

The world according to Kurt Vonnegut: Moral paradox and narrative form

Pettersson's dissertation examines all of Kurt Vonnegut's works to date and pays particular attention to his novels, from *Player Piano* (1952) to *Hocus Pocus* (1990).

In the introduction Pettersson presents his aims and methods, surveys previous works on Vonnegut, examines the three phases in his oeuvre, and discusses Vonnegut's relation to various literary genres. He claims that although some novels can be considered, generically, as science fiction and others as postmodern fiction, Vonnegut's literary career as a whole displays many naturalistic traits, of which the most notable is a deterministic view of mankind.

This largely neglected affinity with literary naturalism is the starting-point for the first part of the dissertation. Here Pettersson considers a central motif in the novels, "the Vonnegut paradox": the fact that Vonnegut, in the main, describes the behaviour of his characters as being strongly determined but nevertheless often stresses the moral responsibility of mankind. Pettersson maintains that Vonnegut first grapples with free will in two early novels (*Player Piano*, *Mother Night*), and then treats various types of determinism--cosmological, sociological and physiological--in most of his oeuvre, before finally making them interact with a capricious "Fate" in his two latest novels, *Bluebeard* and *Hocus Pocus*. In many of his novels the various types of determinism are formally reflected by what Pettersson terms "metafictional determinism", Vonnegut's way of summarizing--and thus determining--the action (usually the protagonist's biography) from the outset. The motif of determinism is also related to a moral responsibility which is highly valued by Vonnegut and to the humorous fictional mode within which it is expressed.

The second part of the dissertation is the first overall study of narrative form in Vonnegut. It starts out with a survey of narrative perspective and structure in the novels but, for the most part, comprises detailed analyses of four novels which span four decades in Vonnegut's career and most successfully combine deterministic motifs with narrative form: the cosmological (*The Sirens of Titan* 1959, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 1969), the sociological (*Jailbird* 1979) and the physiological (*Galapagos* 1985). However, Pettersson sees no one-to-one correspondence between form and theme and demonstrates, for instance, how "crosscutting" (alternation between simultaneous action) is the informing principle for *The Sirens of Titan* and *Galapagos*, and how *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Jailbird* are structured by shifts between largely chronologically narrated time levels. The four analyses also include discussion of some other central motifs and techniques, such as Vonnegut's intra-allusive way of building his fictional, "Heraclitean" universe, his use of science and fiction as sources, and his--often double--allusions to such sources in the names of his characters.

In his conclusion Pettersson discusses some thematic and formal reasons underlying Vonnegut's wide readership and points out that even if Vonnegut's characters often fail to shoulder moral responsibility for their actions the satirical point is directed at the reader.

World According To Kurt Vonnegut

Yicheng Fang



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