RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Quest for Order: Social Chaos in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Sirens of Titan*

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**ABSTRACT**

The individual’s search for absolute order and meaning within a chaotic universe is an important theme in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. Ordinary human consciousness, it seems, simply incompatible with what it cannot clarify and control. It requires and it insists on as much form, as much meaning, and as little ambiguity and inconsistency, as possible. In such novels, the characters and the form itself are free to reflect and react to chaos without becoming indistinguishable from it. This is primarily focused in the *Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut.

**Keywords:** Chaotic universe, Ambiguity, Inconsistency, *Sirens of Titan, Slaughterhouse-Five.*

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Mystery, formlessness and meaninglessness of essential elements of chaos to the creative mind do not necessarily signify or evoke a nihilism that must lead to aesthetic suicide or a life devoid of values. If precise truth, crisp definition, and orderly procession are not in evidence, we are uncomfortable. If we find ourselves lost in a blizzard, the first thing we may do is cast furtive glances in an attempt to locate recognizable objects or tracks in the snow that we hope will lead us quickly home, where familiarity lies in abundance.

Albert Camus, in his essay “An Absurd Reasoning,” states:

“People have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living” (7).

Recognition of chaos does, however, force one to acknowledge that both these potentially destructive options lurk close beneath the invented and accepted veils of meaning that enable us to live. In acknowledging absurdity, the creative consciousness willingly either creates additional veils of meaning, thus compromising its vision through a very real human need; or, aided by integrity and not a small amount of self-reflexive humor, the creative consciousness sacrifices finality and form to a life of pure depiction and incessant questioning.

The position of the modern artist, the novelist in particular seems to be that of a person torn between telling a lie to him or to others to satisfy immediate emotional and aesthetic needs, and telling the naked truth as a matter of intellectual principle. If the novelist is to remain true to his vision of chaos and all it entails, and if art is a reflection of nature, he must then live as an unaccommodated man and shape his art as such. The novel must be utterly open, utterly random, utterly chaotic and ultimately inaccessible. This could mean self-annihilation, or destruction of the work of art itself, for that which is to be reflected is chaos and absurdity. In other words, a true work of chaos works
against itself at the most basic and immediate level.

Within this type of novel, the subject remains apart from the object abstract or realistic while still being drawn into it and even victimized by it. Consequently, the reader can essentially remain in control of his world even as the fictional world in which he is immersed is out of control even though, paradoxically, the fictional world purports to reflect the real world, a world of chaos. The reader, then, accesses the textual world in all its chaos and uncertainty while still remaining in the relative stasis of his non-fictive world.

Perhaps it is this irrational security that accounts for the success of Kurt Vonnegut. His novels are chaotic, sometimes frustratingly so. Yet they are not without meaning, even if the meaning cannot be readily apprehended or, more likely, if their “meaning” is meaningless and chaos. This openness, this refusal to conform, is found not only within the works themselves but also in the novels’ reception among readers. Vonnegut’s novels, virtually all of which are philosophical or, more specifically, existentially absurd, are popular with mainstream audiences and at the same time have elicited at least, since the early 1970’s substantial serious criticism.

_Sirens of Titan_ can be read on many levels as black comedy, avant garde, pure satire, philosophical escapeism or even traditional science fiction. Indeed, the novel at many points transcends literary categories, branching out and breaching convenient and conventional labels until a chaos of genres appears imminent in addition to the chaotic world within the work. Similarly, _Slaughterhouse-Five_ is anti-war stance which quickly becomes overshadowed by and subservient to its philosophical implications to such an extent that the bombing of Dresden and the war itself can be read as metaphors, an idea that too few critics have pursued.

Nevertheless, _Sirens of Titan_ and _Slaughterhouse-Five_ are accessible. This is not due to any lack of philosophical insight on the part of the average reader, nor should it imply superficiality on the part of the author. Rather, it is because, in addition to their readability, the works present enough chaos to spur delight in irrationality on the reader’s part, but not so much as to incite alienation.

This is not to say that either novel achieves a perfect chaotic mixture. _Sirens of Titan_ and _Slaughterhouse-Five_ are not without their flaws. Both at times lapse into confusion form and begins to mirror content to such an extent that, paradoxically, states that the works are in danger of being sacrificed to themselves. The effect on the reader is, ultimately, alienation: at the end of the respective novel he may experience puzzlement, which quickly lapses into inattentiveness, followed by a sense of inconclusiveness and a feeling of aesthetic emasculation.

