Sarah Spicer

Professor Gwiazda

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The Role of Kilgore Trout in Four Vonnegut Novels

The focus of my thesis is the function of Kilgore Trout in four of Kurt Vonnegut’s novels: *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), and *Timequake* (1997). These novels portray Trout relatively consistently, with details about him and his attitudes varying in only minor ways. In all four novels, Trout is a depressed, aging science fiction author who cannot control his impulse to write even though his stories have an almost nonexistent readership. He often ends up in pathetic, ridiculous situations as a result of his lack of confidence and inability to influence the world.

My choice of novels comes partially from Josh Simpson’s 2004 article on Trout as representative of the potential failures of science fiction, in which he introduces what he calls Vonnegut’s Troutean trilogy. This trilogy includes *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*. Whereas Simpson ends the list with *Breakfast of Champions*, I have chosen to include *Timequake* because I believe that the function of Trout in Vonnegut’s last novel remains relatively similar to what it is in the other three novels, even though the aspect of science fiction is less present. There is a fifth novel that features Trout – *Jailbird* (1979)– which I have left out of my analysis. In *Jailbird*, Trout is a pseudonym for a separate persona that differs in many respects from the Trout of the other four novels.

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Kilgore Trout appears as a character only towards the very end of the book, but his presence is felt throughout the entire narrative. In the novel, Trout functions as a moral compass. Trout’s inclusion allows the reader to evaluate each character based on their reactions to and interpretations of Trout and his works. Trout is likened to “a frightened, aging Jesus, whose sentence to crucifixion had been commuted to imprisonment for life” and his characterization as a truth teller bolsters his function as a prophetic guiding moral light (*God Bless You* 162). In another passage, Eliot Rosewater even calls Trout society’s “‘greatest prophet’” (19). Protagonists (such as Eliot) and antagonists (such as Mushari and Senator Rosewater) are defined by their attitude toward Trout rather than by their explicit actions.

Trout’s stories are diagnoses of sick societies – his “favorite formula was to describe a perfectly hideous society, not unlike his own, and then, toward the end, to suggest ways in which it could be improved” (21). Even though the suggestions for a better world never seem to make it into Vonnegut’s novels, the themes of the stories often mirror the themes within the novel: for example, how money and power connect and corrupt. The characters in the novel serve to translate Trout’s works into the world. At one point in the novel, Eliot Rosewater has the realization that “a really good science-fiction book had never been written about money” (23). *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, while only a science fiction book in terms of Trout’s stories, is undoubtedly a book about money, making Eliot’s comment almost metafictional. Vonnegut couches his own themes in Trout’s stories in an attempt to refrain from proselytizing. However, he doesn’t outright praise Trout or his stories; they are hidden in obscure places and are found on the same shelves as pornography magazines, characterizing Trout’s works as taboo, embarrassing, and to be hidden away rather than proclaimed. His own ambivalence towards Trout disconnects Trout’s themes and messages from the themes and messages that arise through Vonnegut’s authorial power, even though they are often similar. Trout’s works, also, are surprisingly omnipresent for their supposed obscurity. Many of the characters in the novel are able to find Trout’s works, characterizing the works as unpopular more so than as rare. In person, Trout is gentle, accepting, and rational.

Kilgore Trout’s character has a small role in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but the impact of his stories is enormous. In this novel, Trout functions primarily as a human exploration into the unstable relations between authorship and readership. The two “readers” of Trout in the novel are Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, who integrate Trout’s ideas into their own ideas of reality. Science fiction is brought into contest with and privileged over other forms of writing as “re-invent[ion of] themselves and their universe,” or as Rosewater says, works of literature are not “‘*enough* anymore’” (*Slaughterhouse* 101). The science fiction stories are thus therapeutic.

