Tampere University

Eeri Hietala

SATIRE IN POSTMODERN AMERICAN NARRATIVES
Alienation under Late Capitalism in Kurt Vonnegut's Novels

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the theme of alienation under late capitalism in three Kurt Vonnegut novels: *Player Piano* (1952), *Jailbird* (1979), and *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* (1976). The three novels discussed in this thesis are examples of post-war American satire writing, and the aim of this thesis is to use these novels to show that postmodern American literature uses satire to portray alienation under late capitalism. This selection of novels exemplifies postmodern satire and its relation to alienation, as it covers both dystopian writing and contemporary political satire.

This thesis discusses these three novels against a background of the history of satire in its sociopolitical contexts up to the twentieth century, as well as relates them to theories on postmodernism and postmodern satire. Late capitalism in the postmodern era and its association with alienation is further examined in relation to the novels' protagonists. Alienation is used mainly as a Marxist term denoting alienation from ones labor, oneself, and one's relationships. The connection of satire, postmodernism, and late capitalism demonstrates that the postmodern era has seen an abundance of American satirical works about alienation, due to the advent of late capitalism after World War II. Postmodernism and late capitalism as concepts are linked and inseparable in economy and culture, which is why postmodern satirical narratives depict alienation.

Alienation in a late capitalist society affects the individual, especially an individual's connection to their work and their relationship with themselves and others. This thesis connects the phenomenon of alienation to Vonnegut's three protagonists, who are depicted as apathetic, confused, and passive in their work and personal lives. The role of satire is to criticize the societies created in the novels in order to exemplify the alienated existence of their protagonists as they narrate their struggle with corporations, consumer culture, exaggerated patriotism, and individualism. Satire manifests differently in each novel, but its role is the same – to show that characters in Vonnegut's work are portrayed as alienated form their work, other people, and their own purpose.

Keywords: Vonnegut, satire, postmodernism, alienation, late capitalism, American literature

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä tutkielma käsittelee myöhäiskapitalismin aiheuttamaa alienaatiota kolmessa Kurt Vonnegutin romaanissa: *Player Piano* (1952), *Jailbird* (1979) ja *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* (1976). Nämä kolme romaania toimivat esimerkkeinä toisen maailmansodan jälkeisestä amerikkalaisesta satiirikirjallisuudesta, ja tämän tutkielman päämäärä on käyttää näitä romaaneja näyttämään, että postmoderni amerikkalainen kirjallisuus käyttää satiiria kuvatakseen alienaatiota myöhäiskapitalismin aikakaudella. Romaanivalinta ilmentää postmodernin satiirin yhteyttä alienaatioon, sillä se sisältää sekä dystopisia kertomuksia, että aikakautensa poliittista satiiria.

Tutkielma analysoi näitä kolmea romaania käyttäen taustanaan satiirin ja sen sosiopoliittisten kontekstien historiaa 1900-luvun loppuun saakka, jonka jälkeen se yhdistää ne postmoderniin aikakauteen ja – satiiriin. Teoreettiseen taustaan kuuluu myös myöhäiskapitalismin ja alienaation yhteyden käsittely. Alienaatio tai vieraantuminen on Marxistinen käsite, jonka mukaan ihminen vieraantuu työstään, itsestään ja ihmissuhteistaan kapitalismin seurauksena. Tämän viitekehyksen avulla tutkielma väittää, että amerikkalainen satiirikirjallisuus postmodernilla aikakaudella käyttää satiiria kuvaamaan vieraantumista myöhäiskapitalismin vallitsevuuden johdosta toisen maailmansodan jälkeen. Postmodernismi ja myöhäiskapitalismi ovat toisistaan riippuvia käsitteitä, eikä niitä voi kulttuurillisesti eikä ekonomisesti erottaa toisistaan, jonka vuoksi postmodernit satiirikertomukset käsittelevät vieraantumista.

Alienaatio myöhäiskapitalistisessa yhteiskunnassa vaikuttaa yksilöön, erityisesti hänen yhteyteensä työhön ja ihmissuhteisiin. Tämä tutkielma yhdistää alienaation tunteen Vonnegutin kolmeen päähenkilöön, jotka kuvataan apaattisina, hämmentyneinä ja passiivisina työssään ja henkilökohtaisissa elämissään. Satiirin rooli on kritisoida romaaneissa kuvattuja yhteiskuntia ja siten ilmentää päähenkilöiden vieraantunutta olemassaoloa suurten yritysten, kulutusyhteiskunnan, liioitellun patriotismin ja individualismin lomassa. Satiiri esiintyy eri tavoin jokaisessa romaanissa, mutta sen rooli on aina näyttää, että Vonnegutin henkilöhahmojen kuvaus viittaa alienaatioon työstä, toisista ihmisistä, ja omasta tarkoituksesta.

Avainsanat: Vonnegut, satiiri, postmodernismi, myöhäiskapitalismi, alienaatio, vieraantuminen, amerikkalainen kirjallisuus

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"The postmodern is a regime in which, like Figaro in his time, one has to laugh to keep from crying."
– Bertrand Westphal

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, satire and parody seem to be more present in modern American media and political commentary than ever. In a period of increased social and economic inequality, the satirized targets of television sketches, late night-shows, and social media posts include billionaires, large corporations, politicians, and affluent celebrities. Contemporary satire in the United States, writes James E. Caron, is largely the product of "[s]kepticism toward metanarratives as well as the impact of technology and science on all domains of human society", making the past twenty or so years "the golden age of satire" (154). In the course of its history, satire has been employed in literature and culture during times of instability, so it is not surprising that the twenty-first century has had this effect. For the United States, perhaps the largest issue has become inequality, both economic and social. "One might expect America's great divide between affluence and poverty—wider than it has been in a century—to yield narratives of tragedy rather than humor", writes Angelique Haugerud (10), and she is right in that it has yielded both. The exposure to constant satire aimed at the specific targets of billionaires and politicians may be the cause of social media, which allows a more intimate view of these people's lives, news coverage of their every policy, investment, and opinion, or the increased possibility for individuals to share their thoughts on the Internet with others, which creates a more profound general public understanding of who these people are and what they do. Television shows such as late-night programs also contribute to the public image of the people who run the world from a humorous point of view. However, there is a crucial similarity between them all: they profit from a broken system that leaves so many others on the outside. They are not the ones who are affected by the climate crisis, income inequality, unemployment, or homelessness. What the criticism in this contemporary abundance of satire is truly aimed at, then, is the system which allows these people to

thrive: late capitalism. The anxiety, worry, and fear of living under late capitalism make people feel alienated from their labor, their peers, and even their own identities. Satire offers, if not a solution, at least a comfort in this alienation.

In the postmodern age, roughly beginning after World War II, satirical art has indeed been concerned with the anxieties of late capitalism, as late capitalism and postmodernism are directly linked to one another. When satirical art is not directly aimed at criticizing billionaires, politicians, or corporations, it often looks within, into how late capitalism affects the individual. In this light, this thesis focuses on the protagonists of three Kurt Vonnegut novels: *Player Piano* (1952), *Jailbird* (1979), and *Slapstick, or Lonesome no more*! (1976) from the perspective of how they portray individuals experiencing alienation under late capitalist sociopolitical structures and particularly American environments and contexts. It will attempt to show that satire is used in these novels as a way of navigating late capitalist landscapes and to depict how individuals are affected by alienation in these landscapes. The concept of *alienation* will be discussed as a Marxist term, denoting a type of alienation from one's labor, human nature, and human relationships under late capitalism, specifically. These three novels, as well as much of Vonnegut's other work, include multiple themes that can be directly related to anti-capitalist thought: the meaninglessness of working for a large corporation, the anxiety of dealing with individualism and competition, and the disillusionment of the American Dream, for instance. Late capitalism will also be discussed directly alongside postmodernism to show not only that the two are tied to and dependent on one another, but that postmodern art has had a need for satire and parody precisely due to late capitalist anxieties. Vonnegut's work exemplifies these anxieties by utilizing satire and parody to create dystopian regimes and corporations to address mid-twentieth century America in *Player Piano* and *Slapstick,* as well as satirizing existing sociopolitical issues under the Nixon administration in *Jailbird*. This selection of books, then, serves the purpose of examining satire using both dystopian societies as well as ones based on reality.

Vonnegut's work has been widely researched in terms of its postmodern narrative style and themes, as well as its satire and humor. Notable works on Vonnegut have been written by Robert T. Tally Jr. (2011) and Jerome Klinkowitz (2009), who analyze Vonnegut's individual works in terms of their significance to postmodern writing and postmodern satire. Their work also analyzes Vonnegut's novels as part of the American landscape, noting for instance that they "present a sprawling image of the complexity of American life, expressing the human, all-too-human, condition of its varied inhabitants" (Tally 2). This thesis draws on these notions that Vonnegut's novels represent a mid-century view of American life as it is understood through the postmodern condition. Both Tally and Klinkowitz recognize a sort of postmodern condition in their analyses of Vonnegut's protagonists, noting that the satire in the novels deals with various societal issues that cause this condition. This thesis will extend on Vonnegut's social satire and explore the influence of late capitalism specifically as it relates to the postmodern condition of Vonnegut's protagonists, arguing that the drawing force in Vonnegut's satire is criticizing the forces of late capitalism in the post-war period. This thesis also argues that the "all-too-human" condition in his work in fact expresses alienation directly caused by the forces of late capitalism.

After giving an overview of the forms and purposes of satire and parody throughout literary history and discussing the link between postmodernism and late capitalism through the lens of alienation, this thesis will divide its analysis of the three novels into three chapters. All three chapters, one on each novel, will address different types and subjects of satire. The first chapter, concerning *Player Piano*, will address parody – the novel is comprised of a number of parodies of different genres, namely drama, the pastoral genre, and afternoon television. These parodies are used in the novel to effectively satirize the cultish nature of capitalism, corporations, and the American dream. The following chapter on *Jailbird* is concerned with cosmic and dramatic irony, which in turn satirize government work, anticommunism and excessive patriotism, and wealth inequality. Finally, the last

chapter on *Slapstick* satirizes American individualism stemming from capitalism by creating an

apocalyptic dystopia, as well as using dark humor and comedic exaggeration. Thus, all three novels use

satire in slightly different ways to portray societies under late capitalism, as well as their protagonists

experiencing alienation. This thesis will attempt to show that postmodern narratives use satire

specifically to deal with the absurdities of late capitalism, and that they do so by portraying the point of

view of alienated protagonists.

2. Satire and the Postmodern Condition under Late Capitalism

The sociopolitical contexts of satire up to the twentieth century

John T. Gilmore writes: "The satirical impulse, some of the time, appears to be a defense mechanism of the helpless, offering comfort, however meagre, in an otherwise unbearable existence" (Gilmore 15). Satire, then, can often be used as a form of escapism, to "comfort" the protagonists and help them make sense of their environments. For satirical writing to be effective, however, it is dependent not only on having a target, but a willing and understanding audience. It needs to be perceived by people other than the author to be satire, and so the responses to satirical works may change according to time and circumstances. Also subject to time and circumstance are the very definitions of what satire means. In the first century BC, for the Romans, satire was a specific literary form, a poem in Latin hexameter verse with the subject matter of social criticism. This view of satire in the form of verse was later influential to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English satire. The definition has since become looser, including not only satirical verse and literary works but cinema, TV-series, cartoons, and other, newer types of visual media, such as social media posts and YouTube videos. Gilmore notes, however, that while it is easy to note that all these varying types of literature and media are examples of satire, it is more difficult to define what a Roman hexameter verse poem and a satirical YouTube clip have in common; what the deciding factors that make them equally satirical consist of (2-3). If form or technique are not suitable deciding factors in themselves, it is necessary to look at the aims and objectives of satirical works, as well as the use of satire over the course of its history, to conceptualize what purposes satire serves, regardless of the form it is in.

Satire utilizes multiple techniques to carry out its goals: exaggeration, obscenity, parody, allegory, irony, and the creation of fictional worlds and alternate universes and histories, to name a few, but these techniques in themselves are still not what *make* satire (Gilmore 12). Satire is also often

humorous, but similarly, humor alone is not satirical. An example of explicitly satirical humor can be found in *Player Piano* in the form of irony, when Finnerty remarks to Paul's crying secretary, after finding out she is dealing with a difficult breakup with her fiancé: "What is there to cry about? See – none of the red lights are on, no buzzers going off, so all's well with the world" (81). This remark comments on the ideologies that permeate this system and fictional society, ideologies that this character does not himself share; that all is well as long as the machines are still running, and nothing else in the world could possibly be wrong. One technique of satire, then, is taking a character that the readers share an ideology with and using them to voice criticism about the world around them. Another technique, also using an example from the same novel, is to have disagreeable characters behave in disagreeable, humorous, absurd ways, and have the relatable characters witness this behavior. They do not need to comment on what is happening, because the reader should be made aware of the absurdity all on their own. For instance, one of these clearly disagreeable, satirical characters in *Player Piano* is Shepherd, a co-worker of the protagonist and an avid believer in the corporation and in the system he works and lives for. The clear-cut differences between Shepherd and Paul Proteus are made clear in multiple instances to emphasize the message that participating in the system is absurd in itself, and Shepherd is made absurd for being enthusiastic and overly competent. What satire does in these instances is invite the reader to laugh at and judge the people who are portrayed as naive, uninformed, and even brainwashed by the system's propaganda. Furthermore, the central goal of satire from the individual characters' point of view in these examples is to create distance between themselves and their surroundings, as mentioned earlier. Again, this only works if the reader understands the author's message and, more importantly, if they share the same views (Gilmore 13). Thus, in *Player Piano*, Vonnegut not only invites the reader to condemn the fictional system created in the novel, but to consider what this message might have to do with real life corporate culture, as well. The same can be noted of *Jailbird*, as well, which satirizes anticommunism and patriotism, and *Slapstick*, in which the

satire's target is the individualistic and personal success-oriented nature of American thought.

