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Vonnegut's criticisms of modern society

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Vonnegut's criticisms of modern society

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. SOME PERSPECTIVES OF MODERN SOCIETY	1
II. IRRATIONALITY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR	19
III. DEHUMANIZATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL	29
IV. MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN	37
V. CONCLUSION	45
VI. A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	48

I. SOME PERSPECTIVES OF MODERN SOCIETY

In his age-old effort to predict the future, man has tried many methods, including a careful study of past history. Although the act of predicting social events is largely theoretical--since it is necessarily a tentative process--numerous historians, sociologists, theologians, scientists, and artists persist in discovering trends or seeing patterns in the movement of history. In developing their theories, many of these people discover cycles in historical events, which enable them to shape and to give definition not only to human experience but to the rise and fall of entire civilizations, as well. When studying what they believe to be the cycles of civilizations, scholars have observed that each cycle is a well-rounded unit of history characterized by stages of birth, growth, decline, and death. These cycles occur even in civilizations on opposite sides of the globe, like the Babylonian and the Mayan. Western Civilization may be no exception; many historians suspect that it also can be viewed as cyclical in its development and some further assert that it is presently in its final stage--dissolution.

Historians, sociologists, and scientists have predicted some general outlines of societal decay; meanwhile, artists (and writers in particular) have tended to portray the human aspects of this same decay. The American writer, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., writes satirically about our contemporary culture and sees no possibility in the future for anything but decay and self-destruction.

This introductory chapter will briefly review several significant theories of men who have written extensively about the decline and decay of civilizations and, in the process, it will also point out what these men believe to be some recurring patterns in the decay cycle. The views of these people, it appears to me, are similar in many respects to Vonnegut's attitude toward the contemporary scene. Most of them, Vonnegut included, see Western Civilization as displaying the characteristic signs of a dying culture.

The German historian, Oswald Spengler, is the best representative of the group of scholars who view world history in terms of its many civilizations.¹ Spengler rejects the idea that there is one culture, one civilization, for all humanity. Instead, he develops a theory which proposes the plurality of cultures and civilizations. He writes:

I see, in place of that empty figment of one linear history. . . a number of mighty Cultures, each springing with primitive strength from the soil of a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle; each stamping its material, its mankind, in its own image; each having its own idea, its own passion, its own life, will and feeling, its own death. . . . Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay and never return. There is not one sculpture, one painting, one mathematics, one physics, but many, each in its deepest essence different from the others, each limited in duration and self-contained, just as each species of plant has its peculiar blossom or fruit, its special type of growth and decline.²

¹Note: In Spenglerian usage, culture and civilization have different technical significance. The former points to the beginning of cultural phenomena; the latter refers only to the last stages; i.e., a culture degenerates into a civilization. However, for clarity, I will use the two words synonymously.

²Oswald Spengler, Decline of the West, trans. C. F. Atkinson, I (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 21.

For Spengler, the cultures, like flowers, grow spontaneously without predestination. Each culture passes through a regular cycle of birth, growth, breakdown, and dissolution which is parallel to the biological process of childhood, youth, manhood, and old age. He also associates civilizations with races of people and specifically lists nine major ones: Classical, Mexican, Arabian, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, Babylonian, Russian, and Western.³

Along with his main thesis--the multiplicity of civilizations--Spengler develops the theory that each culture has an isolated existence. That is, history is a morphology of civilizations with each civilization living a certain span of life, then going out of existence as unobtrusively as it had first sprung up. There are no legacies nor heritages nor relics. All nine of Spengler's civilizations are completely independent of each other.

In studying the final phases of decaying cultures, however, Spengler notes a number of similar characteristics. To him, societal unanimity is basic for cultural growth; therefore, cultural change is a sign of regression. Change makes people self-conscious and turns them towards intellectual activities. When this stage of civilization is reached, reason becomes God and scientists become priests.⁴ Works of art and pieces of literature deteriorate into mechanical attempts to imitate life. All of these characteristics of cultural decay finally lead to

³Spengler, I, 3-50.

⁴Spengler, II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 304-305.

the materialistic, urban society with all of its artificial living conditions. As Spengler states :

Every great Culture begins with a mighty theme that rises out of the pre-urban country-side, is carried through in the cities of art and intellect, and closes with a finale of materialism in the world-cities.⁵

A civilization begins to degenerate when its population craves uniformity. People live massed together in hotels instead of in homes, newspapers (more easily digested) replace books, and a society begins to lose its basic values. Thus, in the end, a culture defeats its own purpose. In a civilization's last phase, Spengler sees an interminable cycle of wars, and an aura of scepticism which causes a loss of unity in society and a loss of faith in the people.

As the title of his work indicates, Der Untergang des Abendlandes or The Decline of the West, Spengler is pessimistic. He predicts that Western Civilization is inevitably doomed, that there is nothing mankind can do to prevent its demise. By cataloging the past into a fixed pattern, he is able to forecast the course of future history; since he thinks it is similar to the eight cultures which preceded it, Western Civilization will experience their same fate--total collapse:

It is a drama noble in its aimlessness, noble and aimless as the course of the stars, the rotation of the earth, and alternance of land and sea, of ice and virgin forest upon its face. We may marvel at it or we may lament it--but it is there.⁶

⁵Spengler, II, 308.

⁶Spengler, II, 435.

This type of prophetic determinism has made Spengler a "bête noir" among historians. Both his extremism in denying the continuity of various cultures and his dogmatism in emphatically predicting Western Civilization's death have been lamented by many who otherwise like his writing. The English historian Arnold Toynbee, who has taken many of his own theoretical speculations from Spengler, finds Spengler's absolutism too extreme. For Toynbee, the Spenglerian philosophy of cultures is a theory and, therefore, it must be treated tentatively.

Like Spengler, Toynbee reduces history to a stream-lined system of morphology and carries to great lengths the presentation of his theory that civilizations can be viewed as well-rounded units. Toynbee, however, recognizes twenty-six distinct civilizations instead of nine. Also distinguishing himself on methodological grounds, Toynbee thinks that the proper fields of historical study are societies and not states. His ten-volume work, A Study of History, begins with the thesis that the real units of history are "civilizations" defined as "species of society," whose parts are connected with one another by causal ties. In the six thousand years about which we have knowledge, there have been, according to Toynbee, twenty-one such complete species: Western, two Orthodox Christian (in Russia and the Near East), Iranic, Arabic, Hindu, two Far Eastern, Hellenic, Syriac, Indic, Sinic, Minoan, Sumeric, Hittite, Babylonian, Andean, Mexic, Yucatec, Mayan, Egyptian, plus five "arrested civilizations": Polynesian, Eskimo, Nomadic, Ottoman, and Spartan.⁷

⁷ Pitirim A. Sorokin, "Toynbee's Philosophy of History," JMH (Sept. 1940), rept. in Pieter Geyl, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Pitirim A. Sorokin, The Pattern of the Past (Boston: Beacon, 1949), p. 96.

He observes that they all now have faded or perished, with the exception of Western Civilization, which he believes has sprung from the Hellenic.⁸

Professor Toynbee also disagrees with Spengler about the theory of cultural individuality. Toynbee has not been able to find any justification for believing that a civilization has a completely isolated existence, unaffected by past events; therefore, unity is a primary feature in his philosophy of history. Each of the twenty-six civilizations that he classifies has affected the development of at least one other civilization. Toynbee further rejects Spengler's identification of civilizations with animate beings, and he speaks emphatically against Spengler's connecting civilization with race.