Trout’s skill as a writer in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is not as important as his ideas, just as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. The stories themselves play a similar role as in the previous novel; they are translations of broad societal issues into science fiction parables. These parables also bolster Vonnegut’s themes, although in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the themes involve wartime destruction rather than greed and monetary power. This change in theme seems to change Trout as a character. He is characterized much more negatively in person; Trout is “friendless and despised” (111). Rather than being gentle or moral, he is a bully and a creep, creating a divide between Trout’s stories and Trout himself. This divide is registered in Trout’s own reactions to being treated like an author – he is at first unable to register himself as a “writer,” and later struggles to perform that role, making up stories and their inspirations on the spot and lying about them. His stories are similarly devalued in society, relegated to seedy shops and even there unappreciated in favor of porno mags. The notion that his writings are out of place everywhere, except for his two fervent readers in Rosewater and Pilgrim, makes his role seem even more pathetic. However, he is also compared with Jesus in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, just as in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. He is referred to as a “cracked messiah,” as well as being juxtaposed with a story in which Jesus is characterized as “a bum with no connections” (110, 167). His stories are parables, like in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Even though Vonnegut himself is in the book at brief intervals, Trout is still another facet of Vonnegut’s themes.

*Breakfast of Champions* sees Kilgore Trout enter into the novel as a main character for the first time. Inthe novel, Trout functions as “the eyes and ears of the Creator of the Universe” (*Breakfast* 75). However, this function is problematized by the revelation that narrator-Vonnegut is the Creator, rather than some traditional cosmic God figure. Therefore, Trout functions as the centerpiece of a layered conversation about the ethical responsibilities of the author as creator. As a main character of the novel, we can see more about Trout’s backstory and motivations. He appears to be a man utterly dejected by his life experiences and almost willfully resigned to the futility of his written ideas. The premise of *Now It Can Be Told*, the novel of Trout’s that is implicated in *Breakfast of Champion*’s climax, mirrors the theme of the Creator in conversation with the Created, allowing Vonnegut an additional outlet for his main theme. In fact, most of the Trout novels and stories throughout *Breakfast of Champions* function as explorations into some of Vonnegut’s other themes. Unlike in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in *Breakfast of Champions* the only elements of science fiction present are in Trout’s works, distancing the stories from the novel even as they illuminate it. Vonnegut and Trout are mirrored throughout the novel in their initial disdain for humanity and in their eventual epiphanies by the end of the novel about the slipperiness of the ideas and therefore people that they have created. Narrator-Vonnegut admits of his characters that “I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals,” just as Trout is unable to predict or control Dwayne Hoover’s reaction to *Now It Can Be Told* (207).

In *Timequake*, Trout also serves as a main character, functioning as the narrative center of the novel, rather than narrator-Vonnegut. The entirety of the plot of *Timequake* takes place in relation to Trout’s unfinished memoir, *My Ten Years on Automatic Pilot.* Trout’s works are not specifically works of science fiction in this novel, making the connection between Trout’s outlandish parables in the previous novels to society explicit here. The world remains at the same level of dysfunction – or contains the same imminence of doom – in reality as it does in Trout’s stories. Even though Trout and Vonnegut coexist more comfortably as separate characters in *Timequake* than in *Breakfast of Champions*, tension still exists through narrator-Vonnegut’s explicit claim to ownership of Trout’s writing. Vonnegut says that “All I do with short story ideas now is rough them out, credit them to Kilgore Trout, and put them in a novel,” but almost immediately afterwards says that they “aren’t mine. They’re Kilgore Trout’s” (*Timequake* 17, 20). This simultaneous distancing and ownership of Trout’s words allows Vonnegut to include them as a second opinion that is really the same opinion as his own.

Trout’s lack of self-awareness as an author is also made explicit in *Timequake*, in contrast to all of his readers’ characterizations of him (and Vonnegut’s characterizations of him) as an author and nothing else – Vonnegut says to “let it be noted here that Trout himself was not an alcoholic, a junkie, a gambler, or a sex fiend. He just wrote” (30). We also discover firsthand Trout’s personal relationship to his writings: “‘I write stories that astonish *me*, even though nobody else thinks they’re worth a damn’” (105).Trout as a character also functions in important ways in the novel. Notably, Trout’s attempt to make everyone aware of their regained free will mirrors the futility of an author writing their ideas and then publishing them and relinquishing control over their readership and interpretation.