Vonnegut uses satire to address postmodern issues and to portray the postmodern condition, but satire as a practice has a long history, even though it is not possible to pinpoint exactly when it began. There are satirical elements in ancient Egyptian and Babylonian literature, as well as ancient Greece and Rome, and there are certainly instances of political satire in the Bible. Satire in Greece, for example, between approximately 449 - 385 BC, saw the development of Old Comedy, which emerged as a result of Athenian democracy allowing for wider participation in politics (though only for adult male citizens). The plays varied from slapstick humor, humor based on stereotypes, and topical themes ridiculing certain individuals, often living contemporaries, and their ideas. Satire has also long had a conservative element, as was the case in much of ancient Roman writing, in which the target of satire was the *preservation* of the current social order rather than its dismantlement. (Gilmore 32-5, 47). Later, Roman satire continued to be popular and widely read in the Middle Ages, but much of medieval satire itself took a step back from classical models. Perhaps one of the most well-known medieval works, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1392), utilizes satire to direct criticism toward the Church and its greed and hypocrisy, for instance (Gilmore 54-7). However, satire can be said to have had its golden age in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with the increased popularity of the novel. Charles Knight argues that satire and the novel share a number of defining elements, writing that the elements of the novel such as "formal self-consciousness, "implicit criticism of its predecessors", and "its uncertain or ambiguous relationship both to its author and to its dominant ideology" for instance, are principle defining characteristics of satire, as well (203). Eighteenth century satirical novels, a widely known example being Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), use satire to raise awareness of broad social issues, also by making individual characters representative of those issues. Novelistic characters are normally given importance and depth as individual subjects, but satire often treats its characters as examples of societal problems. Sympathy for characters, then, is replaced with judgement of the culture

they exist in (Knight 204). As noted before, Vonnegut uses his characters in this satirical way, to act as conduits for the reader to criticize the societies they live in; they are not fully treated as personal subjects outside of the societal problems they face. Knight further notes that novels are largely "concerned with individual consciousness" and characters in conflict (ibid). The use of satire in novels centers consciousness and conflict slightly differently, because satire represents society through "fantastic structures" that "cannot be read in the same way as conventional novels": "The consciousness of satiric characters may shift, but their shifts usually serve the satirist's need for multiple or different perspectives" (Knight 205). The newly found popularity of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then, introduced a possibility to use broader narratives and conflicts between characters to criticize issues, which may be part of the reason for the thrive of satirical narratives during these decades. However, since satire is used to draw attention to societal issues, its increased usage and enjoyment during any period of time is also dependent on the current sociopolitical and cultural climate.

The historical, social, and political conditions of satire are varied, according to Dustin Griffin, who states that satire has been noted to belong to specific time periods and emerge under distinct times in society (133). Satire has been at its most prominent, for example, in first-and-second-century Rome, late sixteenth-century England, seventeenth-century France and eighteenth-century England (ibid). Satire is theorized to emerge in times of either completely fixed moral norms or, contrarily, great moral conflict, and satirical works often increase at times when "moral norms are so firmly fixed that the satirist can freely and confidently appeal to them" or conversely, when the moral norms of society are "called into question" and must be "reaffirmed" with the tool of satire to prevent the breaking of said norms. A third view on why satire has historically emerged during certain times and in certain places is that it arises "when there is little credence in public standards of morality and taste", leaving these standards open for questioning (Griffin 134). Thus, it is highly probable that certain historical and

social circumstances tend to lend themselves to the uses of satire more than others. Simon Dentith further notes that there are also certain social and historical situations in which it becomes more likely for parody specifically to be at its peak and to speak for important cultural, political or historical developments (28-9). Times of internal division within societies, for example, are apt to produce parody, because of social classes being so strongly separated, and their mannerisms of speech and writing being so marked by their class, that it produces both formal and informal mutual parody between classes. This was the case, for example, in English society between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, when society was socially zoned and different classes lived apart from each other (Dentith 30-1), and parody in nineteenth century England flourished with titles by Dickens, Austen, and Thackeray, for instance. During the course of its history, then, satire has been used in writing to address societal issues and divides, flourishing in societies with division and anxiety.

Parody is a distinct and historically significant form of satire. While parody is only directly discussed in context with *Player Piano*, the novels discussed in this thesis include a wide repertoire of parody and parodical elements used to criticize late capitalism, corporate culture, and the American Dream, among others. Simon Dentith notes that it is difficult to find any one fitting definition for parody, because its definition depends so crucially on the time of writing and its intentions. It is, then, beneficial to consider parody as a term which includes multiple definitions according to when it is produced and how it acts toward the world or toward the text or genre it is parodying (Dentith 21). Margaret A. Rose notes that of all the terms describing "comic quotation, imitation, or transformation", parody is the only one that has been expressly named in classical literature and Greek poetics, which is why it has gained so much importance in the Western tradition (Rose 6). The specifically comic and imitative elements, then, have been associated with the form of parody since ancient times, although some modern critics have attempted to separate parody from its purely comical elements (ibid. 28). This thesis argues that parody in Vonnegut is nonetheless used in a comical and imitative respect; the

novels parody other genres as well as societal issues mainly by ways of humorous imitation. The novels here are thus particularly concerned with the socially significant definition of parody, as well. Parody, according to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the 'carnivalesque', calls into question the seriousness of authority; Quoting Bakhtin, Dentith notes:

> [I]n late medieval and Early Modern Europe especially, the popular institution of the carnival, with its feasting, its celebratory enactments of the overthrowing of authority, and its militantly anti-authoritarian debunking of sacred and official rituals and languages, provides the social ground for the grotesque realism, mimicries, multiple registers, and parodies to be found in Rabelais and his near-contemporaries Cervantes and Shakespeare. (Dentith 22-3)

Thus, instead of parodying other existing works or referring to another piece of art in any way, a parodical work can act as a social commentary on real or in-story authority and society on its own. In *Player Piano* for instance, the function of parody is both satirical imitation of societal structures and issues, as well as satirical imitation of other genres.

Parody has been popular in the form of novels since the seventeenth century. The novel started using parody to "devalue alternative genres and their ways of depicting the world", and so a popular genre that has been the target of parody from the seventeenth century onwards is romance. Romance is, according to Dentith, a genre of wish-fulfillment, ruled by "coincidence and wonder". The novel, being more of a secular genre that attempts to inhabit the world as it is, makes the ideals of romance clash with difficult facts of existence. Parody in the novel performs acts of debunking and ridiculing to these kinds of overly idealistic concepts. It is then inherent to the very texture of the novel as it defines its relationship to other devalued modes and claims to be a more realistic depiction of human life (Dentith 55-6). When it comes to characters, parody also uses them to witness and experience the issues that are being parodied, which then often works to bring them to a saner or healthier place. The focus of parody

is to depict "the distance between the characters' misrecognition of the world" and the truth that is made explicit to the reader (ibid. 58). Vonnegut utilizes parody in much the same way, especially in creating environments, by placing characters into scenes which are parodical of corporate workplaces, political offices, and suburban environments innate to the American dream.

The postmodern period, like any period, deals with its own sociopolitical and human rights issues, in the form of racial segregation and the struggle for women's rights, as well as other human rights issues, but also the rise in power of unethical corporations and technological and scientific advancements. The themes, subjects, and influences in writing during the postmodern period, then, are also partly dictated by the sociopolitical and cultural climate. Thus, in light of the social conditions that satire and parody have emerged in throughout their history, the argument remains that there are multiple aspects of the postmodern period that have made satire extremely relevant in the postmodern age. Satire has been used in different ways in different time periods, and it has existed as a form of textual and societal polemic for centuries, so it is important to discuss in what ways the postmodern environment and the postmodern condition cause satire and parody to be relevant once again, perhaps in a new and different way, as well as how postmodern satire may speak to the conditions of the past.

The postmodern need for satire

The time of writing of the three Vonnegut novels in this thesis coincides with the emergence of both postmodernism and late capitalism, and the link between them can be seen in both their style and subject matter. Postmodernism and postmodern fiction are not concepts which can be easily defined, but they can be discussed in the context of the mid-twentieth century and late capitalism, and analyzed in terms of their overarching style, dominant subject matter, and influence by contrasting, comparing, and summing up the views of different critics. The main interest here is the ways in which postmodern

fiction is used and exists in relation to satire, parody, and alienation under late capitalism.

Three main characteristics of the postmodern novel are outlined by Mark Currie. He writes that, firstly, the postmodern novel deals with the relationship between fiction and reality in an "anti-realist" way, meaning that it constructs fictionalized realities only in order to "expose them as artificial constructions". This means that they often use devices which break the boundary between fiction and reality, they are aware of their own fictionality and often even reference it by highlighting the author's presence, for example. Secondly, postmodern novels are intertextual. Again, they blur the line between fiction and reality in a way that they reference and allude to other works, they are citational, and they are aware of their place in a world full of other fictional representations. Finally, postmodern novels represent contemporary culture, especially in terms of new technologies, globalization, and issues of identity and cultural differences; Currie notes that in terms of content, "the postmodern novel represents worlds of simulation, of the proliferation of representational technologies, and of personal and collective archiving that belong to the contemporary phase of capitalism" (Currie 2-4).

One view on the influences, dominant themes, and the general nature of postmodernism is proposed by Brian McHale, who introduces postmodernist fiction with quite a literal definition of the term; as simply fiction that has emerged after modernist fiction. The features of postmodern texts are often made clearer by contrasting them with modernist writing, but McHale claims that this is not enough to show how postmodern poetics differs from modernism or how the different contrasts came to be in the course of literary history (McHale 7). There must instead be a *dominant*, a term made famous by Roman Jakobson, that helps catalogue the historical change from modernism to postmodernism, as well as make sense of the changes themselves. A dominant is "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components" (Jakobson, quoted in McHale 6). The question, then, is what has emerged as the dominant of postmodern fiction, and how it has changed in contrast to modernist fiction. McHale proposes that, if the dominant of

modernism was epistemological, the dominant of postmodern fiction is, in turn, ontological, which means that it asks existential questions such as: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?". In other words, this ontological dominant dictates and explains the features that can be found in postmodern writing. The historical change between modernism and postmodernism can also be explained by their respective dominants, in that "[i]ntractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability", and vice versa (McHale 9-10). Thus, there appears to have been a change in postmodern literature, in which it has started focusing on posing questions about the self rather than all-encompassing questions about the entire world.

Gerhard Hoffmann argues that the distinction between modern and postmodern fiction largely relies on how texts are read and analyzed; a postmodern reading pays attention to different aspects and asks different questions than a modern reading. In addition to the ontological considerations proposed by McHale, a novel can be read in a postmodern way by focusing on the "postmodern eclecticism in theme, the dissolution of the subject, the dissemination of meaning, the play with theme and character, form and composition, and the perspectives of radical irony and the comic mode" (Hoffmann 59), with the last few aspects taken into greater consideration here. Hoffmann considers postmodernism and postmodern writing largely through a cultural and sociopolitical lens, while also lending focus to the role of satire and parody in a postmodern context. Viewing the sociopolitical values of postmodernism largely as a product of the sixties, he writes that the postmodern period started with a deconstruction of the dominant values of the previous decades (13). Historically, the term has existed well before the sixties, but the decade made postmodernism evolve due to its radical political, social, and cultural movements and its overarching values of liberation. Postmodern fiction, then, also turned against late modernism by rejecting modernist concepts and developing its own alternatives; while modernist writing is defined by "rationality, transcendence, continuity, and depth", postmodern writing is

characterized in opposites here by "irrationality, immanence, discontinuity or difference, and surface" (33-4). Socially and culturally, the evolution of postmodernism was greatly influenced in the mid-century by liberation, but also a growing sense of instability and entropy. Postmodern readings of texts, then, also reflect these perspectives.

Due to its opposition to the values of late modernism, Hoffmann also views postmodern writing through the "perspectives of negation", emphasizing the postmodern re-emergence of and drive for satire and parody. These perspectives of negation include "satire, the grotesque, the monstrous, farce", as well as "their attenuation by parody, play, irony, and the comic mode" (605). The interaction between satire and parody (the grotesque and the comic), is such that the "stricter modes of negation", i.e. satire and the grotesque, are attenuated through the more comic attitudes of parody and irony, resulting in the complex attitudes and viewpoints of the postmodern text (605-6). Hoffmann writes that postmodern satire challenges traditional categories, with criticism toward "the modern, unifying formal design in art". It casts doubt in "the referentiality of language" and abandons all "clear-cut borderlines between reality and fiction" (607). He argues that this alliance between parody and satire in postmodern texts is born from "a social process that has worn out not only values but also the language of values" (618), which means that postmodern satirical writing casts language itself into question, especially the language of criticism and social analysis: "When one recognizes and criticizes the emptiness of the social world and at the same time is aware of the world-language problem, the sense of language-being-the-world, satire and parody fuse" (ibid).