In order to work more precisely with the civilizational processes, Toynbee devises a law of culture-phases. This law is based on the idea that the twenty-six civilizations have certain "tendencies" or "standard patterns of development" which Toynbee then draws into a three-step sequence: 1) genesis, 2) growth, and 3) decline. The main difference between the process of growth and disintegration is that in the growth phase the civilization successfully responds to a series of ever-new challenges, while in the disintegration stage it fails to give such a response to a given challenge. In growth, the challenges, as well as the responses, vary all the time; in disintegration, the responses vary, but the challenge remains unanswered and unremoved. Like Spengler, Toynbee's verdict is that civilizations perish through suicide, not by

⁸Pieter Geyl, "Toynbee's System of Civilizations," JHI (Jan. 1948), rept. in Pieter Geyl, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Pitirim A. Sorokin, The Pattern of the Past (Boston: Beacon, 1949), p. 5.

murder; no outside force can be blamed.⁹

Toynbee sees civilizations subjected to a regularity of decay which is hardly less rigid than Spengler's parallel with the biological process. In his theory, the decline phase consists of three subphases: 1) the breakdown of the civilization, 2) its disintegration, and 3) its dissolution.¹⁰ (The breakdown and the disintegration are often separated by centuries, sometimes even by thousands of years.) Professor Toynbee believes he has observed in history that the decline of a civilization after its breakdown follows a much more regular course than the growing process. He has been so struck by the uniformity with which the various phases spring from the body of a disintegrating civilization that he has reduced the disintegration process to a table.¹¹ The breakdown, Toynbee summarizes, is caused by the retarding force which arises from the "mimesis" of the majority; by the "intractability of institutions," giving them a paralyzing effect; by what he calls the "nemesis of creativity," the stiffening following creative action (as exemplified in the "idolization" of an achievement) or following society's intoxication with successful militarism. Eventually, the "creative minority" changes into a "ruling minority," and the masses become a "proletariat," a group which no longer has any real share in the civilization of its society.¹² Although Toynbee and Spengler differ in their treatment of the philosophy of history on various occasions, they do have a basic

⁹Sorokin, pp. 100-101.

¹⁰Sorokin, p. 102.

¹¹Geyl, p. 11.

¹²Geyl, pp. 7-9.

and essential agreement in their diagnosis of the fatal malady that has eliminated so many civilizations--that is, the schism occurring between the individual and the social body.¹³

Spengler, observing the decline of the nine cultures, is satisfied to remain a pontifical priest, watching, never acting; on the other hand, Toynbee prefers to be a cultural healer. Believing in free will, he carefully treats the future of our own civilization as an open question. He thinks that there is wisdom to be gained from the study of the past, but that one cannot dictate the future as a result of such a study.

Since Karl Marx seems to have taken insufficient pains to make himself understood, his theory of history is more difficult to interpret than Spengler's or Toynbee's. Marx was not often in the habit of giving clear expression to the concepts he employed nor careful elaborations to the theories he advanced; hence, there are many obscurities and inconsistencies in his writings which perplex even the careful reader. For example, there is considerable disagreement among students of Marx whether the basis of his social organization lies solely in technological advances or whether he has something more comprehensive in mind.¹⁴ Most critics do agree, though, that Marx's theory is primarily based on economic dialectics, which, freely interpreted, means that civilization is the result of man's efforts to improve his material condition.

¹³ Dharmendra Goel, Philosophy of History (Delhi, India: Sterling Pub. Ltd., 1967), pp. 145-146.

¹⁴ M. M. Bober, Karl Marx's Interpretation of History, 2nd ed., rev. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), p. 6.

Like Spengler and Toynbee, Marx attempts to visualize a framework for world history, but Marx uses the dialectic as the basis for his historical model. He divides history into four chronological epochs: Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production.¹⁵ These divisions are viewed as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society. They are all prehistoric eras, mere preludes to the future epoch of the socialistic state, where there will be no more exploitation of men.

Instead of calling our society Western Civilization, Marx states that we are now in the epoch of modern capitalism. To Marx, the master principle of capitalism is the accumulation of wealth. Men are secondary; they are means, not ends. In close association with accumulation are the double phenomena of concentration and centralization. Concentration is Marx's term for large-scale production, for the large business firm. Centralization is the fusion of several independent firms into one management, the expropriation of the small capitalist by the large capitalist. The familiar Marxian indictments of capitalism follow: the enslavement of man to machines, the remorseless grinding of surplus-value out of the exploited wage-slaves, the industrial reserve army, the increasing misery of the workers, and the crises and panics.¹⁶

Marx believes that the breakdown of civilization (or, in his theory, the breakdown of modern capitalism) will be caused by the proletariat,

¹⁵Bober, p. 46.

¹⁶Bober, pp. 182-205.

the exploited working class. His formula for the breakdown can be divided into two parts. The first deals with the class struggle, the emancipation of the proletariat. Marx never makes it clear whether this struggle will be a sensational, bloody battle or an essentially non-violent climax of a course of peaceful reform. For Marx, however, revolution is an essential historical instrument, and although the prospect of bloodshed is distasteful to him, he accepts it as inevitable and necessary. The second part of the formula concerns the timing of the revolution. Marx seems to expect the final cataclysm during a war, or during a depression of the economy. These crises, he thinks, will grow in severity, finally graduating into a chronic stagnation which will sooner or later touch off the decisive revolution.¹⁷

For contrast with Spengler, Toynbee, and Marx, it may be informative to examine the views of a nineteenth-century American historian, Henry B. Adams. Adams presents a physical theory of history in The Tendency of History. He believes that "science touches every material and immaterial substance."¹⁸ His theory is rather pejorative, since for Adams, history--as defined by physics, mathematics, and chemistry--is just one negative phase after another, a steady spiral downward which will finally culminate in some dark catastrophe. He states, for instance, that there is an equivalent to the second law of thermodynamics in history which supports his assumption that the energy and wisdom of

¹⁷Bober, pp. 261-268.

¹⁸Henry Adams, The Tendency of History (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 133.

mankind are always running downhill.¹⁹

Adams states that whenever there is "some particular and unquestionable change of Direction or Form in human thought" in history, a connection can be drawn to some important discoveries in the scientific world. The Renaissance is a specific example of a parallel between a phase in history and a phase in science. During that period, incidents which resulted in the development of human thought--such as the introduction of printing, the discovery of America, the invention of the telescope, the writings of Galileo, Descartes, and Bacon, and the mechanical laws perfected by Newton, Huyghens, and the mathematicians as late as 1700--parallel equally significant discoveries in the scientific world.²⁰ In Adams' words :

Only the electrolytic process permits us to watch such movements in physics and chemistry, and the change of phase in 1500-1700 is marvellously electrolytic, but the more curious because we can even give names to the atoms or molecules that passed over to the positive or negative electrode, and can watch the accumulation of force which ended at last by deflecting the whole current of Thought. The maximum movement possible in the old channel was exceeded; the acceleration and concentration, or volume, reached the point of sudden expansion, and the new phase began.²¹

In Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, Adams illustrates another aspect of history by asserting that there are two dominant forces in the world: religion, symbolized by the "Virgin," and technology, symbolized by the "dynamo." Adams states that we "must all admit that society and science are equally interested with theology in deciding whether the universe is

¹⁹David Hackett Fischer, Historians' Fallacies (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 298.

²⁰The Tendency of History, pp. 131-153.

