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<b>Author</b>	Andrew Hicks
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## “Being Alive is a Crock of Shit” – Kurt Vonnegut’s Kind Pessimism

Andrew Hicks  
University of Bristol

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*Kurt Vonnegut, long considered one of the arch-misanthropes of the American literary canon, could more accurately be said to have only fallen into genuine cynicism at the very end of his life. Before this final despair, however, Vonnegut was a trenchant critic of a variety of aspects of American culture. In *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Slapstick* (1976), Vonnegut respectively satirises the self-made myth of the American Dream and tackles the issue of modern loneliness. In both novels, he proposes far more modest but perhaps more achievable and compassionate goals than those promised by American convention – goals that only appear pessimistically limited in light of unrealistic or unfulfilled ideals.*

**“Life is no way to treat an animal, not even a mouse.”**

— Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without A Country*

In his recently released biography of Kurt Vonnegut, Charles Shields accurately asserts that “it’s become axiomatic that [he] is Mark Twain’s heir in style and outlook” (252) – and certainly, when Vonnegut finally found fame with *Slaughterhouse Five*, he took to imitating his forebear in more ways than one. Vonnegut, like Twain, discovered in the second half of his career a niche “plying the [public reading] circuit with droll stories” (236) for cash. He dressed similarly for a period – in the early 1970s, the novelist Hilary Masters derisively described Vonnegut’s “Mark Twain impression...baggy white suit, bushy hair, and flowing moustache...my attitude toward Vonnegut was that he was something of a poseur” (qtd. in Shields 302). However, self-conscious theatricality aside – Sam Clemens, after all, also did a fairly good Mark Twain impression – the most striking (and seemingly “authentic”) parallel between the two writers is the profound pessimism that overtook them in later life. Robert Douglas notes that “the twilight of Twain’s life was one of complete despair and hopelessness. He lived to see everything taken from him...Hence he took refuge in the fact that there is nothing – “life is but an empty dream”” (4). Indeed, in his late works, Twain often declared life itself a curse, and death a gift devoutly to be wished for all. Although the elderly Vonnegut only rarely called for the universal end of humanity, he certainly did not consider life to be any great treasure. Nor, in his own estimation, did anyone else, consciously or not.<sup>1</sup> The kind pessimism that had characterised his career up until the new millennium – a compassionate understanding of man’s essential limitedness – fell, finally, into abject cynicism and despair. At the heart of Vonnegut’s latter day pessimism is a profound disappointment with the state of early 21<sup>st</sup> century American politics, and an accompanying disillusionment with the American Dream – products, perhaps, of a lifelong belief in the “idealistic, pacifistic” America of yesteryear:

I was taught in the sixth grade that we had a standing army of just over a hundred thousand men and that the generals had nothing to say about what was done in Washington. I was taught

to be proud of that and to pity Europe for having more than a million men under arms and spending all their money on airplanes and tanks. I simply never unlearned junior civics. I still believe in it. I got a very good grade. (*Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut* 103)

What seems to have most disturbed Vonnegut was not so much the violence, exploitation and inequality of recent American realpolitik, but its disparity with the “City upon a Hill” imagery of American moral exceptionalism with which he had grown up. As he notes in *A Man Without A Country*, the idea of a “humane and reasonable America” was a dream that survived “the Great Depression, when there were no jobs...and then we fought and often died for that dream during the Second World War, when there was no peace” – but in 2007, Vonnegut can only avow that “I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reasonable...because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (71). Whether or not the social deprivation of the Great Depression or the violence of the Second World War compare to their modern counterparts seems almost immaterial to the sanctity of the junior civics dream. Something other than material conditions, in Vonnegut’s opinion, seems to have changed – there has been an ideological shift with regard to notions of personal and national power.