To conclude on the connection between satire and postmodern fiction, it is relevant to discuss how they have been shaped by the postmodern condition and how specific uses of satire have emerged in the postmodern period. James E. Caron explores contemporary satire as it relates to and exemplifies the postmodern condition and outlines contemporary uses for satire as a means of criticism and activism. Notably first discussed by Jean-François Lyotard in the late 1970s, the postmodern condition

prevails as a relevant concept both in the contemporary satirical writing Caron focuses on and earlier postmodern writing as well; it can be used to characterize and evaluate American satirical works since at least the 1960s (153). Postmodernism and the postmodern condition, according to Lyotard, pertain to "incredulity towards metanarratives", in particular the metanarrative of the scientific process, which has created complicating and confounding knowledge about the world, which has had profound impacts for people and societies. Due to technological changes and scientific progress in communication and the media, the ways in which societies receive and understand advancement have been reshaped (Caron 154). In the context of this postmodern technological landscape evolving from the mid twentieth century onwards, Caron outlines aspects of satire that are relevant to the postmodern age. Firstly, degenerative satire, so-called by Steven Weisenburger, seemingly fits the postmodern condition in that it "targets not specific people or events" but "uses its ridiculing tactics to call into question codes of knowledge understood as foundational". It is informed by the poststructuralist "radical doubt about representation and narrative telos" and questions the possibility to return to any kind of normative order (ibid. 156), notions relevant to the postmodern notions of uncertainty and blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Caron further notes that satire is ethically committed to "promote the process of social change", while also comically using "symbolic violence" to ridicule and insult the current social order. The postmodern condition, then, "exacerbates the dilemma of ethical ridicule that has concerned Western thought for centuries", in that postmodernism lacks apparent norms or standard values necessary to produce and receive satire in the contemporary world. However, satire is still able to have great social impact despite the postmodern condition, due to its nature of being simultaneously serious and nonserious; satire is able to function as comic political speech without actually holding the role of direct political speech, so it can be used to criticize sociopolitical and cultural aspects of the postmodern age through ridicule (Caron 157). Even if the postmodern age is characterized in terms of instability and seen as lacking "standard values" that can be largely agreed

upon, satire is an apt tool for criticism due to its ability to criticize issues without claiming to be overly serious.

Alienation and late capitalism

Multiple changes have emerged between modernism and postmodernism, not only in literature but in a cultural, political, and socioeconomic sense as well. Therefore, the complexity of postmodernism as a term, as well as the usefulness and importance of satire in postmodern writing, need cultural, economic, and political explanations. Fredric Jameson posits that postmodernism should be analyzed not as a style or a set of theories but rather as a cultural dominant of its age (4). He writes that postmodernist theory is largely an attempt to "take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age,' or zeitgeist or 'system' or 'current situation' any longer" (xi). Postmodernism seems, according to Jameson, to elude any complete and pure theories. He adds that, in order for a completely new postmodern culture to emerge, it requires the collective struggle of creating a new social system (xii). In his book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson argues that the cultural and economic factors of postmodernism tend to collapse in on one another, as do the concepts of postmodernism and late capitalism themselves. There is a reciprocal relationship between culture and economy – late capitalism has produced a class of people who are capable of thriving in modern labor processes just as the culture of postmodernism has produced people who are capable of functioning in "a very peculiar socioeconomic world" (xiv-xv). The cultural and economic factors in a postmodern world must, then, necessarily collide, and thus it can be concluded that "every position on postmodernism in culture [...] is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today" (Jamerson 3); postmodernism cannot exist without the forces

of multinational capitalism.

This multinational capitalism, more commonly called late capitalism, is defined by Jameson as encompassing two main features: A "tendential web of bureaucratic control" and the interrelation of government and big business, also known as state capitalism (Jameson xviii). The way in which the term is widely used differs somewhat from these definitions. The common and modern usage often refers to the effects and culminations of capitalism, namely the inequalities and absurdities that are the products of a capitalistic economy. The definitions differ, because, as Jameson notes, these factors of late capitalism seem like simple, natural facts of life, and no individual person "particularly notices the expansion of the state sector" or large-scale bureaucratization happening around them (ibid). The features of late capitalism also include the importance of transnational business and international division of labor, a "new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges", "second and third world debt", "new forms of media interrelationship", along with social consequences such as "the crisis of traditional labor" and gentrification, for example (xix). The prerequisites for the emergence of late capitalism can be divided into technological and cultural ones. The technological prerequisites for late capitalism, as suggested by Ernest Mandel, emerged by the end of the Second World War, a period which also saw the organization of international relations, decolonization, and an emerging new economic world system. The cultural prerequisites, in turn, can be found in "the social and psychological transformations of the 1960s". The preparations for the economic side of postmodernism, then, were on their way from the 1950s onward, after wartime shortages of goods had been repaired, allowing for new products and technologies to be made (ibid. xx). Jameson, however, also suggests that both the cultural and economic levels of postmodernism (and thus late capitalism) finally crystallized during "the great shock of the crises" of 1973 (xx-xxi). Whenever these two factors truly melded together to form what is known as late capitalism is not crucial or even possible to fully determine; what is more important are its connections to postmodern society and culture, and its effects

on the individual; the effects of late capitalism can most strongly be seen in the form of alienation.

Closely related to the concept of late capitalism is the discussion of Marx's theory of alienation as it still applies to the postmodern era. István Mészáros (1970) explains and expands upon the theory and its contemporary significance and applications, mostly writing on the basis of Marx's *Capital* (1867) and *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx's concept of alienation is divided into four key characteristics of alienated labor: 1) alienation from nature, 2) alienation from oneself and one's own activity, 3) alienation from one's membership as a human being, and 4) alienation from other people. The first characteristic expresses the relationship between the worker and the product of their labor, which is also, according to Marx, a relationship to the "sensuous external world, to the objects of nature" (14). To put it simply, the principal terms of reference while discussing this first characteristic are "man" (M), "nature" (N), and "industry", or "productive activity" (I). Industry, here, is both "the cause of the growing complexity of human society and the means of asserting the supremacy of man over nature" (103-4). Marx imagines the relationship between these three constituents as a threefold interaction in the form of a triangle, which shows reciprocity between M, N, and I; "Man is not only the creator of Industry, but also its product", and Man's relationship to Nature is thus "mediated through an alienated form of productive activity", or Industry. (ibid). Nature, here, is also extended to mean human nature in an anthropological sense, which is the basis for the second characteristic. Alienation from oneself is the "expression of labor in relation to the act of production within the labour process", which means the worker's relationship to their own activity has become alien, it does not offer satisfaction in itself, unless by the act of selling it to somebody else; it is not the activity of the individual that gives them satisfaction, but its abstract property, or its salability. The third characteristic is related to the concept of the "objectification of man's species life"; "Man duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created" (14). Alienated labor has the effect of

estranging Man from both "external nature and spiritual existence, his human being" (14-5). The fourth characteristic is similar to the third one, as it regards alienation from other people. In Marx's theory, the direct consequence of alienation from the product of one's labor is that Man also becomes estranged and alienated from the people surrounding him (15).

In addition to Marx, whose theory of alienation largely views the concept through alienated labor, Rahel Jaeggi discusses the concept in the philosophy of Heidegger, who understands alienation as people having an "objectifying relation" to the world, or as a tendency to understand objects that are "ready-to-hand" as "present-at-hand". Jaeggi writes: "Heidegger elucidates his idea of the environment (*Umwelt*) with his famous analysis of "equipment" (*das Zeug*): we use the hammer for hammering. This hammering serves us in the making of a chair, which in turn serves us (or someone else) for sitting" (16-7). The world, when it is seen like this, is full of meaningful relations; everything has its purpose, and that purpose is clear. The hammer in this example is what is meant by something being "ready-to-hand", that is, "good for something" and used to accomplish something. Through alienation, these things seem instead to be "present-at-hand", i.e. detached from practical contexts (17). Thus, the world is a structure that must include a subject and an object, and the separation of the two sides is what Heidegger calls alienation, "the separation of what belongs together" (18). These terms describe one's alienation from the world by ways of misunderstanding, but another aspect of Heidegger's alienation concerns one's relationship to themself and their own existence (*Existenz*). There is also a misapprehension in this relation, in that "someone who does not relate to herself as to someone who has her own life to lead reifies herself insofar as she denies the character of her life activities as praxis, as activities that she must decide on". There is, then, a similar distinction here between *Existenz* and being merely present-at-hand, or, to put it simply, not relating to what one does and how one lives (ibid.). Relating to oneself existentially means to not only see oneself as "an object that is present in the world", but relating to oneself through meaningful activities, what one wants and does, and having

control over these things. Alienation from oneself in Heidegger's terms, then, is "making oneself into a thing and adapting oneself to others in what one does", instead of leading one's own life (19). This concept is similar to Marx's in its basic definitions, but focuses on slightly different aspects of people's alienation from the world and themselves.

In light of these characteristics, it can be noted that alienation as a concept occurs in multiple discussions about Vonnegut's work and the ever-present anxiety of his protagonists; critics have frequently pointed out that Vonnegut's characters long for community and family, they share a profound sense of "homelessness" (Tally 16; 5), as well as a desperate need for simple human courtesy (Klinkowitz 82-3). These aspects can all reasonably be connected to Marx's characteristics of alienation and alienated labor, namely alienation from nature, humanity, oneself, and others. Alienation from nature occurs most prominently in *Player Piano,* both in regard to the protagonist's longing for a simple life running a farm so he can reap the products of his own labor, and in the form of a corporate retreat on an island that abstracts nature in order to impose artificial constructions and corporate luxuries. Alienation from oneself also occurs in each novel; the protagonists' struggle to hold onto their sense of self mostly due to the nature of their jobs, which in all cases remove the humanity from them, reducing them to extensions of their corporations or governments. Walter Starbuck (*Jailbird*) loses his own sense of self and humanity holding a useless job title for years, and later as a government pawn during Watergate. The third and fourth of Marx's characteristics of alienation are relevant to the novels' protagonists mostly in terms of their naïveté, misunderstanding, and ignorance of what other people are going through. Each of the characters can be described as men who sympathize with the working class and who ideologically oppose the forces of late capitalism, but who either start off or end up in powerful corporate or government positions despite their sympathies; what characterizes them all is the wish to save the world and tear down oppressive systems, but from their positions these efforts are portrayed as mostly naïve or out of touch, even impossible. The basic understanding of struggle is

there, but their experience is wildly different from that of the average person, which creates a powerful divide between themselves and other people, even their own families. In this way, their work quite literally deters them from making meaningful connections and understanding others. Alienation is also relevant to these struggles in a sense that it is impossible for these men to meaningfully claim the products of their labor when they are so disconnected from what their work actually accomplishes in the world.

Many of the characteristics of alienation are the exact topics that are satirized and parodied in Vonnegut's novels, suggesting that satire is an apt way of conceptualizing and dealing with alienation and anxiety in a postmodern society. By abstracting and exaggerating these concepts via the tools of parody and exaggeration, as well as focusing on parts of the dystopian landscape that contribute to feelings of alienation, isolation, and anxiety, Vonnegut portrays the detrimental effects of this alienation from labor that is still relevant in late capitalism. One of the concepts being satirized and parodied in *Slapstick*, for example, is American individualism and "the cult of the individual", which shows up as a point of discussion in Marx's theory of alienation. According to Marx and Mészáros alike, the notion of a "social instinct implanted in all men" has disappeared as a result of capitalistic developments, replaced by individual liberties; Aristotle's conception of "a harmonious relationship between individual and community", in which the individual is organically ingrained into their community, has simultaneously disappeared from modern theories (Mészáros 254). From the seventeenth century onward, increasingly greater attention has been paid to individual freedom, which contrasts with the views of even the late Middle Ages. "The dynamic development of capitalist relations of production" requires individual thinking, simply so that each individual can "enter into free contractual relations" with others, as well as selling and then alienating everything that belongs to them, including their labor. Thus, the ideal of individual liberty was already prevalent in the twentieth century, turning the "socio-historically conditioned circumstances of the individual's atomized,

privatized life", into the human condition (ibid. 255). Mészáros further notes that because of this cult of

the individual, loneliness has been an increasing theme in art, literature, and theoretical works during

the course of the twentieth century (ibid). In fact, there are studies linking loneliness and mental well-

being issues directly to late capitalism (cf. e.g. LaMothe 2012), so it is no wonder that the theme of

loneliness and anxiety increased in literature, as well. This cult of the individual, coupled with an

alienating corporate or government existence leaves Vonnegut's characters feeling like no one is going

through the same things they are, or that they must go through them alone regardless. Wilbur Swain,

the protagonist of *Slapstick*, struggles with being alone after separating from his sister, with whom he

shares an intelligent thought process that neither of them can achieve on their own; they work

excellently as a unit but become near illiterate when separated from one another. Despite this, they are

judged on their intellect individually and eventually separated according to society's standards. The

"human condition" of Vonnegut protagonists, their postmodern condition, is thus undoubtedly not only

alienation, but the loneliness and meaninglessness that come from it, as well.