²¹The Tendency of History, pp. 153-154.

one or many, a harmony or a discord."²² Society insists, he says, that it has "liberum arbitrium" or free choice. Adams argues that the words, themselves, imply not unity but duality in creation. On the other hand, science, as though it were itself a Church, has been just as dogmatic as society in characterizing the Law of Energy as the one ultimate unity. Adams' opinion is that history is a twofold struggle between technology and religion, with both forces exerting a steady but equal pressure on man.²³

As a result of reading the works of these four historians--Spengler, Toynbee, Marx, and Adams--one can conclude that historians' interpretations vary greatly in both style and expression. There is considerable evidence, however, to support the thesis that civilizations in world history have similar phases of growth and decline. Of course, one cannot prove this theory, since in noting a significance in the cultural development of civilizations, one is already in the realm of philosophy. To find meaning in human culture is to ascend from fact to value, and that is what these four historians have done.

If historians can predict the future, why can't others? Naturally, some predictions about the decline of civilizations are more meaningful than others. (Adams' physical theory of history is probably quite far-fetched.) Trained historians have a more disciplined approach in developing historical philosophies than people in creative professions such as artists or writers, but all of these individuals' theories are conjectures.

²²Henry Adams, Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), p. 363.

²³Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, pp. 363-377.

One art critic, Sir Kenneth Clark, is currently studying history as revealed through the art of the past and has observed a striking number of signs of cultural decay. Clark's opinion that Western culture is on the verge of dying coincides with the views of Spengler, Toynbee, Marx, and Adams. In his television series, "Civilisation," Clark explores history and culture through the diverse creative works of Western man. Clark states in his corresponding book, Civilisation: A Personal View, "that however complex and solid [the nature of civilization] seems, it is actually quite fragile. It can be destroyed."²⁴ He mentions a number of its enemies such as war, plague and famine, and fear of the supernatural, but he feels that civilization's greatest problem is:

. . . exhaustion, the feeling of hopelessness which can overtake people even with a high degree of material prosperity. . . . Of course, civilisation requires a modicum of material prosperity--enough to provide a little leisure. But, far more, it requires confidence--confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and confidence in one's own mental powers. . . .

So if one asks why the civilisation of Greece and Rome collapsed, the real answer is that it was exhausted.²⁵

A general feeling of hopelessness and a vague lack of confidence in certain of society's institutions are both characteristic attitudes of people in a decaying society.

Clark thinks that Western Civilization, like past civilizations, is also threatened by barbarism, but by a new type--"heroic materialism."²⁶

²⁴Kenneth Clark, Civilisation (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 3.

²⁵Clark, p. 4.

²⁶Note: To Clark, "heroic materialism" is materialism that has "transcended itself."

This materialism results in exploitation of technical means by industry, dehumanization of the individual, reliance on machines, and regimentation and bureaucracy. For Clark, it displays little regard for creative powers or the enlargement of human faculties, since "science no longer existed to serve human needs--but in its own right."²⁷ The end result is a seemingly never-ending cycle of wars. Gloomily philosophizing that "we have no idea where we are going" any longer, Clark continues:

. . . our universe cannot even be stated symbolically. And this touches us all more directly than one might suppose. For example, artists, who have been very little influenced by social systems, have always responded instinctively to latent assumptions about the shape of the universe. The incomprehensibility of our new cosmos seems to me, ultimately, to be the reason for the chaos of modern art. I know next to nothing about science, but I've spent my life in trying to learn about art, and I am completely baffled by what is taking place today.²⁸

This notion that modern art is chaotic because the civilization which produces it is chaotic is not a new idea and, moreover, is not confined to the fine arts. Some modern literature also expresses this notion: the falcon (which may represent science and technology) has flown too far from the falconer (which may represent the controlling brain). Western Civilization is usually portrayed in today's literature as being too complex and, ultimately, as meaningless, thus causing the hero of earlier literature to become a "stranger" alienated from society and unable to participate in the human enterprise any longer.

²⁷Clark, p. 344.

²⁸Clark, pp. 345 -346.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., a contemporary writer who is perhaps more aware than most men of the absurdities in modern Western Civilization, bases his satire about our deteriorating culture on a belief in a chaotic, absurd universe. Even though Vonnegut bases his predictions about the future of civilization only on personal and emotional reactions to the contemporary world, his conclusions closely parallel those of professional historians.

Like Spengler, Vonnegut seems to be basically a pessimist. He appears to believe that Western Civilization is exhibiting many characteristic signs of a decaying culture which will probably die. He also seems to agree with Toynbee's opinion that excessive warfare, the desperate attempt by every society that has broken down to fill up its gaps by expanding its empire, is the most obvious symptom of a sick civilization. Like Marx, Vonnegut seems to view society as being broken down into the inevitable classes of the capitalists and the proletariat, the privileged versus the underprivileged. For Vonnegut, there is no common bond between these two groups, a condition which causes the gap between them to widen and their mutual antagonism to grow. Just as Adams writes that "science touches every material and immaterial substance,"²⁹ Vonnegut in his novels, short stories, and play depicts a society now almost entirely governed by its technology and science. The rise of industry reduces millions of workers to the status of being mere tools of a machine, and modern man now has a new religion--science. Finally, Vonnegut would

²⁹The Tendency of History, p. 133.

probably agree with Clark's theory that a civilization requires its inhabitants' confidence to survive--confidence in the society in which one lives and confidence in oneself. Of course, both Spengler and Toynbee would agree with this diagnosis of the most fatal disease of all civilizations--the schism that results from a loss of unity of purpose in society and a loss of faith in the people. Vonnegut observes this same schism in Western Civilization. Along with outward cultural deterioration, which he describes in his works, Vonnegut believes that Western man is experiencing a corresponding inner degeneration. Life has lost all form for him. His values are changed and his social institutions are cynically challenged by revolutionaries. Western man, Vonnegut believes, no longer has faith either in himself or in his society, because he is now living in a world of unfulfilled desires, vague wishes, engulfing anxieties, and dreary actualities.

These five non-artists, Spengler, Toynbee, Marx, Adams, and Clark, have considered the past, have come to some conclusions about the present, and have attempted to predict the future. The artist, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., also has considered the past (though in a general and informal way), has looked with a jaundiced eye at the current antics of Western man and, like the five scholars above, has drawn some devastating conclusions about the future.

I have arbitrarily selected what I believe to be three of the major themes of social criticism found in Vonnegut's writings. The analysis of these three themes will develop the thesis that Vonnegut's view of Western Civilization is consistent with the views of certain historians

when they talk about the characteristics of a decaying society. Since these three areas are quite broad and comprehensive, they will tend to overlap; however, to help the reader better understand my classifications, I will try to treat them as independent units.

The first theme to be discussed is the irrationality of human behavior, the absurd actions of man that range anywhere from his lacking sound judgment behind his behavior to his being totally illogical. In Vonnegut's novels, this theme appears repeatedly as he describes American social institutions, but the best examples of this type of behavior can be found when Vonnegut writes about man's relationship to science in his short stories from Welcome to the Monkey House, Canary in a Cat House, and in Cat's Cradle. Dehumanization of the individual, the second major theme, can be seen in Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, and God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. This dehumanization is exemplified by man's increasing reliance on machines--machines which have ceased to be our tools and have begun to rule us. Vonnegut identifies the third theme, man's inhumanity to man, in the monstrous idiocies of two world wars. In Mother Night, Slaughterhouse-Five, and Happy Birthday, Wanda June, Vonnegut finds little ground for hope that man will refrain from using the weapons of ultimate cruelty which he has so cunningly contrived.