This reaction and reflection is evoked in the novels’ worlds and by the form of the novels themselves. Having been spiritually stripped, reduced, yet scattered by their splintered, contradictory worlds, Malachi Constant and Billy Pilgrim, the protagonists of _Sirens of Titan_ and _Slaughterhouse-Five_ respectively, drift like the fragmented heroes they are, numbly reacting to and reflecting the chaos within and the chaos without. Caught in the schizophrenic whirlwinds and whirlpools of time, space, and meaning, each character at one point or another either has lost or loses his identity while attempting to extract from chaos a harmonious, truthful, and whole existence: Malachi Constant is quickly subordinated to digressive detail and quite literally becomes almost a secondary character from the moment his spiraling journey begins. Billy Pilgrim, having come “unstuck in time,” has become a character actor in his own life and lives “in a constant state of stage fright… because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (23). Both characters “are so profoundly alienated from society and self, so utterly overwhelmed by feelings of futility and shame, they lapse into complete helplessness” (Broer 3) and are free only to dazedly react to and reflect their predicament.

Both _Sirens of Titan_ and _Slaughterhouse-Five_ are concerned with the ephemeral questions and dilemmas that fly out from and to the individual faced with a chaotic existence, the timeless individual who has been thrown into a world “inexhaustible in quantity” and diversity, where explanation is useless (Camus 71), yet one that begs explanation, interpretation, and regulation.
Although they are certainly two different characters, Billy Pilgrim owes a dubious debt to Malachi Constant for guiding him to and offering an existence governed by illusion and delusion as a means of travel and as an option for coping with chaos. Without an understanding of Sirens of Titan’s philosophical grounds and implications, its comparative linearity, and its failure in the face of chaos, Slaughterhouse-Five’s metaphorical content is more likely to be relegated by the reader to the realm of “off-beat anti-war novels” and are primarily read as such.

How the character of Billy Pilgrim may have been born, how Kurt Vonnegut may have come to the creation of such a protagonist can be seen in Sirens of Titan and in the character of Malachi Constant. The path Malachi takes and the irony of his destination is the very same that Billy helplessly exploits and explores further: if Billy is on a pilgrimage, Malachi leads him to his ship.

The significance of Billy Pilgrim and his eternal, internal descent to chaos, then, can be better appreciated and Slaughterhouse-Five’s world is more fully realized by an exploration and description of Malachi Constant’s erratic ascent to external disorder. An investigation of Sirens of Titan additionally reveals the worth of the novel on its own merits, cut loose from the moorings of Slaughterhouse-Five, and generates an understanding of its place in the chaotic cosmos of Kurt Vonnegut.

It is fitting that Sirens of Titan is at once a success and a failure. If it appears at the end of the novel that Malachi has come to his justly deserved reward for enduring anguish and madness, it takes only a moment of contemplation to throw this idea into doubt; uncertainties and contradictions come too quickly for this illusion to be maintained. This is the reality that Vonnegut deals in, that his protagonists move willingly or not. Similarly, it is this reality that his readers must deal in as well, or we, like Malachi Constant, will be grasping futilely for something that is simply not there or is at least utterly unattainable.

Sirens of Titan is both a success and a failure because it is successful in portraying failure, failure of form and of content. If this is difficult to see, if either its success or its failure at any point overlaps or overshadows the other, it is because this is the restless, chaotic, and paradoxical nature of the beast. The “success of failure” or “failed success” manifested in Sirens of Titan builds a hazy foundation for Slaughterhouse-Five, in which chaos is at once taken to extremes and is thus more faithfully rendered and tightened to show closely the banal texture of a number of fragments of one chaotic experience. If the “point” is missed, Vonnegut is there to remind us from the beginning that “this one is a failure,” and goes on to tell us and in doing so takes Sirens of Titan a step further just how it begins and how it ends (22).

What Vonnegut shows us in Sirens of Titan and later more fully in Slaughterhouse-Five are chaos and options in the face of chaos. Once Malachi spirals back to himself and finds only illusion, there is both a stop and a halt. The stop is simply Malachi’s death; the halt is the pause between Malachi Constant and Billy Pilgrim, between knowing what is not there and compulsion to find something that is. Malachi is victimized by and dies in the throes of illusion; Billy is victimized by life and can only live irrationally and so lives in the throes of illusion.
References