It is an accepted fact in Vonnegut scholarship that Trout is an “alter ego” of Vonnegut’s, but scholars differ in their specific explanations of the meaning of the concept. Some, such as Josh Simpson have chosen to focus in on the role of Trout as a science fiction writer, since Vonnegut himself disliked being labelled a science fiction writer. Others, such as Tamas Benyei, set up a binary opposition between literary fiction and science fiction and describe how Trout functions within this binary opposition. The most helpful readings of Vonnegut for my purposes are intertextual, focusing on how his repeated themes, characters, and events create a body of work rich in interconnected nuances of meaning. For example, some of Kathryn Hume’s work on Vonnegut focuses on the role that recurring characters play intertextually in demonstrating Vonnegut’s methods of meaning-making.

In describing Trout specifically, scholars tend to place Trout in one of two alter ego roles: he is either a parody of Vonnegut and of science fiction in general or he has a prophetic voice and his stories function as parables that mirror Vonnegut’s own opinions. Josh Simpson is one voice relegating Trout to parody: he describes how Trout represents the failures of science fiction as a genre. Jesús Lerate de Castro, on the other hand, focuses on how each Trout story in *Slaughterhouse-Five* functions as a parable that bolsters Vonnegut’s own themes. I believe that both interpretations have their merits. I think that putting them into conversation with each other would do much to show how Trout’s role comes to be advantaged in its indeterminacy.

A series of questions is guiding me in my exploration of these four novels. Namely, how does Trout’s presence as a character, author, and symbol/metaphor impact the novels? How do Trout’s stories inform the themes that are present in Vonnegut’s novels? How does Vonnegut explore an ambivalence towards science fiction through Trout as a science fiction author? To what extent is Trout one of many incarnations of Vonnegut? How do Trout, the narrator-Vonnegut, the character-Vonnegut, and the author-Vonnegut compare? Is it possible to give Trout a definite role or function, or is his presence marked by so much tension, parody, and instability as to render his role purposely indefinite? In essence, is it Trout’s purpose to be indistinct?

In uncovering the answers to these questions, I hope to show that Trout’s role is not one of simple parody or parable. Vonnegut’s use of Trout as a thematic unifier renders his role indefinite in many ways. For one, he is representative of Vonnegut, yet he represents features that Vonnegut felt less than an affinity for, such as science fiction writing. Binaries such as popular science fiction vs. literature and author vs. character become problematized through Trout. However, in the end, the intertextual, mosaic quality of Trout’s stories embedded in the texts is supported by the indefinite characterization of Trout. Through an ambivalent rendering of Trout as an unfortunate messiah or holy fool, Vonnegut can couch his didacticism in fantastical parable and use parody to make grim themes seem more lighthearted.

I plan on finding my answers by exploring postmodern ideas of metafiction, parody, and fabulation, in conjunction with close readings of these four novels, Vonnegut scholarship, and interviews with Vonnegut. I will also elaborate more fully on Trout as a holy fool figure, because I believe that looking at Trout in this light allows one to see the tensions implicit in his character. Through an exploration of Trout that calls back to the long-standing tradition of the holy fool, and also utilizes some ideas of postmodernism, I hope to contribute to notions of how authors construct and reinvent narrative spaces to portray their ideas. I also hope that the ideas presented here can be used as a sort of model, perhaps for Vonnegut’s other recurring characters (such as Eliot Rosewater and Rabo Karabekian), or perhaps for the construction of character and narrative self in other authors’ works. There might also be connections that can be drawn with the other Trout persona in *Jailbird*. In the end, the goal of my research is to contribute to scholarship concerning the Vonnegut canon, but also to address broader contexts of narrative inquiry.

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