This paper will cover the material from Vonnegut's six novels: Player Piano; The Sirens of Titan; Mother Night; Cat's Cradle; God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater; Slaughterhouse-Five; his two short story collections: Canary in a Cathouse and Welcome to the Monkey House; and one

play: Happy Birthday, Wanda June. Many magazine articles and reviews have been written either by or about Vonnegut dating from approximately 1957 and can be found in such popular journals as The New Yorker, the Ladies Home Journal, and Playboy. Relatively little significant research has been done on Vonnegut; however, no books have been written and only a few short scholarly articles can be found dealing with such topics as his pessimism, his major concerns, his use of black humor, and his role as an authority for youth cults.

II. IRRATIONALITY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

The broadest of the three areas of Vonnegut's social criticisms--irrationality of human behavior, dehumanization of the individual, and man's inhumanity to man--to me seems to be the irrationality of human behavior, a specific example of which is man's inability to control scientific technology. This is one of the signs of a decaying culture. Recall that for Spengler, a civilization begins its degression when reason becomes its God and scientists become its priests.³⁰ When people become fond of intellectual formulations, this German historian believes, they often become intolerant of some of the old, valuable aspects of life such as rituals and ceremonies and, in fact, become impatient with their old faith. Life, for these people, becomes secularized. Adams, of course, bases his whole historical theory on the idea that whenever there is a change of direction in history, a connection can be drawn to some important discovery in the scientific world. This is not an optimistic view since he also states that the energy and wisdom of mankind are always running downhill on a course which is equivalent to the second law of thermodynamics. Emphasis in Adams' theory should be placed on the fact that he believes man is killing himself with his so-called scientific progress. Clark writes that a new scientific era began even before World War I, and that it is the era in which we are still living. He says:

³⁰Spengler, II, 304-305.

. . . science had achieved great triumphs in the nineteenth century, but nearly all of them had been related to practical or technological advance. For example, Edison, whose invention did as much as any to add to our material convenience, wasn't what we would call a scientist at all, but a supreme "do-it-yourself" man--the successor of Benjamin Franklin. But from the time of Einstein, Niels Bohr and the Cavendish Laboratory, science no longer existed to serve human needs, but in its own right.³¹

Vonnegut would appear to agree with all of these men and especially with Clark, since Vonnegut observes that we are presently living in a society in which all the enormous changes--the only enormous changes--are being brought about by science and its application to everyday life. Count up the changes introduced by the automobile, by the television set, by the jet plane. No previous generation has had to face the possibility and potentialities of such an enormous and rapid transition. No generation has had to face the appalling certainty that if the advance of science is not better controlled, it may overwhelm Western culture. Vonnegut worries about man's inability to control science, because he believes that modern man is incapable of judging between the scientific discoveries which benefit mankind and those which do not. To Vonnegut, giving man the products of scientific knowledge is comparable to giving a child a loaded gun--neither one is wise enough to use his new possession prudently. In short, man has a great deal of scientific knowledge, but knowledge is not wisdom: wisdom is knowledge tempered by judgment, and Vonnegut finds that people today are not using their judgment prudently. He makes this point clear near the end of Player Piano when Paul Proteus,

³¹Clark, p. 344.

the central character of the novel, is being tested by a lie detector:

"The witness will please tell what he considers to be a lie," said the judge.

"Every new piece of scientific knowledge is a good thing for humanity," said Paul.³²

Vonnegut seems to emphasize two aspects of man's misapplication of scientific knowledge: man's eagerness to use science for profit only and man's use of scientific knowledge to promote war. The former idea is similar to Spengler's theory that after reason takes precedence over religion, materialism will prevail. An example of this first misapplication of scientific knowledge appears in Vonnegut's short story, "The Eupho Question." In the story, a professor, Dr. Fred Bockman, invents an eight-ton umbrella that picks up radio signals coming from different heavenly bodies. These radio signals produce a tremendous sense of well-being in people, a euphoric condition. Sensing that there is a profit to be made, Lew Harrison, an unscrupulous radio announcer, immediately tries to cash in on the invention by creating a real-estate development, Euphoria Heights, where people would want to buy land and to settle down because of its atmosphere of artificial happiness. Lew's plan is to set up a transmitter in a barn and run a line to the antenna on the umbrella. Then, in Lew's words:

³²Player Piano (New York: Avon, 1952), p. 297. Subsequent references are in the text as are references to Vonnegut's other fiction: Mother Night (New York: Avon, 1966); The Sirens of Titan (New York: Dell, 1959); God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater (New York: Dell, 1965); Cat's Cradle (New York: Dell, 1963); Slaughterhouse-Five (New York: Dell, 1969); Welcome to the Monkey House (New York: Dell, 1970); Canary in a Cat House (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961); Happy Birthday, Wanda June (New York: Dell, 1971).

"I'd get the prospects, Doc, and you'd sit up there in the barn with your hand on the switch. Once a prospect set foot on Euphoria Heights, and you shot the happiness to him, there's nothing he wouldn't pay for a lot" (Welcome to the Monkey House, p. 183).

America, Vonnegut indicates, is not quite ready for this synthetic peace of mind; and oblivion--in Euphoria Heights, for instance--becomes a national craze with disastrous results. Vonnegut detests a system that promotes research and development in areas which lead to profit without regard for social utility.

Vonnegut also emphasizes man's use of science to promote warfare. In the twentieth century, man has seen the unleashing of chemical warfare by Germans in World War I, the human experiments conducted by the Nazis in World War II, the welcome given by both the West and the Russians to the technological mercenaries whose skills resulted in the production of V-1's and V-2's, the stockpiling of germs for biological warfare, and the destruction of crops in Vietnam. These examples, perhaps echoes of Toynbee's idea that excessive warfare is a characteristic symptom of cultural degeneration, are some of the horrors touched upon by Vonnegut in his writings.

Frequently using satire to point out the absurd cruelty of man's treatment of other men during wartime, Vonnegut's technique is to move carefully between the horrible and the humorous, the pathetic and the ridiculous. Despite his realization that war is a devastating and degrading experience for the human psyche, he portrays many aspects of it as simultaneously funny and heartbreaking. An example of Vonnegut's use of humor depicting the horrors of war occurs in his only play, Happy

Birthday, Wanda June. The main character in it, Harold Ryan, is a fanatical lover of all types of war. By killing the Nazi butcher, Major Siegfried Von Konigswald, Ryan serves his country well in World War II. Later, while reminiscing about his war crimes in heaven, Major Von Konigswald delights in remembering one particular human experiment, one in which the Nazis inject a man full of orange juice to see how much fluid the human body can tolerate:

If I'd lived through the war, and they tried me for war crimes and all that, I'd have to tell the court, I guess, "I was only following orders, as a good soldier should. Hitler told me to kill this guy with orange juice" (p. 79).

Vonnegut's technique of combining the horrible with the mundane for humorous effect is dramatically illustrated in this incident. The ironic juxtapositioning of murder and orange juice carries with it a tremendous impact for the reader.

Since playfulness is always present in his books and is difficult to separate from his serious criticisms, Vonnegut's readers can not always be sure when he is being facetious and when he is being serious. Later, in Happy Birthday, Wanda June, Vonnegut does appear to be somberly moralizing about the effects of war on people, such as the fear of men in uniforms.

Harold Ryan remarks:

When I was a naive young recruit in Spain, I used to wonder why soldiers bayoneted oil paintings, shot the noses off of statues and defecated into grand pianos. I now understand: It was to teach civilians the deepest sort of respect for men in uniform--uncontrollable fear (p. 142).

Respect and pride, the attributes that humans usually find so admirable, in this case are synonymous with fear. Vonnegut appears to have an affection for the world and desires to improve it, but sees little hope

for improvement. He seems to believe that all humor can do is comfort people.