As Tony Tanner notes in *City of Words*, the history of American literature is littered with examples of writers struggling with ideas of power, control and agency:

There is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, and that condition is ubiquitous. (15)

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the vast majority of Vonnegut’s work is concerned with a sustained investigation into the latter concept, though his position on the matter is far more ambiguous than “dread”. The “abiding dream” that Tanner describes is, of course, the American Dream – a belief in the possibility of absolute autonomy, independence and self-made success, no matter what one’s personal beginnings. It encompasses, in short, the “Horatio Alger” myth. Alger’s classic American narrative posits that with dogged determination, quick wits and moral purity, one can pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps and achieve a life of wealth and respectability, despite the depredations of circumstance. It is this myth that Vonnegut repeatedly took to task in his writing:

I have customarily written about powerless people who felt there wasn’t much they could do about their situations...It goes against the American storytelling grain to have someone in a situation he can’t get out of, but I think this is very usual in life...it strikes me as gruesome and comical that in our culture we have an expectation that a man can always solve his problems. There is that implication that if you just have a little more energy, a little more fight, the problem can always be solved. This is so untrue that it makes me want to cry – or laugh. (*Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon* 231)

What is at stake, at the heart of the American self-made myth, is the question of free will – the ability, over and above economic, social, political, familial or biological circumstances, to act in a way that is determined only by one’s own volition, with the concomitant right to claim that one is solely responsible for one’s success. Throughout his career, Vonnegut sought to complicate the relationship between will

and action, between favour and happenstance – to complicate, in short, the foundational principles of the American Dream, while retaining and celebrating the idealistic, pacifistic values of the junior civics dream. His ultimate pessimism rested on the belief that the former had reached its apotheosis in neoliberal America, while the latter had been left, abandoned, by the wayside. Nevertheless, the worldview that emerges from his life's work continues to undermine virtually every aspect of the self-made myth, and may be more relevant today than ever.

**“I was a victim of a series of accidents, as are we all.”**

— **The Space Wanderer, *The Sirens of Titan***

*The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Vonnegut's sophomore novel, is a bizarre, complex and picaresque tale, set across the length and breadth of the solar system, in which the entire plot is revealed to the reader (and the protagonist) within the very first chapter. Malachi Constant, the richest man on Earth, is invited to the home of Winston Niles Rumfoord, “a member of the one true American class” (20) and pioneering space adventurer. Rumfoord and his dog, Kazak, have become “chrono-synclastically infundibulated...wave phenomena - apparently pulsing in a distorted spiral with its origin in the Sun and its terminal in Betelgeuse” (11). Scattered across space and time, Rumfoord simultaneously experiences the past, present and future, and is able to appear in multiple places at once – from the perspective of the merely “punctual”, he regularly materialises and dematerialises as planets and objects orbit in and out of the ribbon he has become. Rumfoord reveals to Constant that he will travel to Mars, Mercury, back to Earth, and finally to Titan, siring a child along the way with Rumfoord's wife Beatrice. During his travels, he will be press-ganged and have his memory wiped by the Martian army, become exiled on Mercury, and be hailed as the messiah of a new religion on Earth. Unsurprisingly, both Constant and Beatrice find the idea of predestination ridiculous and distasteful, respectively. Nevertheless, their attempts to defy the deterministic forces that will lead them into space only serve to further confirm Rumfoord's prediction. As Rumfoord tells Beatrice, knowing *how* something will happen has absolutely no bearing on whether it *will* happen:

“Look,” said Rumfoord, “life for a punctual person is like a roller coaster...sure, I can see the whole roller coaster you're on. And sure – I could give you a piece of paper that would tell you about every dip and turn, warn you about every bogeyman that was going to pop out at you in the tunnels. But that wouldn't help you any ... because you'd *still* have to take the roller-coaster ride ... I didn't design the roller coaster, I don't own it, and I don't say who rides and who doesn't.” (41)