3. Alienation through the Lens of Parody in *Player Piano*

Player Piano, published in 1952 as Vonnegut's first novel, is a dystopian narrative set in the fictional city of Ilium, New York, in a period described in the foreword as a time of "no more war", when automation has replaced most of human employment. Jerome Klinkowitz writes that the structure of *Player Piano* is reminiscent of a large portion of Vonnegut's stories in the following decade, in that they follow individuals and communities who are being tempted away from their core values in some way or another by "illusions, be it the perfect social personality, sudden wealth, designer lifestyles, or utopian technology", only to be disappointed that what they were promised is only an illusion. He argues that these stories are based on "a fundamental essence of human social behavior", which he also views as the basis for most of Vonnegut's writing (Klinkowitz 21). These illusions in this particular novel deal with getting happiness from corporate success and fulfilling the American dream, and the disappointment comes in the form of the alienation inherent in both endeavors.

Alienation in *Player Piano* can be analyzed through the novel's recurring parodies of other literary genres. The three types of texts discussed here are a play, wilderness narratives and the pastoral, and an afternoon television program. The stylization, as well as the typical themes and content of these three genres are parodied in the novel to satirize the absurdity of corporate culture, the American dream, and attitudes on income inequality, respectively. The theme of alienation and anxiety is treated in these parodies through the protagonist, Paul Proteus, an engineer and manager at the Ilium Works, who becomes more and more anxious and concerned with the system, the meaninglessness of his work, and his home life. His frustration with the system is apparent through his inability to relate to his co-workers, his isolation from his wife, who only seems to be concerned with his corporate success, as well as his desire to abandon his entire life and move to the countryside. The purpose of showcasing this alienation through parody is largely to show the absurdity of human behavior in these situations

and the trust people place in failing systems, the failure of the American dream for the individual, as well as the alienating nature of corporate entities. Through parody, the novel is also able to show this system through the eyes of someone who has always actively participated in it at a high level, someone who does not realize how skewed their own perceptions of the world truly are.

Theater and company propaganda

Player Piano satirizes corporate culture and the novel's fictionalized automized society by creating a parodical version of a large corporation. This parody is best realized in a chapter focused on a corporate retreat, which takes place on what is colloquially called *Meadows*, an island dedicated to hosting a company-wide sporting event. The retreat consists of members of the company in color-coded teams battling each other in varying sports and playful competitions, which already alludes to the corporate world being viewed as a series of games. The atmosphere at this event may be light-hearted on the outside, but at its core, the retreat is about real competition for corporate success, higher positions, and the respect of higher-ups. The retreat parodies corporate culture with its comically closely scheduled activities and its excessive mentions of patriotism and respect for traditions; the corporation is making the retreat out to be some sort of a sacred tradition, something to take solemnly and seriously, while also forcing the managers into having "fun" in tiny, scheduled segments. Each activity on the island has the air of spontaneity and seems playfully competitive, but the narration creates an undertone of hurry, stress, and unspoken rules. The retreat starts with a hurried command from the loudspeakers to "Get to know your tentmate, then lunch" (189), a command which is repeated not more than a paragraph later, as every activity is tightly scheduled and narrated by an automated voice from the start. Communicating and making friends is actively and quite aggressively encouraged, but conversation is constantly interrupted by the disembodied voice from the loudspeaker either repeating the rules of

whatever activity is happening, or reminding everyone how little time is left, thus comically impeding any communication from ever actually taking place:

> Get to know the man next to you," said the loudspeaker. "Don't talk to anyone you know."
>
> "Married?" said Paul.
>
> "That's what you're here for, to get to know new people, to broaden your horizons," said the loudspeaker.
>
> "Nossir, I'm en–"
>
> "The more contacts you make here at the Meadows," said the loudspeaker, "the more smoothly industry will function, co-operationwise. (195)

This consistently interrupted interaction satirizes the way in which one is encouraged and expected to make friends, be polite, and enjoy oneself in corporate environments, but how the goal is always, in fact, productivity and individual success and competition. There is a juxtaposition between the first loudspeaker announcement and the last, namely in that the first is a simple encouragement to talk to one another and the third reveals the actual motivation of friendly discussion, the "smooth" functioning of the industry. Making friends and talking to people is also depicted as a sporting event like any other, in which the goal is to win and be as efficient as possible, "co-operationwise".

The activities at Meadows are consistently described as if they were part of the rites of a religious organization or a cult, and much of the symbolism present at the retreat is reminiscent of both patriotic and religious symbols, which work to transform the island almost into a cult-like compound for the engineers and managers to worship these symbols. The symbol of the Meadows, and of "the entire national organization" (198), is the Oak, which also takes the form of a literal oak standing in the middle of the island. "Its image was on every letterhead, and, stitched in a rectangle of white silk, its image snapped in the breeze, just below the American Flag on the parade-ground mast" (198). Here, the symbol for the organization is directly connected to the US flag; religious, patriotic, and corporate

symbolism are made one and the same, and the corporation is to be revered in the same way as the

national flag. Adding onto the religious and nationalist undertones are the songs sung around the oak

and the lunch table, which are reminiscent of hymns or battle songs. Furthermore, the corporation and

its workers are frequently connected to war imagery and hero worship. As the attendees gather around

the Oak to memorialize managers that have passed, it becomes clear from this memorial service that

these dead managers are correlated to war heroes, as everyone solemnly gathers to take a moment of

silence beneath the symbol of the organization. Paul's superior refers to one of these men as "a great

American, a great engineer, a great manager, a great pioneer at the head of the procession of

civilization, opening new, undreamed-of doors to better things, for better living, for more people, for

less cost" (200). The heroic endeavors he is essentially describing here are making household

appliances affordable by rendering human labor obsolete, but it is presented as if the man died for the

freedom of the American public like a war hero.

To further participate in this hero worship and to heap praise on the engineers and managers for

making the world a better place, the company stages a play about the birth of the current machine-

dominated system that celebrates its accomplishments and highlights how much it has improved the

lives of American citizens. The play works as a parody of the entire system itself, offering an absurd

and exaggerated view of the superiority of the system and the almost savior-like quality of the

engineers and managers who have made it all happen. This play is stylized in the novel in the form of a

script, with stage directions and lines, and it starts with the emergence of a character called the Sky

Manager, an old, bearded man in a long white robe, who seems to represent God or some other cosmic

being in charge of the universe: "I am the Sky Manager. It is I who keep night skies shining brightly; I

who, when a star's glory is tarnished beyond restoration, must take it from the firmament. Every

hundred years I climb my ladder to keep the heavens bright. And now my time has come again" (212).

Accentuating his duties as the overseer of stars, the old man, then, picks up a star labeled "Labor

Unionism" and lets it fall onto the stage. The stage description makes a note on the scrap heap below, where other stars labeled Rugged Individualism, Socialism, Free Enterprise, Communism and Fascism are stacked. He then pulls up a bright, shining star with the symbol of the Meadows printed on it, as he continues to dramatically regard and contemplate the fate of this star. From the start, the message is far from subtle, stating the obvious fact that the current system has been chosen by God himself. Because the play takes the form of the script instead of employing the usual narrative style, the message is presented as it is; sincere, objective, and impersonal, as Paul's judgements are left to the end. It also highlights the seriousness with which the play is received, thus effectively satirizing the message of this theatrical performance without the filter of vocalized value judgements, because, in the eyes of the managers and engineers, this play is taken completely seriously and sincerely, even though the content is little more than obvious corporate propaganda.

The first central indicator of this propaganda is the way in which the characters of the play are written and what they are meant to represent. The play copies stereotypical characteristics of Greek theater, as well as common character archetypes and stock characters to parody the type of story it is telling. A stock character is "a character in a drama or fiction that represents a type and that is recognizable as belonging to a certain genre" (Britannica), and its definition overlaps with that of an archetype, in that they are both used to denote typical and recurring character types in plays. The Sky Manager here takes on the characteristic role of a God, or an otherwise all-seeing figure, and the play's engineer character has all the characteristics of an archetypal hero, thus written to win the fight against the "radical", who represents the villain. These archetypes are shown in a dramatically acted out courtroom trial in which these two characters, only called the Radical and the Engineer, argue over the fate of the Oak star that the old man is considering. The Radical questions the brilliance of the star, saying how "There's never been a bloodier, blacker one" (213) and the Engineer, clearly written by the playwright to be the unemotional, sensible character, naturally argues for the benefits of the star. When

the Radical invites a character not-so-subtly named John Averageman to the stand to testify for the detrimental effect the star has had on his life, mainly having lost his job after the automatization of society, the Engineer has every possible counterargument at hand for why the current system has actually been beneficial to John. John complains that his life has become meaningless after losing his job, to which the Engineer is ready with all the reasons that John's life has been, in fact, *improved* by the new system; he now has a "twenty-eight-inch television set," "a laundry console", "a radar stove", "an electronic dust precipitator" (216), as well as all the rest of the modern conveniences that now adorn every person's home free of charge. With this, the playwright clearly contests the idea that the star could ever bring unhappiness to the general public, when it has given them everything they could ever wish for, if everything one ever wishes for is television sets and electronic dust precipitators, absurd examples made up to represent modern automatized luxuries. The sentiment of the writer of this play, namely an engineer sitting the audience, is trying to convey that all engineers and managers really want is to make the world a better place for people like John, and that they are heroic martyrs unappreciated by the public. With this argument, the engineer comes out as the hero of the story, as the villain is driven off the stage.

The characters of the play thus represent the values of the system, satirizing the general attitudes and thought processes of the managers and engineers. According to Anne Ubersfeld, dramatic characters often function as the metonymy or synecdoche of larger structures (81). In this case, the Engineer is metonymical of the power and authority of the system and the corporation, and the Radical is conversely the metonymy of chaos, which means everything outside of the system. Dramatic characters can also be metaphors for orders of reality, unique "figures of discourse", dialogical figures or oxymorons, by bringing together two opposite sides of reality, e.g. life and death, law and crime, individual and society (ibid.), as they do here; In these terms, the Engineer represents law, the Sky Manager represents life (at least the life of the system), and the Radical is meant to represent crime and

the death of the system. These roles are notably reversed from classical ones, here, making the characters belonging to an oppressive institution represent the virtuous qualities of lawfulness, justice, and reason, while the individual fighting for justice represents crime and evil. In addition to its characters, the play also shares a number of plot characteristics with Greek and Roman theater, especially tragedies, described in detail by Aristotle in *Poetics*. David Wiles outlines these characteristics by discussing the six ingredients of tragedy developed by Aristotle in his theory of "drama-as-literature": story, character, intellectual argument, language, song, and visuals. Greek plays were "full of oratory, long speeches, during which the characters would "develop competing arguments, using the art of public speaking to impress the chorus", often choosing a public setting such as a marketplace, to create an emotional response in those who are listening (95-6). Most important to these plays was the emotional response of the audience; it was important for the audience to feel "admiration for the people in the play whom they judge to be not perfect but nobler than themselves" (97). The play certainly follows these guidelines and ingredients, perhaps only lacking a musical number. The role reversal of the character archetypes, as well as the intent of getting an emotional response from the audience by praising the engineers and their accomplishments, are ways of turning this play into a parody that satirizes corporate ideologies. Moreover, the Engineer's dramatic monologue toward the end of the play, during which he is addressing John Everyman and appealing to his emotions, saying: "do you suppose that Caesar, with all his power and wealth, with the world at his feet, do you suppose he had what you, Mr. Averageman, have today?" (216) is an example of an intellectual argument meant to "impress the chorus", only the argument is so resolute and intentionally absurd as to be almost impossible to counter against.

In addition to Greek theater, the play also satirizes the company and the system by sharing a striking number of characteristics with medieval morality plays. The dictionary definition of a morality play is "an allegorical play popular especially in the 15th and 16th centuries in which the characters

personify abstract qualities or concepts (such as virtues, vices, or death)" (Merriam-Webster). These plays often followed these characters' fall into sin and their subsequent redemption, and they were regularly meant to act as moral lessons for the public. Pamela King notes that, in morality plays, "the protagonist is generally a figure of all men, reflected in his name, Everyman or Mankind, and the other characters are polarised as figures of good and evil. The action concerns alienation from God and return to God, presented as the temptation, fall and restitution of the protagonist" (235). The aforementioned *Everyman,* a medieval morality play from the fifteenth century, immediately shares a similar name and a purpose with John Averageman, in that they are both written as representations of the "average person", and they both struggle to achieve redemption from sin in their own ways. While Everyman faces God and is put on trial for the fate of his eternal soul, John Averageman testifies in a trial for the fate of the company, instead, thus allegorically fighting for his own fate as a member of this society. The other characters are put in polarizing roles: the Sky Manager represents God, and the Engineer and Young Radical are representations of good and evil, respectively. Representations of good and evil varied across morality plays, but they were often biblical, portrayed by the seven deadly sins, for instance, as well as the sinners who committed them (ibid.). Judgement and redemption from sin, then, were the two main themes of morality plays, and redemption was achieved through perseverance and atonement. The Meadows play and its characters also work as an allegory for the struggle for redemption, but, again, the roles are reversed; in order to satirize the worldview of the engineers and the capitalist system, the character of "Everyman" is cast aside, made to first fight against the play's morals, only to realize in the end that the company and the system *are* working in his favor, thus achieving redemption in his own way. The institution, however, with the help of the Engineer, becomes the real representation of good and virtue, as the moral lesson of the play becomes the continued worth of the company in the eyes of God, as the Sky Manager lifts the star representing the company up, exclaiming: "Yes, out it goes again, brighter than all the rest" (219).