A short story from Canary in a Cat House, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," describes how through science powerful instruments of war are developed. In the story, Professor Barnhouse discovers a new force which "can flatten anything on earth--from Joe Louis to the Great Wall of China" (p. 8). The professor wants to use his new acquisition ("dynamopsychism") in the cause of peace and writes the American Secretary of State requesting his advice "as to how this might best be done" (p. 14). Piously mouthing that "'Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom'" (p. 15), the United States government decides to use dynamopsychism's power to try to control the world. Vonnegut concludes in another work, Cat's Cradle, that "Anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another" (p. 32). Rather than seeing science used for selfish or inane purposes, Vonnegut would prefer that men find peaceful objectives for scientific knowledge, such as trying to run "generators where there isn't any coal or water power, irrigating deserts, and so on" (Canary in a Cat House, p. 15).

Although Vonnegut severely attacks these two areas of the misapplication of scientific knowledge, his largest volley of satire in the area of science is aimed at the scientists themselves. He pictures them as thin-lipped, humorless men who work long hours and overlook no possibilities, even the possibilities that should have been overlooked. They are Dr. Frankensteins--paying strict attention to detail but never pausing

to ask themselves about the nature of the monsters they are creating. Their search for truth ignores many of its possible results, because science has become a religion for them, a religion with a phenomenal unconcern for anything human. Dr. Breed, a scientist in Cat's Cradle, expounds on this philosophy:

"New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become" (p. 43).

Later in the novel, Dr. Breed states, "Pure research men work on what fascinates them, not on what fascinates other people" (p. 49). This all leads Vonnegut to reflect "that scientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all" (Cat's Cradle, p. 41).

Vonnegut's best portrait of a typical scientist is presented in Cat's Cradle. Nobel prize physicist Felix Hoenikker is an innocent who is as amoral as any child can be. Vonnegut has an undertaker acquaintance remark about Hoenikker:

"I suppose it's high treason and ungrateful and ignorant and backward and anti-intellectual to call a dead man as famous as Felix Hoenikker a son of a bitch. I know all about how harmless and gentle and dreamy he was supposed to be, how he'd never hurt a fly, how he didn't care about money and power and fancy clothes and automobiles and things, how he wasn't like the rest of us, how he was better than the rest of us, how he was so innocent he was practically a Jesus--except for the Son of God part. . . .

...but how the hell innocent is a man who helps make a thing like an atomic bomb?"(p. 63).

On the day the atom bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, Dr. Hoenikker is

sitting at home playing with a piece of string, making a cat's cradle.

He suddenly thrusts it into the face of his infant son, Newton:

"'See? See? See?' he asked. 'Cat's cradle. See the cat's cradle? See where the nice pussycat sleeps? Meow. Meow.'" (p. 21)

A hundred thousand people are being annihilated by an instrument of war which Hoenikker has created and he obliviously shapes a maze from a piece of string. Many years later Newt, Vonnegut's double-entendre nickname for the midget, says:

"No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's. . . ."

"And?"

"No damn cat, and no damn cradle" (p. 137).

The good of science is just as illusory as the cat's cradle. For Newt, the children's game has become a symbol "of the meaninglessness of it all!" (p. 140).

Hoenikker is the inventor not only of the atomic bomb, but also of a much more potent device--"ice-nine"--which can (and does) freeze all of the liquid on earth. One of his children tells this anecdote about him:

"For instance, do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamagordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, 'Science has known sin.' And do you know what Father said? He said, 'What is sin?'" (pp. 24-25).

This type of innocence is lethal. Felix plays at science as he plays with a string, like a child. He gives no thought to the consequences of his

play, for he has no sense of identity with other human beings; he completely lacks an awareness of humanity. Newton Hoenikker tells this pathetic story the morning his father left for Sweden to accept the Nobel prize:

"Mother cooked a big breakfast. And then, when she cleared off the table, she found a quarter and a dime and three pennies by Father's coffee cup. He'd tipped her." (p. 22).

Scientists such as this "receive honors and creature comforts while escaping human responsibilities" (p. 184). Newt summarily characterizes his dad by stating that "'People weren't his specialty'" (p. 24).

Just as Adams writes in his *Dynamo versus the Virgin* theory, that history is a twofold struggle between technology and religion with both forces exerting a steady but equal pressure on man, Vonnegut also examines the contemporary aspects of the old collision between science and religion in Cat's Cradle. The scientist concerned is, of course, Dr. Felix Hoenikker. The religious prophet, Bokonon, is a Negro from Tobago in the Caribbean who has invented a religion for the island of San Lorenzo (where he arrived, a castaway, after considerable experience of the world). Bokonon has arranged to have himself outlawed and his religion driven underground so that believers can have the thrill of the forbidden. As a result, all the people on San Lorenzo are secret but devout Bokonists. Bokonon's bible, The Books of Bokonon, contains this abrupt warning on the title page: "'Don't be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but foma!'" (p. 214). "Foma" are lies. Similarly, the epigraph to Cat's Cradle reads:

Nothing in this book is true.
 "Live by the foma* that make you brave and
 kind and healthy and happy."

The Books of Bokonon. 1:5
 *harmless untruths

Vonnegut's major purpose with Bokonism, I believe, is to imply that the "foma," the harmless untruths, of Bokonism are better than the harmful truths of science. The very confrontation in the book between science and religion is aimed at developing the "cruel paradox" that lies at the center of Bokonist thought as it lies at the center of the world:

. . . the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it (p. 229).

Kurt Vonnegut's view of the future of Western Civilization is not optimistic. Man is stupid, and he does not learn from his mistakes. If man manages to avoid atomic elimination, science will discover something else (like "ice-nine") and turn it over "'to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are'" (p. 199). Vonnegut believes that somehow science must conform to some kind of social responsibility. There can never be any question of restraining or repressing natural curiosity, which is true science, but there is ample justification for controlling developmental science. The common good requires nothing less. Meanwhile, Vonnegut looks at the continuous advance of science with its irrational applications and its amoral scientists. Still the ironist, he asks, "'How can anybody in his right mind be against science?'" (Cat's Cradle, p. 191).

III. DEHUMANIZATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL

A second area of social criticism in Vonnegut's writings deals with the dehumanization of the individual. Vonnegut observes that America is becoming more and more a nation of machines since today nearly all government operations, big businesses, and industrial installations depend on computers and other mechanized gadgetry. As there is so much marketing, production, and investment information stored in computers, the crippling of one hundred key machines could paralyze the nation's economy for months. This growth of technology as exemplified by a computer culture, Vonnegut believes, has caused people to become cogs in the machinery of an industrialized society. Individuals no longer seem needed for what they are as human beings, but only for the certain limited skills they possess. And when machines are introduced which will do the same work faster and more accurately, what need is there for people any more?

Vonnegut's picture of our modern technological society coincides with Marx's dialectic theory of history in which Marx claims that we are now living in the epoch of modern capitalism. Both Vonnegut and Marx seem to contend that the basis for the advancement of Western Civilization now lies almost solely in technology. Men, consequently, are used as means, not as ends, and accumulation of wealth seems to have become the master principle of life. Mass production has provided practically all individuals with running water, flush toilets, health care and medicines, gas heating, and electric lights. Sir Kenneth Clark sees this same transition taking place, but he also sees that this shift has resulted in a runaway

technology, with every man assuming that he is entitled to all the benefits of science. Clark labels this materialistic attitude as one which has "transcended itself."³³ To him, this type of materialism results in dehumanization of the individual, too much reliance on machines, and regimentation and bureaucracy.