In *The Sirens of Titan*, characters consistently misunderstand or flat out ignore the differences between action and volition, between determinism and fate. Malachi Constant inherited his fabulous wealth from his father Noel, and in a deft and hilarious pastiche of the Prosperity gospel, the reader soon discovers that Noel made his fortune by investing in companies whose initials correspond to the sequential letters in the Bible. It is “a system so idiotically simple that some people can't understand it ... people who have to believe, for their own peace of mind, that tremendous wealth can be produced only by tremendous cleverness” (52). Malachi cannot help but interpret this incredible dumb luck as a work of intentionality. Even if the intention was neither his or his father's (his running phrase,

throughout the novel, is “I guess somebody up there likes me”), he longs to live up to his name by delivering “a first class message from God to someone equally distinguished” (14). Yet, as the novel’s plot unfurls, it becomes increasingly obvious that the actions of Constant and every other being in the novel are ultimately determined entirely by external forces. Rumfoord himself is outraged to discover that he has been manipulated by the robotic remnants of an alien civilisation from a planet named Tralfamadore, who have “reached into the Solar System, picked me up, and used me like a handy-dandy potato peeler!” (199) And beyond the Tralfamadorians? As Peter J Reed notes, “perhaps only the meaningless, arbitrary workings of the Universe ... in making the Tralfamadorian machines the last traceable source of control, the novel goes a long way toward implying a purely mechanical Universe.” (85) The ever-widening spiral of influence encompasses the mechanical and the organic, the inanimate and the sentient, to the point where there is ultimately no discernible difference between them – there is only the mechanical motion of cause and effect.

Not for nothing does Vonnegut choose two members of the American upper class – one a member of the nouveau riche, the other the personification of old money – to be the hapless playthings of forces totally beyond their control. The vicissitudes of circumstance rain on the socially powerful and the powerless alike, and neither, in this deterministic model, warrant praise or blame for what happens to them. The natural response to this is, perhaps, an insistence on the dream of the “unpatterned, unconditioned life”, a refusal to look under the proverbial hood. Vonnegut demonstrates this desire in a literal manner with the spaceships designed to ferry Martian troops to Earth:

The only controls available to those on board were two push-buttons...one labelled *on* and one labelled *off*. The *on* button simply started a flight from Mars. The *off* button was connected to nothing. It was installed at the insistence of Martian mental health experts, who said that human beings were always happier with machinery they thought they could turn off. (119)

The illusion of control is a seductive one, and may even be a constitutive part of our psychological make-up.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many Vonnegut critics insist upon it. Lawrence Broer, for instance, contends that the action of *The Sirens of Titan*, a “soulless, mechanistic nightmare”, is in fact a hallucination of Constant’s - one he must awaken from if he is “to negotiate his own destiny” (43). Nevertheless, there are valid approaches to life that take into account our essentially determined nature, and Vonnegut provides several examples in *The Sirens of Titan*. When Constant (temporarily named Unk after losing his memory) and a fellow Martian soldier named Boaz are trapped on Mercury, Unk restlessly roams its tunnels, “at war with his environment”, convinced that it is “either malevolent or cruelly mismanaged”, and reacting in the only way he knows how – with “passive resistance and open displays of contempt” (141). Boaz, meanwhile, remains in one place, tending to the native Harmoniums. His time on Earth was unpleasant, living with people who “push me this way, then they push me that – and nothing pleases ‘em, and they get madder and madder, on account of nothing makes ‘em happy” (151) – frustrated people with frustrated ambitions. On Mercury, however, Boaz realises – unlike the earth people, unlike Unk – that while he is not free to do whatever he will, he is better able to do what he can. In this case, it is caring for the Harmoniums, and Boaz is simply glad that “I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm” (151). Similarly, Constant and Beatrice, at the very end of their journey, residing in their old age on Titan with their son Crono, finally realise that it is perfectly possible to live happily and well without the misguided hope of being able to freely author one’s own existence. Beatrice

writes a book titled *The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System*, in which she gladly admits that “the forces of Tralfamadore have had something to do with the affairs of Earth”. Still, the people who had served those forces had done so in such “highly personalized ways” (216) that they made them their own. The determined nature of the Earthlings’ actions does not devalue their subjective experience – even if they did not make the decisions, the decisions were still “theirs” in the sense of working through their own particular configurations and circumstances. Beatrice tells Constant that “the worst thing that could possibly happen to anybody ... would be to not be used for anything by anybody”, and we are told that “the thought relaxed her” (218). Similarly, at the very end of his life, Constant remarks that “a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved” (220). This “use” is not meant in the sense of exploitation, but in the sense of mutual utility – and this “love” is not meant in the sense of romantic or possessive love, but in the sense of something far broader and more inclusive. In the Space Opera burlesque of *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut discards the gewgaws of divine purpose and of human free will without losing positive value or falling into cheap cynicism. In his 1976 novel *Slapstick*, he would turn a similarly critical eye upon traditional notions of love.