The propaganda present in this play works as a striking representation of the ideology of the entire corporate system which Paul has grown to despise, and his reaction to the play mirrors his growing unease with the life he has been living. As the play shows the way these people view the world and their place in it, Paul has no choice but to realize he does not and cannot belong in this group of people anymore. Furthermore, there is no hint of irony in anybody's reactions or remarks after the play ends, because this room full of engineers all genuinely believe they belong to a system that has made the life of the average person better and more meaningful than ever before. They all see themselves as the calm, collected, reasonable Young Engineer shooting down the emotional arguments of the unreasonable Radical. They all see themselves as the heroes of the story, and as the play ends, Paul is left as the only person to understand the role reversal. Thus, his distance from the system and his alienation from his career become are summed up by his response to this play compared to the response of all his colleagues. Shepherd, who has been represented as the complete opposite to Paul throughout the novel, enthusiastically quotes the play to him:

> 'Not with all his gold and armies could Charlemagne have gotten one single electric lamp or vacuum tube!" He shook his head wonderingly, admiringly. 'Don't tell me art is dying.'
>
> 'Art who?' said Paul under his breath, and he walked away from them, into the twilight at the fringe of the ring of floodlights. (220)

Shepherd, completely seriously, "wonderingly, admiringly" repeats the most obviously satirical dialogue of the play, and Paul literally decides to walk away from this human representation of the company and the system with a final sarcastic comment.

Survival fantasies and pastoral narratives

In addition to theater and satirizing company culture via dramatic characters, *Player Piano* parodies the

conventions of both wilderness writing and the pastoral genre in order to satirize the concept of the American dream, specifically wanting to escape it. Firstly, the "American dream" can be defined by its multiple aspects as it is understood colloquially. Perhaps the most common understanding is that the American dream describes a system in which everyone is capable of pulling themselves up the ranks of society with hard work and intelligence, and that the United States is the land of opportunities for everyone, no matter their background or current circumstances. What is also implicit in the definition, however, at least in the mid-twentieth century imagination, is the addition of a perfect family life to return home to at the end of the workday, a nice house and a perfect family. Both aspects of the American dream are visible in the ideologies of the engineers, and the "national organization", while not outwardly a capitalist system like it would be understood in the world, is presented as a cult of success, profit, and fanatic involvement, whose members are frequently described as leading idyllic family lives on top of their corporate success.

The pastoral genre, as well as aspects of wilderness and survival narratives, are parodied in *Player Piano* as Paul attempts to escape everything that comes with the American dream; his high-ranking job, a house in an upscale neighborhood, and an automated, comfortable existence. Scott Hess argues that the pastoral is central to the concept of the American dream in its postmodern form, and he characterizes postmodern pastoral as "the pursuit of happiness through leisure in a secular and sensual Utopia paradoxically claiming to be grounded in nature, even as it is refracted back at us through the massive proliferations of our technologies" (Hess 72). The previously dominant ideologies of American nationhood developed in the twentieth century into suburban pastoral ideals, as the "virtuous farmer" was replaced with the goal of a life of leisure and consumption. Hess also notes that the postmodern version of pastoral necessarily represents the capitalistic social order as something natural, as the idea of nature is frequently used in advertising and promoting ideal lifestyles. Moreover, in postmodern pastoral, "the machine is no longer a potential interruption but the central site of the

pastoral order, since it is the machine which promises to reduce the complexities and frustration of contemporary life… Nature is still valorized, but it is now technology, rather than nature itself, which guarantees abundance and grounds the happiness of the pastoral dream" (ibid. 77). In the context of the novel, this capitalistic American dream as it relates to machines and leisure is represented in Paul's home, which juxtaposes automated luxuries with a rustic, old-fashioned aesthetic. The living room is designed by his wife Anita to look more like a cottage than a suburban home with its "rough-hewn rafters", and walls that are "wainscoted in pine" and "aged by sandblasting". The living room is filled with old-fashioned items, such as "a huge fireplace and Dutch oven", "a long muzzle-loading rifle, powder horn, and bullet pouch", "candle molds, a coffee mill, an iron and trivet", and "a wooden butter churn" (110). None of these items are used by neither Anita nor Paul, so they are only there to create a certain kind of aesthetic. It is precisely this aesthetic that Paul wants to recreate in reality, so the only escape he sees in his situation, being alienated from his affluent environment, is an escape to the countryside.   Borrowing from the survival novels he reads, Paul finds escape in the idea of nature and cultivates an idealized fantasy of surviving off the land and living a simple life. At home, in their comfortable, automatized lives, Paul's relationship with Anita is estranged, their communication deteriorating in both quality and quantity, but Paul imagines life in nature to be able to fix this, as well, as he daydreams in his living room in front of a colonial tableau they have hanging on the wall: "[He] imagined that he and Anita had pushed this far into the upstate wilderness, with the nearest neighbor twenty-eight miles away. She was making soap, candles, and thick wool clothes for a hard winter ahead, and he, if they weren't to starve, had to mold bullets and go shoot a bear" (110-1). Paul's image of a paradise in wilderness is simplistic and overtly masculine, something taken straight out of the novels he reads, which consist of masculine heroes surviving in the wilderness with nothing but their "basic cunning and physical strength for survival" (137), novels that have a "broad, naked chest of the hero on the book jacket" (138). Another comparison to novels, although more classically pastoral ones,

comes from Paul's friend Finnerty, who often acts as both the reader's critical viewpoint and an expression of Paul's inner wants and needs throughout the novel. Paul's *Walden*-inspired pastoral epiphany can be linked to an earlier conversation the two men have about moral convictions, during which Finnerty says: "You're afraid to live, Paul. That's what's the matter with you. You know about Thoreau and Emerson?" (143). The context for mentioning Thoreau is him being incarcerated for not supporting the Mexican War, as Finnerty implies that Paul should be equally willing to risk everything for what he believes in. Although it is not made explicit, the comparison occurring only moments before Paul's idea to move to a farm is telling of his impressionable and hasty motivations, as he understands the conversation about Thoreau's political convictions as a literal suggestion to live in the wilderness in the style of *Walden*. Paul further misunderstands the messages of Finnerty's words, the survival novels he reads, and even the content of his own fantasies, by being unable to differentiate between what kind of nature he wants to escape to; Paul's dreams seem to be centered around a masculine urge of surviving in the wilderness, but he simultaneously dreams of a more classically pastoral ideal of the countryside and leisure.

Many pastoral texts, then, share these fantasies of escaping society into the countryside or wilderness, but the parodical aspect of Paul's fantasy comes from the disconnect between his idealized life on a farm and the reality of his experience. Firstly, Paul ends up buying his ideal country house at an auction for next to nothing, while the real estate agent almost begs him not to: "If you try to force me to sell it, I'll quit. … My classification number may be twice what yours is, but I have a certain amount of integrity" (151). The groundskeeper, Mr. Haycox, anxious about sharing his estate with anyone else, exemplifies Paul's delusions best when he says, after Paul expresses his inability to fix the pump: "[M]aybe if you'd of gone to college another ten or twenty years, somebody would of gotten around to showing you how, *Doctor*" (157). The character of the groundskeeper also represents an actual working-class farmer, in stark opposition to Paul, manager of a large, automatized factory,

disconnected from the rural lifestyle. In fact, Paul quickly learns the obvious fact that he has no idea how to run a farm and even that running it takes hard work in the first place, thus shattering his utopian, pastoral illusions before they can begin. Moreover, the opposition between the groundskeeper and Paul is typical of Paul's continued and established inability to connect with working class people, namely the Reeks and the Wrecks. This fantasy of living a simple life and surviving off his own labor is also darkly humorous in the context of the Reeks and Wrecks, for whom hard work and poor conditions are everyday facts of life, as they do not have the luxury of fantasizing about leisurely life in the country.

Paul's wilderness and pastoral fantasies can be read as a satire of his alienated existence working in a job he finds no purpose and satisfaction in, focusing all of his energy into being a manager and nothing else. Only in the context of his fantasies is he able to express happiness for his wife's companionship, for instance: "Concentrating hard on the illusion, Paul was able to muster a feeling of positive gratitude for Anita's presence, to thank God for a woman at his side to help with the petrifying amount of work involved in merely surviving" (110-1). In his fantasy, where survival and living life on his own terms are the only things that matter, he is able to feel less alienated from his wife, as well, which comes directly in accordance with feeling needed, having the purpose of a provider for his family. However, Paul's fantasy also ends up clashing with the reality of Anita's wants, as he attempts to impose this drastic life change on her without actually asking her whether she wants to completely abandon their comfortable life or not. He thus fails miserably in becoming the novelistic hero of his imagination: "[H]e would mold more bullets, and she would make more candles and soap from the bear fat, until late at night, when Paul and Anita would tumble down together on a bundle of straw in the corner, dog-tired and sweaty, make love, and sleep hard until the brittle-cold dawn" (111). The pastoral image of sexuality often consists of innocence, freedom, and lawful human desires, free of consequence, responsibility, and societal constraints (Hess 74). Paul's pastoral sexual fantasy is parodied here by having it, too, fail miserably; The things that excite Anita, implicitly also in a sexual

way, are Paul's promotion and preparations for Meadows, a.k.a. his corporate success and her part in it.

Paul's entire pastoral narrative fails, then, because he assumes that he can make Anita abandon *her* American dream with its capitalist undertones for his escapist fantasies. In pastoral works, the countryside often works as a refuge from the stresses of city life, or, in this case, the forces of late capitalism. Hess notes that, although the pastoral is about a return to nature, it has never called for hard work or earning one's living in said nature, instead imagining a perfect paradise of leisure (73). The novel, then, satirizes these pastoral concepts by pointing out the realistic aspects of rural life for someone like Paul, who has never been connected to either nature or earning the products of his own physical labor. Vonnegut thus establishes that there is simply no escape from alienation for Paul in the countryside because his world does not work that way; the system will not let him quit, his wife is too comfortable with the modern luxuries his work provides, and life on a farm would simply be unsustainable. The American dream as it stands in the postmodern, capitalist context, will necessarily get in the way.

Accepting inequality and consumer capitalism with afternoon television

The third and final genre parodied in *Player Piano* is afternoon television, or educational programming for children and teenagers. After becoming unemployed, Paul sits around his now empty home consuming daytime television, and a program, clearly meant for young teenagers, starts to play. The message of the program, which is that having a high IQ will not make one happy, parodies the popular sentiment of "money cannot buy happiness". This ideology is often used to convey that one can still be miserable while rich, and that the most important things in life are things that money cannot buy. However, the underlying sentiment can effectively be used to shift attention from the fact that a small amount of people own a huge percentage of wealth while many others are forced to live below the

poverty line. Money does, in fact, buy happiness in the sense that it buys food, housing, healthcare, and security. In *Player Piano*, money as an indicator of societal superiority has been replaced by intelligence and IQ, but the percentages are divided along the same lines; one percent of people have a high IQ, and the rest live on the other side of the bridge. In this system, IQ also buys happiness in terms of work, better living situations, and an overall sense of meaning and accomplishment. Thus, this ideology that money is not everything is often forced upon people who do not have money, or intelligence in this case. It perpetuates the notion that wealthy (or smart) people deserve their significant wealth and that they have worked hard for it, and this notion is softened with the idea that they often lack a lot of things that less fortunate people have, such as meaningful relationships or free time. The program is used to convey alienation in the novel by criticizing ideologies around income inequality, consumer capitalism, and in part, automation, and the fact that this messaging comes in the form of a television program is purposeful.

Television rose to popularity in the middle-class American home around the same time as the emergence of postmodernism and late capitalism, so the connection is made here between the television programming in *Player Piano* and the pervasive ideologies of capitalism and inequality. In 1950s postwar America, discourses around television were centered around the reconstruction of family life and domestic values. The cultural and social climate of the decade made the introduction of television correlate to the possibility of forming a family and living in a suburban home. Televisions were advertised in magazines and on the radio as a way to bring the family together around a common activity, in accordance with depictions of postwar family values (Spigel 2, 39). However, other discourse of the time suggested that not only was television meant to restore notions of family togetherness and promote advancement in technology in the postwar era, it also "renewed faith in the splendors of consumer capitalism" (ibid. 3). The number of television sets in American family homes rose from 6,000 in 1946 to around twelve million by 1951, and by 1955, half of all homes had one

(Ackerman 285). Television is a ubiquitous presence throughout *Player Piano*, as it relates to free time caused by automatized home appliances, and it is thus often brought up in relation to Anita and her position as a housewife. Anita is often purposefully placed in front of the TV, alone and ignoring everything around her, a depiction far from the ideal family values promoted during this time:

> The doors of the corner cabinet were open, revealing a television screen, which Anita watched intently. A doctor was telling an old lady that her grandson would probably be paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of his life. … Anita motioned for [Paul] to be silent, and wait until the program was over, which meant the commercial too. (111)

Here, television is not a family activity at all, but is instead used exclusively to represent the couple's distance from one another, along with the pervasiveness and influence of advertising on Anita, who is generally portrayed as the perfect consumer with her materialistic tendencies.