Vonnegut, in observing our technological civilization, finds the same truth that exists in the scientific world: it is not the knowledge that is harmful, but the misapplication of the knowledge. In the technological world, machines are beneficial; but the people, such as the engineers and managers in Player Piano, misuse them. As one of Vonnegut's characters remarks, "'It isn't knowledge that's making trouble, but the uses it's put to'" (Player Piano, p. 93). Vonnegut's criticism of industrial society also lashes out at technology because not only the economy, but all social institutions, all walks of life, all modes of thought are becoming permeated by a technological mentality. Modern industry and technology have started to model, after their own image, the social institutions within which they function. This seems to be the theme of Player Piano.

The book, published in 1952, is a savage satire of the business world based on Vonnegut's two years of experience as a PR man for General Electric. Its scene is America a decade after World War III, an America in which everything is automated. At the beginning of Player Piano, Paul Proteus, the novel's main character, recalls how people used to embrace

³³Clark, p. 321.

the machine as a tireless progenitor of material well-being and progress. Even during World War III, the application of mechanical power to industry is something to be proud of; the American public still has faith in their industrial complex. The narrator states:

During the war, in hundreds of Illiums [the setting of Player Piano] over America, managers and engineers learned to get along without their men and women, who went to fight. It was the miracle that won the war--production with almost no manpower (p. 9).

When the brave fighting men and women come home from the war, however, they discover that "the miracle that won the war--production with almost no manpower" has also taken their jobs away from them. Riots ensue and thousands are jailed under the new antisabotage laws. The society in Player Piano fails to control its industrial development and Vonnegut suggests that the United States will also fail if the American people continue to measure the success of industrial civilization almost exclusively in terms of quantities of manufactured articles produced. People in the United States once had justification for their mass-production of goods because technological advances did much to make human life more comfortable, healthier, longer lasting, and seemingly richer. Today, however, even the most idealistic person realizes that something has gone wrong with our civilization and that modern ways of life do not necessarily result in better health and happiness.

The world that Vonnegut envisions in Player Piano is run almost solely by computers. The entire economy is planned and administered by EPICAC, a giant computer. Engineers and managers, who operate the computers and manage the companies, are the elite of the country and are

among the few who have any real work to do. This social hierarchy seems to be similar to the one which Toynbee mentions when describing the dissolution of a civilization. According to Toynbee's definition of a society in the decline phase of the cycle, such a society is ruled by the "creative minority" which becomes a "ruling minority" and the masses become a "proletariat," a group which no longer has any real share in the civilization of its society. Who is selected for jobs in the Player Piano society is determined by intelligence and aptitude testing, uncompromisingly administered. Everybody's IQ is on public record; once a job category has been eliminated, the person who has held that job is no longer of any use to society. For the ordinary man, the job choice is between the army (a twenty-five year hitch with no wars to fight) and the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (popularly called the Reeks and Wrecks). The directors of this WPA-type organization devise projects of little or no real value for its members to work on:

The bridge was blocked again by Reeks and Wrecks who were painting yellow lines to mark traffic lanes. . . . Like most of the R&R projects, it was, to Paul at least, ironic. The four-lane bridge had, before the war, been jammed with the cars of workers going to and from the Ilium Works. . . . Now, at any time of day, a driver could swerve from one side of the bridge to the other with perhaps one chance in ten thousand of hitting another vehicle.

Paul came to a stop. Three men were painting, twelve were directing traffic, and another twelve were resting (p. 167).

In essence, "the actual jobs weren't being taken from the people, but the sense of participation, the sense of importance was." (Player Piano, p. 92). Consequently, revolution (the essential historical instrument expanded upon in Marx's theory) comes to Ilium, New York, in the form of

an anti-machine revolt. The leading spokesman for the dissenting forces is the disillusioned manager, Paul Proteus, who proclaims:

"I deny that there is any natural or divine law requiring that machines, efficiency, and organization should forever increase in scope, power, and complexity. . .'" (p. 285).

Although there has been a lot of technological progress recently, Vonnegut seems to indicate that our scientifically-oriented society has been heading in the wrong direction. Progress used to be defined as cumulative improvement of an individual or a civilization; today, progress appears to be viewed as success in technological advances alone. In Player Piano, Vonnegut satirizes the current American attitude of confusing material security with happiness. Materialism abounds in the futuristic American society in the novel and about it Vonnegut writes:

. . . we've become rich beyond the wildest dreams of the past! Civilization has reached the dizziest heights of all time! Thirty-one point seven times as many television sets as all the rest of the world put together! Ninety-three per cent of all the world's electrostatic dust precipitators! Seventy-seven per cent of all the world's automobiles! Ninety-eight per cent of its helicopters! Eighty-one point nine per cent of . . . (p. 209).

For Vonnegut, the American dream has become the American tragedy, since Americans now believe that a society becomes more civilized when its members own more automobiles, freezers, telephones, and other gadgets than does any other comparable group. Marx **also** argues that capitalism carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. He writes that eventually the economic machinery will break down in crises of overproduction and the social and political machinery will be seized by

militant proletarians made bitter through exploitation and oppression.

Another of Vonnegut's novels God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls before Swine also deals with the machine and the systems those machines spawn, but in a different, more subtle manner than in the obviously restrictive system in Player Piano. Written in 1964, the book is about an eccentric millionaire, Eliot Rosewater, who is the head of the Rosewater Foundation by virtue of being the only son of its founder. Eliot resigns as head of the Foundation and goes to the little town of Rosewater, Indiana (where the Rosewater fortune had gotten its start), deciding to spend the rest of his life loving people and trying to make them feel as important as possible. His favorite science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout, probably one of Vonnegut's persona, tells him that his new life style is "'quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time'" (p. 183). With automation, people are beginning to feel worthless. Trout says:

"Poverty is a relatively mild disease for even a very flimsy American soul, but uselessness will kill strong and weak souls alike, and kill every time" (p. 184).

Uselessness is the human characteristic Spengler is also talking about when he states that a civilization begins to degenerate when the individual gets lost in the crowd. This feeling of being lost, for Spengler, occurs when a society begins to lose its basic values. Eliot Rosewater thinks that capitalism and free enterprise are not the core beliefs of our country, but are merely philosophies that justify the wealthy and console the poor. He finds competition as a work incentive to be both degrading and shameful; fright should not be the factor that drives men to earn

more and more money :

" . . . fright about not getting enough to eat, about not being able to pay the doctor, about not being able to give your family nice clothes, a safe, cheerful, comfortable place to live, a decent education, and a few good times" (p. 88).

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater indicates that our contemporary American system is not based on a deep conviction in the principles of capitalism and free enterprise as is generally believed. Rather, our current society labels poverty as a sign of laziness and uses fear as an inducement to encourage men to compete against each other. In other words, our American system makes people ashamed for not having had the good luck to be born rich.

Pollution is another result of our technological civilization that Vonnegut talks about in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. Man, in the process of seeking a better way of life, is destroying the natural environment that is essential to human life. In blind pursuit of technological advances, people are altering the biological, geological, and chemical cycles upon which life depends. If man does not change his habits soon, he may eventually destroy the delicate chemical and climatic balances upon which his very existence depends:

"Beyond the river lie the green hills of Kentucky, the once green hills of Kentucky, the promised land of Dan'l Boone, now gulched and gashed by strip mines, some of which are owned by a charitable and cultural foundation" (p. 34).

Vonnegut, it appears, would advocate that science and technology be re-directed to more sensible goals instead of being allowed to continue growing just for the sake of economic prosperity. There is no single

villain, and there is no simple answer to the pollution problem. Man's destruction of his environment must be attacked for what it is--a sinister byproduct of the prosperous, urbanized, industrialized world in which we live.