**“Love is where you find it. I think it is foolish to go looking for it, and I think it can often be poisonous.”**

– Kurt Vonnegut, *Slapstick*

*Slapstick* is generally considered by critics (and by the author himself) as Vonnegut’s weakest novel<sup>3</sup>, and it is understandable why many remain cool towards it. Taking the form of the autobiography of Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, the novel portrays a post-apocalyptic future in which the world population has been decimated, and Western civilisation has collapsed due to oil shortages, plagues and bizarre, weather-like changes in local gravity. Swain lives in the ruins of the Empire State Building with his granddaughter, and relates in vignettes his previous life. He was born, with his twin sister Eliza, to upper class parents, but with hideous disfigurements – “we were monsters, and we were not expected to live very long ... we were *neanderthaloids*. We had the features of adult, fossil human beings even in infancy – massive brow-ridges, sloping foreheads, and steamshovel jaws” (31). Though assumed by everyone to be congenital idiots, Wilbur and Eliza are of normal intelligence, and soon discover that when they are in close physical contact they become a hyper-intelligent gestalt, capable of solving the world’s most intractable social, scientific and political problems. They are, however, separated after revealing their intelligence to their parents. Their relationship becomes acrimonious, and eventually Eliza dies in an accident on Mars. Wilbur eventually becomes president of the United States, running on a slogan of “Lonesome No More!”, and institutes a policy of artificial extended families, in which every citizen of the country is randomly assigned a secondary surname (such as Daffodil-11). Despite the fall of civilisation, Swain’s artificial families live on.

*Slapstick* is a bizarre, messy novel, and would certainly be little more than a loose collection of gimcrack sci-fi tropes were it not for the thematic and stylistic unity conferred on it by its essential subject – the various forms and conceptions of love. In the prologue, Vonnegut explains that the book is “the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography”, and he gave it the title “Slapstick” because “grotesque, situational poetry”, like that of Laurel and Hardy films, is “what life *feels* like to me” (11).

He notes that there was little love in their films, and muses that that is why “I find it natural to discuss life without ever mentioning love” since “it does not seem important to me.” What is more important, in Vonnegut’s estimation, is “common decency”:

I have had some experiences with love, or think I have, anyway, although the ones I have liked best could easily be described as ‘common decency’. I treated somebody well for a little while, or maybe even a tremendously long time, and that person treated me well in turn. Love need not have anything to do with it. (12)

Of course, treating someone else decently is not mutually exclusive with love. However, it is not love per se that Vonnegut is suspicious of, but the possessiveness and overt, overwhelming passion that is often implicit in its conventional, “romantic” form. As such, when “people who are conventionally supposed to love each other” fight, Vonnegut would rather they say to each other “please – a little less love, and a little more common decency” (12) than play up to their emotions (not to mention the conventional cues of how a lover’s quarrel “should” proceed). The emotional distancing that is required when one insists on mutual decency over love, far from encouraging solitariness or selfishness, provides the space necessary for people to better understand each other.