One of the reasons for television's ubiquity at the start had been its "ability to hold a child's attention", which eventually led the television industry to treat children's programming as another lucrative income source (Ackerman 285). Educational television was made more prominent in the United States in the early 1950s after parental concerns about the effects of violent programming on children, with the idea that overly stimulating programs were corruptive to impressionable youth. Efforts on the parents' behalf were concentrated on providing children with more wholesome and educational content, instead of programs that were viewed to be made only for profit. It was mostly middle-class people who were concerned about their children's media consumption, and the point of concern was mostly moral norms, as well as what respectable cultural and social values were important for children to internalize (Spigel 54-6). *Player Piano* describes one of these educational programs, whose message is clearly meant for teenagers and whose values seem to be angled toward lower-class consumers, although it is presumably created and written by some of the managers or engineers. The

program follows the conventions of an *after school special*, although that specific term had not been coined at the time of the novel's release. It is, in short, a program which deals with different societal topics and is aimed at children and teenagers in an educational capacity, called an *afternoon drama* in the novel. The program follows a mother and her son, who is heartbroken due to his peers at school bullying him for his family's low IQ scores. The program is very short and structurally simple, and the son's problem can be solved with a simple conversation and a few clichés, as the mother says: "Jimmy, boy, son – I.Q. won't get you happiness, and St. Peter don't give I.Q. tests before he lets you in those Pearly Gates. The wickedest people that ever lived was the smartest". The son soon acquiesces with: "You mean – a plain fellow like me, just another guy, folks like us, Ma, you mean we're as good as, as, as, well, Doctor Garson, the Works Manager?" (261). The excessive repetition of vocatives ("Jimmy", "boy", "son"…) and synonymous phrases ("a plain fellow like me", "just another guy", "folks like us"…), is an exaggerated attempt at folksy, idiolectal speech, emphasizing both the fictional family's intended class status and their family relationships, along with their marked, colloquial vocabulary and syntax. A Works Manager is purposefully brought in as an example, as his education and status are something that the son clearly holds in high regard. It is, then, implied in this program that it is common in the minds of children to learn to respect and admire managers and engineers, and worry about not being as intelligent as them. These worries are squashed, however, with the importance of family and accepting one's circumstances, and the show ends with the son completely accepting that his family is adequate, even with their low I.Q: "In came the organ music, the announcer, and the washless, rinseless wash powder" (261). It is easy to imagine a stereotype of this kind of program, in which a child is being bullied at school for his family being poor, only to be assured by his mother in a series of lighthearted clichés about the power of family and love, in a simple format and the announcer summing up the message before commercial break.

    Player Piano effectively satirizes the way in which television programming perpetuates

capitalist and consumerist values. The novel does so by replacing "money" with "intelligence" in a parody of the philosophy "money cannot buy happiness". This philosophy is framed as an ideological and attitude problem rather than a societal one. Issues such as access to education, unfair and irregular IQ testing, and lack of job opportunities are not discussed in the program, which instead focuses on changing teenagers' attitudes about their status in the world and accepting their scarce opportunities. Intelligence, here, has directly replaced money as a means of opportunity and indication of class. Income inequality was at one of the lowest points in US history during the postwar decade (Kelly 9), but it was only low by historical standards, in comparison to both the Great Depression and the 1970s onward, often also discussed from the viewpoint of the rising middle classes. This parody, then, comments on wealth disparity, but also the loss of employment from automation thematic in the novel. The family in this program needs to metaphorically accept that getting meaningful employment will be impossible, and instead cherish their circumstances. These kinds of messages being broadcast on television are, on the surface, about family values and positivity, but the underlying message remains that unequal circumstances and societal problems should be accepted as natural and as fact, especially when they are made for children. The irony lies in the fact that Paul, being unemployed and thus having extra time to watch afternoon television, is one of these people with a high IQ that are portrayed by the program as wealthy yet unhappy. The program is not made for him in mind, and he cannot relate to the virtues of being part of an average family, but having lost his job, he is nonetheless able to see what it would be like. What the inclusion of this program represents for Paul, then, is the gap between him and the average worker getting smaller, of being one step closer to understanding the common source of both his and the fictional family's alienation.

4. Cosmic Irony and Political Satire in *Jailbird*

Jailbird is essentially a novel about fate and how it affects those who are forced to follow it. The protagonist, Walter Starbuck, narrates the first twenty-four hours of his freedom after being sent to prison for his unwitting and ignorant involvement in the Watergate scandal under the Nixon administration. Throughout the novel, he recounts his past as a "Harvard man", a former communist, and a proud government employee, and recalls the betrayal of a friend that set off the events that made him end up in prison. The events leading up to this betrayal, however, have a much longer history, as the novel creates a butterfly effect of one thing leading to another throughout Walter's entire life. It becomes clear that the major events in his life have all been decided by cosmic irony. He has his beginnings in an affluent background, which leads to dreams of working in a meaningful position for the government, and further leads to a rebellion against these dreams by joining communist groups in university. He ends up into a government position despite this, but, in the end, has his past communist affiliations destroy his career and the relationship with his family. With this theme of communism versus government, the novel comments on the influences of capitalism, patriotism, and anticommunism in the mid-century, as well as satirizes the nature of government employment and the hypocrisy of corporations, in order to represent a sense of cosmic irony, the idea that that everything has already been decided for any one individual by outside forces.

In order to create a sense of cosmic irony, *Jailbird'*s narration blends the past and the present using satirical humor to comment on everything from anticommunism and the corrupting nature of wealth to corporations and political scandals. Furthermore, the satirical humor comments on Walter's passivity and apathy in the midst of losing his career and his family, which manifests as a sense of alienation from his own reality and almost as an inability to view other people as real – the people in Walter's life are often ironic characters, mere manifestations and representations of concepts. In his

narration, every aspect of Walter Starbuck's life in both present day and the past is cloaked in humor and irony. R. B. Gill notes that after the Second World War, comedy has generally been full of "bleak absurdities and shocking incongruities of modern life" because alienation has, in the postmodern world, become "an accepted fact rather than a new fashion". Vonnegut's comedy, then, often deals with a sense of "unillusioned realism", and *Jailbird,* like many of his other works, use dark humor to deal with the "bleakness of life" (77-8). Walter gets himself into most situations, even life-altering ones, inadvertently, which is darkly humorous, as it is due to a fate he cannot avoid. The narration being focused on either unreliable storytelling through memory or present occurrences being depicted through humor and absurdity emphasizes Walter's alienation from himself, his work, and his family, as he reminisces on his youthful ambitions and disappointing career.

Narrating alienating cosmic irony in the past and present

Irony can be used as an umbrella term for many different phenomena, but perhaps its most common definition is linguistic, referring to a rhetoric which includes a "fundamental duality, such as incompatibility or opposition" and that is often used alongside satire to simply convey the opposite of what is said (Dynel 89). According to Claire Colebrook, the definition of irony can cover phenomena from these ironic figures of speech to entire historical epochs. For instance, irony can represent the "huge problems of postmodernity", in that "our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says". In the period of postmodernity, then, irony conveys the sense that everything original or valuable has been somehow lost (1-3). This "postmodern cynicism", Colebrook further writes, "is at once a feature of capitalism and, in theories of postmodern irony, often presented as disruptive of capitalism" **(**152). The value of seeing postmodernism as an ironic time in history may well be the willingness to abandon previous "grand claims about truth and foundations, claims that

have allowed the West to think of itself as a privileged home of reason". In the words of Richard Rorty, postmodernity no longer allows space for truth, ground, or foundations, so irony allows for a distinction between the private and public spheres, instead; publicly, people can commit themselves to the language of shared values, whatever they may be, whereas privately, they may know these values to be "contingent and context dependent", thus allowing them to retain a sense of private irony about the world (ibid. 155-6).

Jailbird finds irony in similarly public, shared ideals, such as overt patriotism, American democratic capitalism, and government service. In the context of the novel, irony is used in the sense of cosmic irony, also called irony of fate, which manifests itself in the use of satirical humor. Cosmic irony is a term used to mean a fate that cannot be changed by an individual, a sense that something is premeditated from the beginning, and every action and event committed by an individual is leading to an outcome purposefully decided by outside forces, were it God or some other cosmic force. The cosmic force present in *Jailbird* is, again, capitalism. Colebrook characterizes cosmic irony as "an irony of situation, or an irony of existence; it is as though human life and its understanding of the world is undercut by some other meaning or design beyond our powers". Related to this notion is the uniquely literary concept of dramatic or tragic irony, in which the character does not know what will happen to them, but the reader often does (14). It is possible to outline a clear timeline and inception for Walter's ironic fate. Firstly, the cosmic irony in *Jailbird* is strongly connected to the source of Walter's money and educational opportunities, connecting it and him to the forces of capitalism from the beginning. Walter does not come from a wealthy family himself, but he has always acted with the advice and the money of a wealthy family friend, who is responsible, for example, for getting him into Harvard. In fact, it is as if the entire course of his life were determined by knowing this man; getting into a prestigious university, adopting the idea that his life goal is to work in government doing something important, joining communist groups in university, getting a job in the department of agriculture after

graduation, and finally unwittingly confessing to his friend's past communist affiliations, effectively

ruining both of their lives. This confession also ultimately leads him to his second government job,

which, in turn, leads him to be an unwitting part of Watergate. Walter comments on his fate throughout

the novel, mostly by lamenting on his Harvard education:

> When I went to work for the government as a bright young man in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's
>
> Department of Agriculture, more and more posts were being filled by Harvard men. That seemed only
>
> right to me back then. It seems mildly comical to me now. Not even in prison, as I say, is there anything
>
> special about Harvard men. (6)

This quote makes a direct correlation in Walter's mind with a Harvard education and ending up in

prison, commenting on both his own ironic fate and satirizing the importance he once found in the idea

of government service: "It was my plan when I entered Harvard to become a public servant, an

employee rather than an elected official. I believed that there could be no higher calling in a democracy

than to a lifetime in government" (4-5). Satire and cosmic irony are linked in this way in the novel's

narration because Walter seems consistently aware that his life has always been dictated by fate, and

equally aware that the satire is aimed at him. Harvard, then, and the ideologies borne from it, is a

central figure in the narration of the comical cosmic irony of Walter's life.

The cosmic irony leading up to these events is conveyed most clearly in two chapters, one set in

1931 and one in 1977, which are related to one another through their blending of past and present, as

well as their use of satirical humor. It is significant that most of Walter's narration throughout the novel

is concentrated on his unreliable and sporadic retelling of the past, as if he is narrating his own cosmic

fate, knowing what will happen as a result of every past decision but unable to change the actions of his

former self. It is significant because the retelling of the past requires finding some meaning in it that

could not be found in the past itself; the past "always means more than it explicitly says" (Colebrook 3-

4), so finding a proper retelling of one's past requires a sense of irony. The novel thus creates a sense of dramatic irony from Walter's life, by inserting the protagonist in a position where he is narrating his own story and satirically commenting on aspects of his own past he can only truly understand in hindsight.

The first of these two chapters takes place in the middle of Walter's years in university, as he chooses to narrate a date from almost fifty years ago. The chapter mixes the past and present by showing Walter as the ambitious young man he used to be, ready to step into important government service, while the present, older version of himself inserts often quite sarcastic notes into the memory. This chapter is thus filled with anecdotes and facts he has learned later in life, which he is only able to connect to the date at the time of narration. This emphasizes the naivete of Walter's youth, the absurdity of the actions of his younger self, as well as a sense of irony that can only be realized after the moment is gone. The date takes place in an expensive hotel restaurant, and the environment and inclusion of stereotypical wealthy customers touches on themes of economic inequality, absurd wealth, and Walter's later affiliation with communism. Firstly, Walter seems to remember the restaurant and its patrons as exaggerated stereotypes of wealth and affluence. As he steps through the French doors with his date, he characterizes the experience as if they had stepped through the "twinkling prisms of a time machine", as the room was filled with "a thousand candles in the chandeliers and tables", which resembled "billions of tiny stars" (104). There is thus immediately a sense of exaggeration in the form of the growing numbers and the description of a room full of shining stars. The other wealthy patrons include a woman and her dog, who are both described wearing diamond necklaces, and a man hunkering over his table hiding the fact that he is eating caviar, as if ashamed he can still afford it during the Depression (106). There is, however, an air of detachment from this expensive and affluent lifestyle, as the date, Sarah, thinks her and Walter are "costumed like millionaires in the spirit of Halloween" and like "people in a movie" (103). Walter also notes that the mirrors on the doors show

"yet again how childish and rich we were" (ibid), making this entire scene feel like children playing

dress-up instead of two people going to dinner. The narration of Walter's memory is thus satirizing

both the absurd wealth of the other patrons and of Walter himself during this time in history. The image

of a dog wearing a diamond necklace is the joke that gives away this exaggeration and renders the

memory unreliable, also making the satire of extreme wealth and gross income inequality explicit.

