the line of humanities inexplicable failure to act on climate change, and the incomprehensible consequences that will lead to. Because of these, and other facets of the historical intersection we find ourselves at today, I believe Vonnegut is back on the menu. Vonnegut’s oeuvre is an excellent source for investigating these deeply unsettling and

difficult feelings, feelings which I believe will only become more pressing in the very near future, and which deserve our utmost attention. He does not offer sweet words of reassurance. And he does not pretend to have found a way out, or to have the answers to our problems. You cannot ask a novel how to be a good citizen and expect an answer. You create these answers inside yourself. This is the power of Vonnegut's satire. It is a participatory exercise of the reader's own, personal, and independent moral reflections—a dialogue between you and the world.

However, despite the fear of tomorrow, and the possible futility of trying to make the world a better place, we must nevertheless participate in that struggle. To struggle is a purpose in itself and few novels express that simple truth more intrinsically than *Breakfast of Champions*. Whether we laugh or cry, and whether we think he is kidding or not, we should once again be reading Vonnegut seriously, for he has very serious things to say. He believed in the writer's responsibility to their society and endeavored that his writing embody an act of good citizenship—"I resolved to shun storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out" (p. 210). Observing the world, warts and all, and with an ironic subtlety and dispassionate humor, he expresses a profound empathy and compassion for humanity. When we are able to loosen our minds from the fiction that some people are worth more than others, and when we imagine even the most deprived stranger as we imagine ourselves, maybe then our struggles will not have been in vain.

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