The twins of Vonnegut’s story play out this dynamic at the beginning of their lives. Safely ensconced in a remote mansion, hidden from the world by their ashamed parents, Wilbur and Eliza find that “happiness was being perpetually in each other’s company ... and growing up as specialized halves of a single brain”. Though they “pawed and embraced each other a good deal”, their intentions are “purely intellectual ... Eliza and I used bodily contact only in order to increase the intimacy of our brains ... thus did we give birth to a single genius” (47). Each twin brings a different but mutually co-dependant aspect to this “single genius” that is “the most important individual in our lives, but which we never named” (48) – just as in (inaccurate) pop science conceptions of the lateralised human brain, Wilbur is logical and methodical whereas Eliza is intuitive and emotional. Together, they are startlingly intelligent. Entirely self-taught, they learn several languages, critique Darwin and Newton, and rewrite the American constitution - which they consider, in its original form, “as good a scheme for misery as any” (49). The twins are happy, fulfilled, and productive, living in near-completely interrelated intimacy and solidarity. Love, as Wilbur makes clear in his reminiscence, plays no part in their Edenic state – it would be as redundant to their continued functioning as it would be between the hemispheres of the brain. When their mother, “temporarily insane” on the eve of the twins’ fifteenth birthday, breaks down and asks how she could ever love “a pair of drooling totem poles” (60), the twins, far from feeling rejected (being “about as emotionally vulnerable as the Great Stone Face in New Hampshire”) feel beholden to respond to their mother’s distress intellectually: “we enjoyed solving problems”, they explain. While they need “a mother and father’s love about as much as a fish needs a bicycle”, they nevertheless “admire her unwavering decency toward one and all” (61), and seek to aid her however they can. Unfortunately, their solution – revealing their intelligence to their parents – eventually leads to their being separated, and the catastrophic rift between the twins is the first point where claims of love begin to be laid. Hiding his work away, separated from Eliza, Wilbur remembers that many of the books they read together “said that love was the most important thing of all”, and experimentally tells Eliza that he loves her. Eliza, ever the intuitively and emotionally intelligent twin, cannot abide the platitude:

‘It’s as though you were pointing a gun at my head,’ she said. ‘It’s just a way of getting somebody to say something they probably don’t mean. What else can I say, or *anybody* say, but, “I love you, too”?’ (89)

As Lauren Berlant notes, the danger of “working in an emotional vernacular is that it brings with it narrative and affective promises: it is a genre of sorts” (690). When the bonds of genuinely mutual understanding and dependence are lost, generic convention is forced to take over, and when convention is not only unsatisfactory but threateningly normative, it leads to alienation and acrimony. Wilbur and Eliza had lived a life of common decency (between themselves, towards others) but are now stuck in the same predicament as the rest of humanity. They are isolated, and left only with culturally sanctioned sentiment in place of real companionship.

The twins’ solution for the loneliness of modern life, artificial extended families, is a modification of an idea Vonnegut had toyed with for several years. Inspired by the work of Robert Redfield, Vonnegut often spoke in favour of “folk societies”, arguing in a 1971 address that “we are full of chemicals which require us to belong to folk societies, or failing that, to feel lousy all the time” – and that this is why people form clubs and organisations about “this or that narrow aspect of life”. What they really desire when they do so, Vonnegut believes, is “the simpleminded, brotherly conditions of a folk society” (*Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons* 169-70) – again, not love, but commonality and community. The extremely limited sphere of the nuclear family is also vulnerable to collapse because of this lack, as Vonnegut would note five years after *Slapstick*’s publication:

Marriage is collapsing because our families are too small. A man cannot be a whole society to a woman, and a woman cannot be a whole society to a man. We try, but it is scarcely surprising that so many of us go to pieces. (*Palm Sunday* 175)