Furthermore, the older Walter goes on to mentally connect the memory of the other patrons eating to

"pictures by George Grosz of corrupt plutocrats amidst the misery of Germany after World War One"

(106), commenting that he had not yet seen these pictures as a young man. By stating that he was

unaware of these pictures in 1931, what is conveyed is the ignorance and naivete of his younger self,

the past inability to view this date or these patrons through the lens of economic inequality. Similarly,

he connects the violinist playing in the restaurant with an awful violent image of how "Hitler, not yet in

power, would soon cause to be killed every Gypsy his soldiers and policemen could catch" (104). The

narrative decision to view this date through an unreliable, satirized memory with later historical

additions works to convey Walter's belief that everything in his life has been decided from the

beginning, that he has been consistently unaware of the future directly in front of him, thus fated to stay

on the path chosen for him. It is further ironic in its own right that Sarah is far from impressed by

Walter's show of wealth, but they become friends nonetheless, and Walter ends up following in her

communist beliefs well throughout his university years and beyond. Thus, at the end of this memory,

he makes a note on the irony in the situation: "So I might have never become a communist, if

Alexander Hamilton McCone had not insisted that I take a pretty girl to the Arapahoe" (111). The name

of the wealthy family friend who started Walter on the path of cosmic irony makes an appearance here

as the opposite of communist values, but he has nonetheless influenced yet another chapter in Walter's

fate.

     Jailbird's narration alternates between these unreliable memories and Walter recounting his

first day as a free man. In the case of the latter, the narration is often realized through satirical humor and a series of comedic encounters. What is meant by this is that Walter and the characters and events in his life are depicted as so absurd and ridiculous that Walter can only narrate and describe them through the lens of comedy. In one instance of this, the past and the present collide in a coincidental scene, in which Walter meets both Leland Clewes, the man he has betrayed, and his old girlfriend, Mary Kathleen O'Looney, simultaneously on the streets of New York. The scene gradually turns into a chaotic comedic performance as the two people from his past proceed to react to his presence after many years while both the environment and the circumstances get more and more ridiculous. This scene connects the past and present with not only an impossibly coincidental meeting of two important people from the past, but also the recurring themes of capitalism and (anti)-communism, as the two characters are portrayed as representations of both. Multiple references are made to acting in this scene, as if all of this were merely a performance rather than a real meeting, which is also reminiscent to Walter's memory of his date with Sarah. The scene is laid out in a way that Walter is placed in the middle of Leland Clewes and Mary Kathleen, with both actors attempting to talk to him and draw him their way at the same time. Behind Leland, reminiscent of a chorus, are "religious fanatics… barefoot and dancing and chanting in saffron robes. Thus did he appear to be a leading man in a musical comedy. Nor was I without my own supporting cast. Willy-nilly, I had placed myself between a man wearing sandwich boards and a top hat, and a little old woman who had no home, who carried all her possessions in a shopping bag" (129). The image conjured by this setup is comical, placing Walter and Leland opposite each other on this exaggerated stereotypical image of a chaotic New York street, setting the scene as if the two were actors in a play. As he notices Walter, he does it via a comical overreaction, seemingly "making fun of our encounter after all these years, overacting his surprise and dismay like an actor in a silent movie" (130). Leland goes on to thank Walter and tell him, bizarrely, that his betrayal was in fact the best thing that has ever happened to him, all the while Mary Kathleen,

the woman with the large amount of shopping bags, continues to attempt to get his attention. While Mary Kathleen yells nonsense next to them, the two men have a comical back-and-forth, stylized in the novel as a repetitive dialogue:

> "We must get together soon," he said.
>
> "Yes," I said.
>
> "You'll be hearing from me soon," he said.
>
> "I hope so," I said.
>
> "Must rush," he said.
>
> "I understand," I said.
>
> "Take care," he said.
>
> "I will," I said. (139)

The polite, distanced, and casual nature of this conversation coupled up with the setting create a humorous and absurd encounter due to the long and traumatic past of these two men, made further absurd by referring to it as a musical comedy and to the two as actors. The repetition in this dialogue, both in terms of the empty responses like "I hope so" and "I understand" and the repetition of "he said, I said", creates a sense of musicality, but also quickness, reminiscent of slapstick or sketch comedy. What is conveyed in this conversation is, at first glance, mere pleasantries between acquaintances, but taking into consideration that this is a man whose career Walter has ruined and who has forgiven him for it, it can also be read in a more meaningful way, placing between the lines all the things they perhaps cannot say. This coincidental encounter on this street in 1977 is narrated through comedy precisely because of this traumatic past, because this meeting is, in a way, a culmination of Walter's cosmic fate; everything he has done and experienced has led him to both know these two people and to meet them at the right place and the right time. The sense of alienation, both from these two people and his present circumstances, turn Walter's narration into an absurd, satirical encounter.

Jailbird uses political satire to discuss the concepts and events that both Leland Clewes and Mary Kathleen represent to Walter. The betrayal mentioned in context with Leland Clewes refers to arrests made from the late 1940s onward, targeting former communists and members of the CPUSA. Phillip Deery writes that the American political climate was completely transformed after the Second World War, resulting from escalating fears about the global dominion of communism and rekindled hostility with the Soviet Union after the wartime alliance (4). Fears concerning communism further intensified in 1949, also the year of Leland Clewes' imprisonment in the novel, when attention was turned to the success of communism in Asia and the explosion of a Soviet atom bomb. These events in the east altered the American world view, and communism was such a central and fundamental ideology of the Cold War, that anticommunism in United States politics became "obsessive". The Truman administration, even before the advent of McCarthyism, began to initiate "a wide range of measures to demonstrate … commitment to meeting the communist menace", notably by finding and arresting Communist Party leaders in the United States (5). A great deal of fear and anxiety, then, was circulating among not only current CPUSA members, but previous ones. Walter destroys the government career of Leland Clewes by exposing him in as a former communist in a McCarthy hearing, but unwittingly, without knowing the weight of what he is saying and not really thinking of the information as a big deal. Walter is thus ignorant of the ramifications of his confession, so what the novel goes on to satirize is the reaction of everybody else compared to his. The depiction of the reaction of the American public to these arrests and to Walter's confession is obviously immense, due to the political climate fostering an overwhelming fear of communism and threats of espionage in government positions. The way people react to what Walter has done later in his life is satirized further by showcasing Walter's ignorance and mild apathy, as if he does not truly understand these anticommunist reactions claiming he has betrayed his friend. These reactions are thus exaggerated and

made absurd in his narration. In one instance, while still in prison, an inmate recounts how he had heard the betrayal on the radio as a child, to which Walter comments:

> I could not smile then at his description of what he thought he had heard, and I cannot smile at it now – but it was ludicrous all the same. It was an impossibly chowder-headed abridgement of congressional hearings and civil suits and finally a criminal trial, which were spread out over two years. As a little boy listening to the radio, he could only have heard a lot of tedious talk, not much more interesting than static. It was only as a grownup, with a set of ethics based on cowboy movies, that Larkin could have decided that he had heard with utmost clarity the betrayal of a man by his best friend. (43-4)

The reaction to Walter's hearing is thus not formed by objective or first-person accounts, but rather learned propaganda and conscious political fearmongering. The fear of communism and espionage was so great, and the influence of anticommunist thought so far reaching that people humorously claim to have understood the inherent wrongness of Walter's actions even as children. Walter's controversially apathetic attitude to the hearings and their content also becomes clear, as he comments that they were "not much more interesting than static".

Leland Clewes, then, represents and is used to satirize anticommunism and excessive patriotism, concepts which have partly dictated Walter's irony of fate. Returning to the street in 1977, Walter's alienation from these concepts continues to be portrayed with the satirical humor and comedy that borders on slapstick, as he begins to be dragged around New York, in turn, by Mary Kathleen. Unknown to Walter, his former girlfriend turned "shopping-bad lady" is secretly in charge of RAMJAC, a major corporation which is intermittently mentioned as owning almost every company Walter comes in contact with throughout the novel. The way in which Walter starts to follow Mary Kathleen for seemingly no reason speaks for the present absurdity of his life, alongside the comical descriptions and physical humor in the narration: "I picked up three of her bags, and she picked up the

other three… we had to get the crowd to part for us, and she began to call people in our way 'capitalist fats' and 'bloated plutocrats' and 'bloodsuckers' and all that again" (144). Her actions and her disposition are ironic, because she herself is the owner of a major corporation, attempting to buy out smaller companies and make them obsolete; she is the exact same kind of "bloodsucker" who she is yelling at on the street. The image of an extremely wealthy woman shuffling around New York pretending to be homeless, carrying around shopping bags and shuffling around in her comically large shoes – not too large because she found them on the street or in the garbage, but because she is hiding important documents in them – is absurd:

> Her means of locomotion in her gargantuan basketball shoes was this: She barely lifted the shoes from the ground, shoving one forward and then the other, like cross-country skis, while her upper body and shopping bags swiveled wildly from side to side… We were surely the cynosure of all eyes. Nobody had ever seen a shopping-bag lady with an assistant before. (144)

Walter's narration of Mary Kathleen's movements is comical, making the walk through the streets seem sporadic and chaotic, with her shopping bags "swiveling wildly" while she "skis" through the streets in her shoes. It conjures up the image of Walter struggling to keep up with her while holding multiple bags, having suddenly become her "assistant" in this instance. Walter joins this mad expedition around New York for seemingly no other reason than the fact that there is nothing else to do, that all the decisions in his life have led him here, into this coincidental meeting of past acquaintances. At this point in his life, all his decisions, big or small, have been part of the butterfly effect leading him to the next significant event, so he must embrace it and let it happen – and it does. All the people Walter meets throughout the novel, including Leland Clewes, end up working for RAMJAC at the request of Mary Kathleen, whose goal is to hire people who have been kind to Walter.

Mary Kathleen, as noted above, is a similarly ironic character to Leland Clewes, in that she

represents capitalism and corporate America, while simultaneously complaining about the state of the capitalist world she has helped create. She speaks to Walter about the state of television, for example, saying: "How can you base a revolution on *Lawrence Welk* and *Sesame Street* and *All in the Family*?". "All these shows were sponsored by RAMJAC" (158), Walter immediately notes, pointing out the hypocrisy in her statement. Mary Kathleen continuously expresses her communist ideologies, having been to a number of labor protests with Walter in the past. In showcasing her extremely conflicting worldviews, the novel satirizes the ideologies of overtly "friendly" corporations with ecological and socially conscious messages, which nonetheless act in the exact opposite manner. Furthermore, the previously mentioned anti-communist fears and political actions during the Cold War also partly stemmed from ideals of American democratic capitalism and American exceptionalism. Laura Belmonte writes on US foreign policy in the mid-century that the country was convinced of the possibility to "spread its vision of democratic capitalism abroad without imperiling the standards of living and political liberties" (116). Democratic capitalism became the perfect alternative to combat communism during the Cold War and in the midst of the McCarthy hearings for alleged communists, and private and public individuals "crafted propaganda that claimed that the United States not only could but should lead the world to modernity, liberalism, democracy, and capitalism" (ibid). Linking capitalism to world peace and freedom by both promoting the way it makes lives better and, conversely, how communism makes them worse, this propaganda during the 1940s and 1950s further changed and defined American national identity, as well as defended the United States' strategies to fight communism in America and in other countries (117). The character of Mary Kathleen represents an odd mix of democratic capitalism and communism, in that she is a large part of the reason Walter joined communist groups and protests in the first place. Furthermore, she is currently the head of a large corporation, but she herself still believes in the "revolution", convincing Walter that she wants to divide all her wealth and control over her company among her employees, thus echoing their

previously shared communist ideologies of wealth re-distribution. The story of Mary Kathleen is also,

in that way, also full of cosmic irony; no matter what her ideologies are or have been, she is almost

forced to live by the forces of American capitalism, even with her futile attempt to change the nature of

corporations. As Walter notes in the novel's epilogue: "Most of these businesses, rigged only to make

profits, were as indifferent to the needs of the people as, say, thunderstorms… The economy is a

thoughtless weather system – and nothing more" (231). Thus, Walter decides to end his narration on

the same note on which he started – an alienated distance from the forces that have shaped his life.

Sarah, Leland, and Mary Kathleen act as representations of different concepts, instead of

portrayals of actual, in-depth personalities. Because Walter's narration either retells the past in an

unreliable way or narrates the present with this alienated, comedic distance, and because he is alienated

from both his past and his present, as well as everyone he comes into contact with, the narration of his

life is satirical and full of bitter humor. Viewing the two chapters that best exemplify the cosmic irony

of Walter's life, it is possible to note that the Great Depression and the income inequality of the 1930s,

as well as the political climate of the mid-century up to the late 1970s with forces of democratic

capitalism and McCarthyism, have both played major roles in orchestrating his inescapable fate.