Vonnegut despairs about our contemporary, technological scene with its machine-like individuals, its over-abundant materialism, its meaningless work, and its false basic premises. Americans are so fascinated by the gimmicks and gadgetry of technology and are in such a hurry to exploit them that they do not keep count of their probable consequences. The human consequences of letting technology escape its masters are ugly. Engineers will continue to tell the average man--the little man--"Let me do the thinking, and you'll be all right" (Player Piano, p. 204). This attitude, in turn, maintains what has become "our national holy trinity, Efficiency, Economy, and Quality" (Player Piano, p. 285). Inevitably, human beings will feel more and more useless as machines replace "first the muscle work, then the routine work, then, maybe, the real brainwork" (Player Piano, p. 22). Vonnegut implies that Western Civilization is reaching the point at which the material benefits of a rising gross national product and the administrative efficiency of centralization may not be worth the psychological costs that technique and large-scale, overly-rational bureaucracies exact.

IV. MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN

The irrationality of human behavior and dehumanization of the individual merge into and are included within the third area of Vonnegut's social criticisms--man's inhumanity to man. Vonnegut despises the way human stupidity, greed, and detachment have manifested themselves in the adulation given to science, the callous way in which scientists work, and the selfish way in which the results of science are used. He also feels contempt for the institutions that men have built which turn people aside from their proper activities to pursue the dehumanizing goals of empty material wealth and technological success. No matter how blameworthy our scientific systems and machines are, however, Vonnegut reserves his most bitter satire and most grotesque irony for the treatment of man's inhumanity to man--war. Clark states that "all great civilisations, in their early stages, are based on success in war."³⁴ Spengler's observation that an interminable cycle of wars will occur in a civilization's last phase causes him to predict the death of Western Civilization after this phase. Toynbee is more optimistic than Spengler, but he also states that there is a desperate attempt by every society which has broken down to save itself by waging war. Excessive warfare to both men is the characteristic symptom of a sick civilization. Although bloodshed is distasteful to Marx, he too accepts it as inevitable. Vonnegut's works discuss the devastating effects of war on Western Civilization. He reminds us in his books that today's wars are much more dangerous than

³⁴Clark, p. 18.

those in the past. Because of weapons such as the atomic bomb, we cannot afford to fight any more. Dr. Woody comments in Happy Birthday,

Wanda June:

Chinese maniacs and Russian maniacs and American maniacs and French maniacs and British maniacs have turned this lovely, moist, nourishing blue-green ball into a doomsday device. Let a radar set and a computer mistake a hawk or a meteor for a missile, and that's the end of mankind (p. 19).

Two of Vonnegut's works, Mother Night and Slaughterhouse-Five, focus on modern war. Mother Night is the story of an American, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who serves his country as a spy while posing as a Nazi during World War II. As a propagandist for the Third Reich, he masquerades as a Nazi anti-Semite so that he can pass information out of the country through his radio program. His position is so secret that, even when the war is over, he is publicly denounced as a war criminal. Rather than reveal the truth that he is a double agent working for the Allies, the United States abrogates all responsibility for him and refuses to clear his name.

Campbell manages to live undetected for several years in New York City. He is finally discovered, however, by an anti-Semitic group headed by Dr. Lionel J. D. Jones, who remembers with approval Campbell's broadcasts during the war. After the exposure of Campbell, West Germany and Israel vie for the right to try him. Russia screams that such Fascists "should be squashed underfoot like a cockroach" (p. 120). Private citizens cry out for his destruction; and Bernard O'Hare, the officer who arrested him after the armistice, tracks him down intending to kill

him. The implications for Vonnegut are frightening. He sees no appreciable difference between the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, that of Dr. Lionel J. D. Jones, and Russia's and Bernard O'Hare's tremendous obsessions with revenge. The West's victory over Germany has changed nothing. Driven by extreme self-righteousness, victors will always claim to have God on their side as they kill or mutilate anyone who disagrees with them. As one of Campbell's Israeli jailers declares, everyone who has been involved in the war, "no matter what side he was on, no matter what he did, is sure a good man could not have acted in any other way" (p. 24). Humanity, Vonnegut feels, should not try to rationalize its inhumanity.

In Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade, published in 1969, Vonnegut reveals the main source of his pessimism--the unnecessary demolition of Dresden by the U.S. Air Force just before the end of World War II, when the Germans had been defeated and all need of bombing any city had disappeared. The young Vonnegut, serving in the armed services at the time, survived Europe's largest massacre (135,000 people were killed--twice the number at Hiroshima). As a prisoner of war with some one hundred other American soldiers and a handful of German guards, he survived the fire bombing by hiding in a shelter-prison in the cold storage unit of a slaughterhouse. Vonnegut's persona in the book is probably Billy Pilgrim, a meek optometrist, whose mind flashes from recollections of the bombing to his boring life in Ilium, N.Y., to his trips to the imagined planet of Tralfamadore. This time-traveling is the

only way that Billy can transcend the inevitable suffering caused by the war condition.

The symbol of human stupidity, for Vonnegut, is war in general and Dresden in particular. He believes that war makes animals out of the defeated and cruel tyrants out of the winners. Devastated Dresden illustrates the lengths to which men will carry their victories over their victims:

There were hundreds of corpse mines [burned-out bomb shelters] operating by and by. They didn't smell bad at first, were wax museums. But then the bodies rotted and liquified, and the stink was like roses and mustard gas. So it goes (p. 185).

The horror of war brings Billy Pilgrim to the probability that life is meaningless; refusing to accede to this view, however, he tries to reinvent himself and his universe by believing in the life style of Tralfamadore. The Tralfamadorians do not take war seriously, for it cannot be prevented. One day there is peace; the next day there is war. "So it goes," the shrugging-type phrase that follows every mention of death, is what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people and is also the book's refrain. Since nothing can be done about the bad moments in life, the Tralfamadorians ignore them and advise Billy to ignore them, too. After all, as the narrator says, ". . . there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (p. 17).

Humanity, then, is no longer capable of explaining inhumanity. Man's inhumanity to man can be understood only tangentially, through the science fiction devices of flying saucers, alternate universes, and time-travel. For it is only through science fiction that Vonnegut can bring

himself and his readers to face or understand both the terrifying and the incomprehensible fate of the Dresden holocaust; it is the only way he can accept the unacceptable.

In another variation on the war theme, Vonnegut discusses how people glamorize war. In "All the King's Men," Vonnegut parallels the game of chess to war; philosophically, he suggests, the action in the two games is similar. In the short story, Colonel Kelly and fifteen others including his wife and ten-year-old twin sons crashland on the Asiatic mainland and are picked up by a Communist guerrilla chief, Pi Ying. The guerrilla chief forces Colonel Kelly to play chess using his fifteen comrades as chessmen. Pi Ying's directions are:

"The rules of the game are easy to remember. You are all to behave as Colonel Kelly tells you. Those of you who are so unfortunate as to be taken by one of my chessmen will be killed quickly, painlessly, promptly" (Welcome to the Monkey House, p. 89).

Pi Ying asks for the deaths of Colonel Kelly's companions as his prize if he wins the chess match between himself and the colonel. Vonnegut seems to be suggesting here that many men besides Pi Ying have a similarly low regard for the sanctity of human life. Their regard for human life is so low that they willingly participate in warfare knowing that their lives, the lives of their allies, and the lives of their opponents are being jeopardized as prizes in the contest. For Vonnegut, the only significant difference between war and any friendly sporting match is that in war the stakes are often higher: death is a high price to pay for winning any game.