In *Slapstick*, the artificial familial bonds are designed not to replace but supplement existing ones, and special care is made to ensure each family cuts across social and economic boundaries – the current unofficial extended families of physicians, lawyers, politicians, and the like are “the bad sorts of extended families [since] they excluded children and old people and housewives, and losers of every description” (124). Critics have been sharply divided on the success of this scheme, in theory and (fictional) practice. While Broer argues that its “modest, humane, democratic, and almost comically practical’ goals are laudable precisely for their simplicity” (177), Robert Tally Jr. sees the scheme as nothing but a recipe for elevating “the worst aspects of bad-old-nationalism ... to the level of blood-feuds” (104), redrawing rather than erasing old battle lines. There is, however, explicitly nothing utopian in the artificial family plan. It is not intended as a panacea for all mankind’s ills, but as an analgesia for its loneliness. Certainly, Wilbur has no illusions about universal love or harmony somehow arising from these new structures; as he explains to a sceptical voter, anyone would be as free to hate their artificial relatives as they already are their blood, and are able and likely to show favouritism towards their own. Nevertheless, the vertical, distributed nature of the new families would (ideally) mitigate the tendency of the powerful to mix horizontally and exclusively with the powerful, and would finally include the destitute, lonely and shunned people of America in something resembling a community. In the Oval Office, President Wilbur Swain is visited by a dishwasher from the kitchens who is “so embarrassed that he choked every time he tried to speak”, but finally manages to articulate



his message – that he, too, is a Daffodil-11. Wilbur embraces him – “My brother, I said” (133-34) – a gesture of common decency, if nothing else.

**“It’s been the university experience that taught me that there is a very good reason [that you write books], that you catch people before they become generals and presidents and so forth and you poison their minds with ... humanity.”**

– Kurt Vonnegut, “A Talk With Kurt Vonnegut Jr.”

Since he first came to critical attention, Vonnegut has garnered a reputation amongst critics and the public as a nihilist, an arch-pessimist, a black humourist and unremitting misanthrope<sup>4</sup> – and, not un-relatedly, occasionally as frankly un-American. A fairly illustrative example of Vonnegut courting, unwittingly or not, such a reputation is his performance on a CBS live panel on day of the 1969 moon landing headed by Walter Cronkite. Charles Shields records that “Kurt remarked that putting space exploration ahead of eradicating poverty was morally ‘untenable’ ... over the next several days, CBS received thousands of angry, insulting letters complaining that Vonnegut [was] un-American and had spoiled the event” (264). Tellingly, Cronkite described Vonnegut as “bitter”. Similarly, *Slaughterhouse-Five* was burnt in North Dakota in the year of its release, its depiction of war and its absurdities decried as “unpatriotic” (Bosmajian 201). In both cases, and in his work generally, Vonnegut cannot help but go against the grain of the American mainstream. Despite his essential identification with the values of the American project (the “junior civics” values he so thoroughly took to heart), there are intractable philosophical and political differences between his work and the reality of the United States, and it is this disjunction that often elicits rancour. Stanley Cavell, in a 1969 essay on *King Lear*, points out the facet of the American self-image that Vonnegut has repeatedly run up against:

[America’s] need for love is insatiable. It has surely been given more love than any other nation: its history, until yesterday, is one in which outsiders have been drawn to it and in which insiders are hoarse from their expressions of devotion to it. Those who voice politically radical wishes for this country may forget the radical hopes it holds for itself, and not know that the hatred of America by its intellectuals is only their own version of patriotism. It is the need for love as proof of its existence which makes it so frighteningly destructive, enraged by ingratitude and by attention to its promises rather than to its promise ... It imagines its evils to come from outside. So it feels watched, isolated in its mounting of waters, denying its shame with mechanical lungs of pride, calling its wrath upon the wrong objects. (345)

This overwhelming requirement for unequivocal love – for unequivocal *positivity* – is singularly unhelpful, since it presupposes the conditions necessary to bring itself about, while refusing to accept the critical perspective necessary to ensure that those conditions actually come about. The American Dream, after all, has always posited that since the nation’s beginning the conditions required for individual success, for peace, prosperity and happiness, have, always and already, been in place. Checking to see whether the material reality of most of the citizens’ lives match up to the ideal barely seems to warrant consideration. It is with the blindness inherent in this optimism that Vonnegut takes issue, and his criticism of many of the fundamental aspects of American culture is his “own version of patriotism”. In this respect, I am in full agreement with John R. May, who notes that Vonnegut’s

tendency in his novels to “limit the humanly possible so severely” paradoxically creates the conditions necessary for “genuine hope”, no matter how unlikely or small that hope may be (28). The avenues of infinite potential and free agency that Vonnegut explicitly closes off were almost certainly never feasible in the first place, and as such serve as distractions from and impediments to what might otherwise be done. In a later novel, *Hocus Pocus*, the protagonist, Eugene Debs Hartke, offhandedly comments that “another flaw in the human character is that everybody wants to build and nobody wants to do maintenance” (198) – essentially, that people (and governments) tend to neglect the less glamorous fundamentals in favour of ambition and idealism. When Vonnegut criticised the Apollo program, he was not doing so because he was inherently opposed to the idea of space exploration, but because he believed it represented a fundamentally misaligned set of priorities – setting off on an expensive and distractingly showy adventure without first getting one’s house in order. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut takes aim at precisely the aspect of American culture Tanner identifies in *City of Words* – the desire to live a self-authored, individualistic, independent existence. Instead, the travails of Constant and Beatrice, constantly struggling to assert themselves, end only when they accept a more modest, realistic alternative: the desire to flourish rather than to succeed, and to do what one can rather than what one will. It is only after doing so that they can achieve any higher state of human happiness. In *Slapstick*, love, or at least its conventional form, is at best a luxury and at worst a claim of possession that leads to bitterness and acrimony. What Wilbur Daffodill-11 Swain achieves naturally with his sister and attempts to provide for the people of the United States with his artificial families is, again, a more modest but more durable and compassionate form of human relationship, a bond of understanding, common decency and communality. These are only pessimistic aims when they are compared to unrealistic notions - of the always-already existing utopia of the United States, of untrammelled free will or of romantic love as a pure and essential redemptive force. Indeed, the only time Vonnegut is genuinely pessimistic is when it comes to the ability and willingness of people and of nations to come around to these modest goals: to discard inane optimism and foolish utopian hopes, to instead focus on what needs to be done to make life tolerable rather than perfect. Pessimism this may be, but it is a kind pessimism. It is also a necessary one, if any kind of improvement in the human condition is possibly to be achieved, rather than merely dreamt.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In one of the last radio interviews of his life, Vonnegut is unremittingly bleak, arguing that it is about time humanity “packed it in” and went the way of the dinosaurs, since human beings, in their abuse of the planet, “are in revolt against life itself” (“Kurt Vonnegut: 10 Years of Provocative Radio”)

<sup>2</sup> Belief or disbelief in free will appears to be fairly malleable, but only when stimuli are introduced to induce doubt. Sarkissian et al. have shown that the beliefs that “our universe is indeterministic” and that “moral responsibility is not compatible with determinism” is strikingly prevalent cross-culturally (“Is Belief in Free Will a Cultural Universal?”). It is probably safe to say, subjectively speaking, that an inherent belief in free will is almost always our ‘default’ perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> Vonnegut notes in *Palm Sunday* that the novel was received negatively in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Village Voice*, and *Rolling Stone*. In chapter 18 of the same book, “The Sexual Revolution”, Vonnegut grades *Slapstick*, as a “D” grade.

<sup>4</sup> A particularly scathing example among Vonnegut’s reviewers is Peter Prescott. In a review of *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), for example, he derides his “smug pessimism” (“Vexed with Vonnegut” 14) as “pretentious, hypocritical manure”, and takes particular exception to Vonnegut’s mechanistic portrayal of human beings as “facile fatalism” (15). Critics, especially in the 1970s, often criticised Vonnegut’s pessimistic outlook. An illustrative example is Lynn Buck, who argues that Vonnegut’s “nihilistic message” (196) is that life has degenerated to something beneath a lousy joke (182). Clinton Burhans, similarly, argues that “for Vonnegut, [man] can neither find nor create meaning or purpose order or beauty...he succeeds best at making himself ridiculous and his life unliveable” (185).

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### **Author Biography**

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Andrew Hicks is a first year English PhD candidate at the University of Bristol, UK. Research interests include 20th century American fiction, postmodernism, humour studies, monistic philosophy and medical humanities. His current research centres on portrayals of monistic philosophy and determinism in the work of Kurt Vonnegut.