Three illustrations from Slaughterhouse-Five will also show how

people consider war to be glamorous. In the first illustration, the wife of Vonnegut's war buddy "thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies" (p. 13). Vonnegut, himself a character in the novel, promises her: "'If I ever do finish [Slaughterhouse-Five], though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne'" (p. 13). At another point in the same book, Vonnegut mentions how the British were adored by the Germans in the World War II P.O.W. camps because "they made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun" (p. 81). On still another occasion in Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut writes, "It was a simple-minded thing for a female Earthling to do, to associate sex and glamor with war" (p. 104). There is nothing glamorous, beautiful, or sexual about war, Vonnegut implies; rather, war is a senseless, cruel, and monstrous example of man's insanity. War cannot and should not be justified or rationalized--and least of all glamorized.

Elaborating on the human fascination with war in a lengthy passage from Player Piano, Vonnegut writes in what is for him quite a serious, contemplative style. This time his persona is Homer Bigley, a barber who simultaneously cuts hair and discusses war:

"There's something about war that brings out greatness. I hate to say that, but it's true. Of course, maybe that's because you can get great so quick in a war. Just one damn fool thing for a couple of seconds, and you're great. I could be the greatest barber in the world, and maybe I am, but I'd have to prove it with a lifetime of great haircutting, and then nobody'd notice. That's just the way peacetime things are, you know?

. . . And another nice thing about war--not that anything about war is nice, I guess--is that while it's going on and you're in it, you never worry about doing the right thing. See? Up there, fighting and all, you couldn't be righter. You could of been a heller at home and made a lot of people unhappy and

all, and been a dumb, mean bastard, but you're king over there--king to everybody, and especially to yourself. This above all, be true to yourself, and you can't be false to anybody else, and that's it--in a hole, being shot at and shooting back" (pp. 197-198).

Vonnegut states that there is no longer any justification for "being shot at and shooting back." He ponders the idiosyncrasy of people's attitudes when they state that they can achieve self-realization through killing. To Vonnegut, the incredible violence of war with its insanity and blind cruelty is abominable--from the fire bombing of Dresden to the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His opinion of war would be similar to that of Penelope, Harold Ryan's wife, in Happy Birthday,

Wanda June:

The old heroes are going to have to get used to this, Harold--the new heroes who refuse to fight. They're trying to save the planet. There's no time for battle, no point to battle anymore (p. 176).

This new hero is the one who refuses to fight. For him, there are better ways to live than by fighting and mutilating and killing one's fellow-man.

Vonnegut also ridicules the military services in his books. "'Americans have changed almost everything on earth. . . , but it would be easier to move the Himalayas than to change the Army'" (Player Piano, p. 71). Soldiers are sometimes pictured as trained killers: "Eliot, like the good soldier he was, jammed his knee into the man's groin, drove his bayonet into his throat, withdrew the bayonet, smashed the man's jaw with his rifle butt" (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, p. 63). At other times, Vonnegut pictures them as pathetic examples of human innocence:

Last came Billy Pilgrim, empty-handed, bleakly ready for death. Billy was preposterous--six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. . . .

Billy was wearing a thin field jacket, a shirt and trousers of scratchy wool, and long underwear that was soaked with sweat. He was the only one of the four who had a beard. It was a random, bristly beard, and some of the bristles were white, even though Billy was only twenty-one years old. He was also going bald. Wind and cold and violent exercise had turned his face crimson.

He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo (Slaughterhouse-Five, pp. 28-29).

The "man" whom Eliot Rosewater killed turns out to be a fourteen-year-old boy. These incidents are examples of Vonnegut's biggest complaint about wars: the innocent suffer most. People forget that many professional soldiers are killed early in the action, with the result that the largest part of wars is usually fought by nonprofessionals, the children. Of course, the children are killed also, only a little later in the fighting "' . . . children dead, all dead, all murdered in war'" (Cat's Cradle, p. 206). Vonnegut sums up the tragedies of war with "'My God, my God-- . . . It's the Children's Crusade'" (Slaughterhouse-Five, p. 91).

V. CONCLUSION

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. looks at the twentieth century world and finds it tragically absurd, a world which actually encourages its scientists to find better and faster methods of destroying it. He examines our technological society and finds a mindless instrument beginning to gather momentum of its own; we are left almost powerless to cope with it. Finally, he dramatizes the continuous warfare in the world today--man's greatest inhumanity to man. About this, he can only sigh and elaborate on this theme in his books by showing that there is absolutely no justification for mass slaughter of human beings. These three major social problems--irrationality of human behavior, dehumanization of the individual, and man's inhumanity to man--are examples of the characteristics of a decaying civilization in the decline phase of its cycle that Spengler, Toynbee, Marx, Adams, and Clark have identified. Vonnegut and these leading authorities might possibly agree that Western Civilization is close to collapse.

In the process of writing about these three major social problems, Vonnegut seems to conclude that what is most dangerous about our contemporary situation is that man conforms to scientific advances, technological imperatives, and wartime exercises. For Vonnegut, the problem is not in the machines of technology, but in those men and women--the immense majority of us--who are more interested in quantity than in quality of life. There is no blueprint for the future; there are only

hypothetical predictions made by such men as Spengler, Toynbee, Marx, Adams, and Clark. Perhaps, it has become too painful for us to think about the future, a future whose melancholy course we may be pursuing into a blind alley. We seem to be unable to steer away from the patently disastrous route we are following; we are like lemmings led mysteriously to the sea. With us, though, we seem to be dragging as baggage an entire civilization on our journey into a watery nothingness.

We must realize that we have the responsibility of preserving and enriching the cultural baggage passed on to us by preceding generations. Thus far, we seem to lack the ability to divert our own disastrous course. Vonnegut may be recording Western man's trip to the sea, his cultural suicide, or he may be warning us that this is the direction in which we are headed. Is it too late for Western Civilization? Are we already too far into the decline phase of the cycle? Sir Kenneth Clark states that "Western civilisation has been a series of rebirths. Surely this should give us confidence in ourselves."³⁵ Still the optimist, Toynbee wants to treat the future of Western Civilization as an open question. I suspect that Vonnegut would agree with Clark's and Toynbee's evaluations of the future, because in the final statement of Slaughterhouse-Five, his most recent novel, Vonnegut writes:

And somewhere in there was springtime. The corpse mines were closed down. The soldiers all left to fight the Russians. In the suburbs, the women and children dug rifle pits. Billy and the

³⁵Clark, p. 347.

rest of his group were locked up in the stable in the suburbs. And then, one morning, they got up to discover that the door was unlocked. World War Two in Europe was over.

Billy and the rest wandered out onto the shady street. The trees were leafing out. There was nothing going on out there, no traffic of any kind. There was only one vehicle, an abandoned wagon drawn by two horses. The wagon was green and coffin-shaped.

Birds were talking

One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, "Poo-tee-weet?" (p. 186).

This conclusion of Slaughterhouse-Five is generally considered to be depressing, a depression which Vonnegut usually shrugs off with "So it goes." It appears to me, however, that the conclusion is at least ambivalent and perhaps even contains a qualified statement of hope: although the wagon is "green" (new life), it is also "coffin-shaped"; although birds are out and talking (again, new life), all they can manage is "Poo-tee-weet." In part, one can conclude that this final statement suggests rebirth, the cyclic return of springtime. Maybe, Vonnegut's intention is that this promise of new life counters despair; maybe, Vonnegut does harbor some lingering hope that man will be able to correct his social problems before it is too late. "Poo-tee-weet?"

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