5. Paddle Your Own Canoe: Dark Humor and Dystopia in *Slapstick*

Vonnegut's recurring philosophy of favoring "common courtesy" and community over more traditional expressions or feelings of love (Klinkowitz 82) takes a turn for the absurd and the grotesque in *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!,* as the protagonist narrates his life amidst the ruined and abandoned landscape of dystopian New York. Klinkowitz notes that the novel is about "community, citizenship, and above all a communal responsibility to group ideals" (7), as its protagonist attempts to create a world in which everyone is less lonely and to favor community and courtesy over individualism. *Slapstick* satirizes the postmodern, capitalist rendition of individualism with the transformation of a communal utopian ideal into an apocalyptic dystopia. The novel further satirizes this phenomenon by using comic exaggeration and dark humor, often finding comedy in absurd, grotesque, and taboo topics. In the prologue of *Slapstick*, Vonnegut describes the novel as follows: "I have called it 'Slapstick' because it is grotesque, situational poetry – like the slapstick film comedies, especially those of Laurel and Hardy, of long ago. It is about what life *feels* like to me" (1). Drawing on characteristics of slapstick comedy of the 1930s and 40s, the novel showcases the causes and culminations of the alienation of its protagonist in an absurd and humorous fashion. By portraying its protagonist as a man who believes strongly in communal values, working together, and helping one another, who then must face the crushing reality of an individualized society, *Slapstick* satirizes American individualism as it relates to late capitalism by turning the protagonist's utopian dream into a dystopian apocalypse. The novel thus showcases the alienating influences of a society focused on individual success by creating an exaggerated and absurd catastrophe caused by this very individualism. The role of satire in this novel is to ultimately criticize the protagonist's notion that the issues stemming from late capitalism are easy or even possible to solve in due to their systemic nature.

Apocalyptic dystopia and American individualism

Slapstick opens on a disorienting and perplexing description of the lobby of the Empire State Building on the "Island of Death*"*, the name the narrator has apparently given to New York City after it has been ruined by a climate disaster. The narration, consistent in its scarcity of clear and concise description, begins in the middle of this apocalypse, as the city has been long destroyed and the narrator, the "former President of the United States of America", stands in his "purple toga made from draperies found in the ruins of the Americana Hotel" (15). This is all that is found out about the narrator from the outset, as the novel describes the man and his surroundings in a familiar manner. The description of the man's environment is immediately metaphorical, making it feel overfamiliar as well: "The pavement on the floor of the jungle is all crinkum-crankum – heaved this way and that by the frost-heaves and roots" (ibid). The juxtaposition between jungle floor and pavement hints to an attempt for survival in nature that people have had to accomplish after the apocalypse, as they are later described to scavenge for food and resources among the ruins of buildings. This apocalyptic landscape, shortly explained to be caused by a disease called only "the Green Death", is the aftermath of the story rather than the beginning, and this scene is periodically returned to in the course of the novel in order to convey the futility of the protagonist's efforts to create a communal utopia in an individualistic society.

Slapstick tells a story of the protagonist's utopian dream that cannot be achieved in the society or time he lives in. To argue that living in postmodern times is comparable or equal to living in a dystopian narrative of the past would not be terribly controversial. This view is shared by Adam Stock, who argues that "we cannot now help but reach for dystopia as a hermeneutic tool to read twentieth-century history" (3). When people speak of living in "dystopian times", what is often meant is a comparison of contemporary sociopolitical events to the cultural narrative called "dystopia". Dystopian narratives are a type of political and politicized commentary, and they often help readers understand

political questions through a narrative framework, and due to their inherent societal engagement they can be brought up in arguments about societal and political issues in both the real world and the media (2). Dystopia as a literary genre is often conventional and easy to recognize, but difficult to succinctly define. Therefore, it is often conceptualized as a type of world-building instead of a fixed narrative fiction genre, and it is structured around historical and political events (5-6). Dystopian narratives owe their existence to the somewhat older phenomenon of utopian narratives, which have a background in colonial history. For example, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) was written in a time when British imperialism was just beginning, and utopian narratives of the colonial age often reflected the values of colonial projects but rarely considered their worst excesses. Utopian narratives, then, have an aspect of "social dreaming", a desire for a better world, while simultaneously critiquing the conditions of the current one (Stock 9). Dystopian fiction simultaneously developed as a form of political and social critique, and it has its origins in a post-Enlightenment tradition prevalent in the social and political thought in the Victorian era. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fiction was widely used to critique social and political relations, and the rise of the novel occurred during the simultaneous growth of Enlightenment thought, but with the help of the new form of the dystopian novel, authors could then critique some of the conditions of the very post-Enlightenment tradition from which they emerged (ibid. 8). Dystopian narratives emerging at the turn of the twentieth century owe much to the utopian works preceding them, but the main difference between the two is their overall message; what characterizes dystopian works is not the "easily comprehensible utopian didactic message" that dreams of a better world, but instead "the impossibility of textual resolution" (ibid. 10). Dystopias have a much grimmer outlook on the possibility of change and the betterment of society. Dystopian fiction in the twentieth century, then, focuses much on the "growing alienation of an individual protagonist or small group of individuals who begin to rebel against prevailing conditions" (ibid. 7), often without a clear resolution in mind.

Slapstick and its post-apocalyptic environment follow these characteristics of twentieth-century dystopian writing, as it deals with an ideal of a utopian society, which then collapses due to the sheer impossibility to achieve it. The goal of the protagonist, largely due to his personal childhood trauma, is to build a society in which nobody needs to be lonely anymore, and he plans to achieve this as the President of the United States by dividing the entire population into artificial extended families, in which everyone with the same government issued middle name will become related. He comes up with this utopian scheme as a child with his sister, which already hints to his dream as naïve and childlike:

> Eliza and I, thinking as halves of a single genius, proposed that the Constitution be amended so as to guarantee that every citizen, no matter how humble or crazy or incompetent or deformed, somehow be given membership in some family as covertly xenophobic and crafty as the one their public servants formed. (38)

Wilbur mentions public servants here in a discussion about the "extended families" that already exist, namely ones into which people categorize themselves based on nationality, profession, or any other identity. These families based on profession or nationality exclude people from other groups, because they have similar goals and their view is that other extended families work against them. Wilbur is extremely invested in fostering a sense of community and togetherness, but the novel consistently frames his values as somewhat simple and as missing the point, even though extended families of a sort already exist, but only in an exclusionary sense. What this satirical message may suppose is that the cultivation of different communities is acceptable only if the community is actively achieving something on a grand scale, but communities based on simply helping one another, communities centered around togetherness and respect, are unacceptable in a society focused on individual success.

As stated above, *Slapstick* uses its dystopian landscape to criticize and satirize individualism, particularly how it relates to late capitalism and the culture of succeeding by oneself, without

community or support from others. Tally notes that postmodernism and postmodern writing is often

characterized by "the subversion of time by space", and a profound sense of spatiality. In postmodern

fiction, characters must figure out their place in the "ever-more-complex network of interrelations",

instead of figuring out their place in history or through memory (5). The environment of *Slapstick* is

dystopian in a postmodern sense, as it creates a landscape in which characters consistently experience a

sense of being lost or out of place, without a clear sense of home or a place to go (ibid), by way of its

self-referential and self-aware narration. Postmodern dystopian environments, then, can be used to

satirize aspects of the postmodern condition, as well as characteristics of late capitalist society, as

characters are depicted having no clear goals or ideas of what to do, their former ideals having been

shut down by their environment. In this way, dystopian fiction can easily be deemed satirical by nature,

and major works that include heavily dystopian themes, such as *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen

Eighty-Four* (1949) construct their fictionalized dystopias in order to satirize the societies of their time

(Booker 99). Dystopian narratives from the twentieth century onward often deal with climate

catastrophes, the apocalypse, and other ecological disasters caused by humans and human technology,

which can be understood as a reaction against earlier Enlightenment beliefs of science and technology

as tools for creating a better future for humankind. Modern dystopian narratives can, then, be

considered as mainly being critical of the Anthropocene, which is the period characterized by the

harmful effect of humans on the planet, such as global warming (Isomaa et al. xv).

Slapstick satirizes the impact of technology and human inventions by making frequent

references to exaggeratedly advanced Chinese technology, which turns human beings extremely small

in order to conserve food and natural resources. There is a juxtaposition here between cultural ideals of

individualism and community between the two nations, but what is also referenced is the fraught

relationship between the United States and China in general, especially as it relates to new technology

and progress. These Chinese advancements are periodically mentioned by Wilbur himself and by his

parents: "It seemed that scientists in the People's Republic of China were experimenting with making human beings smaller, so they would not need to eat so much and wear such big clothes… Only a month before, [China] had sent two hundred explorers to Mars – without using a space vehicle of any kind" (45). Both of these inventions are obviously absurd and impossible to achieve, which works to exaggerate the supposed superiority of China over the United States from the beginning. The relationship between the two nations here can be boiled down to a difference in the values of community and individualism; the reason cited for making people smaller is the good of the community and the environment, so "they would not need to eat so much and wear such big clothes", saving enough resources for everyone. The American characters in this novel do not seem to understand that, though, only voicing resentment and competition: "Mother said that it seemed like such a long time since Americans had discovered anything. 'All of a sudden,' she said, 'everything is being discovered by the Chinese'" (46). The reason for consistently satirizing this competition between nations and China's exaggeratedly advanced technology is that it is precisely this Chinese technology that causes the climate apocalypse and the pandemic of the Green Death. The disease leading to the ruined New York described in the beginning of the novel was "caused by microscopic Chinese, who were peace-loving and meant no one any harm. They were nonetheless invariably fatal to normal-sized human beings when inhaled or ingested" (164). Essentially, what the novel is positing, is that even with the communal experience of the new extended families, America could not fight this new disease because they are "selfishly" still too large, wasting resources and inhaling tiny people due to their size. What is satirized with this technology essentially ending the world is the selfishness of an individualized society, unable to work together and help one another, which directly leads to a dystopian environment. Wilbur Swain is the only person optimistic about the ability of Americans to help one another and band together before the apocalypse, but all he receives are consistent complaints from people who do not want to lend a helping hand to a stranger only because they are now family.

In apocalyptic or climate disaster dystopias, the "bad society" or the dystopian premise depicted in them is often created to *cope* with apocalyptic events. This also pertains to other societal or political events that would be too difficult to survive without attempting to turn the dystopia into a utopia (Isomaa et al. xviii). In *Slapstick*, Wilbur Swain does not cause the apocalyptic fall of the United States or the Green Death, but he does create a utopian society to combat against the loneliness caused by American individualism stemming from late capitalism. Wilbur creates his utopia because he genuinely believes the system will make people happy and the concept of loneliness disappear. He thus continuously exhibits ignorance to the problems of the world before the apocalyptic events:

> 'Gravity hadn't yet turned mean,' I said. 'The sky had not yet turned from blue to yellow, never to be blue again. The planet's natural resources had yet to come to an end. The country had not yet been depopulated by Albanian flu and the Green Death'.
>
> 'Your grandfather had a nice little car and a nice little house and a nice little practice and a nice little wife and a nice little child,' I said to the King. 'And yet he used to *mope* so!' (33)

Speaking to the "King of Michigan" about a man named Dr. Mott, it is clear that Wilbur did not and does not perceive any large issues in the society of the past, excluding the personal loneliness that made him create his artificial extended families. The issues he lists are all completely apocalyptic, and the pros in the earlier life of Dr. Mott are all mundane things. Wilbur's notion here, then, is that if everything is not completely apocalyptically horrible, there is no reason to be unhappy, as long as there is community and family. This ignorance of the fact that many issues are systemic, as well as ignorance of issues on a larger societal scale, are precisely what leads to the creation of his overly simple utopian system, where no American needs to be lonely anymore. However, the issue which he perceives as simple loneliness and a lack of human connection stems from a much larger, systemic issue. This deep alienation he feels and perceives in others is a product of individualism under late capitalism – it is not

an isolated issue that can be fixed by his utopian dreams.

The growing societal individualism during modernity and postmodernity is closely related to late capitalism and the "rise and fall of labor", explains Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman argues that individualism has become the new norm during these two periods partly due to the dissolution of labor into short term work contracts and growing uncertainty in the job market. The period when a worker would unequivocally stay in the same position for decades is over, and some workers have thus come to be viewed as more expendable than others, leaving everyone to fight for their individual success in the job market. This uncertainty is "an individualizing force", Bauman writes, one that "divides instead of uniting". It further leads to a "disengagement" between capital and labor, where they had before been united and dependent on one another. Furthermore, the fact that some workers can be more easily replaced than others has led to major social stratification and inequality (17-28). Many aspects of contemporary life, in fact, are characterized by a constant uncertainty that manifests in the loss of community and communal interests. This uncertainty leads to profound psychological effects, as only a certain percentage of people can be sure of their continued survival in the individualized job market (ibid. 85-6). The other safety nets besides job security, those provided by family or community, "have also fallen apart, or have been considerably weakened". To expand on this, Bauman notes the "changing pragmatics of interpersonal relations, now permeated by consumerism" as well as that "the presence and resilience of teams and collectivities become to an ever greater extend market-dependent, and so duly reflect the capriciousness and unpredictability of the marketplace" (86). *Slapstick* deals with precisely this type of dissolution of communities and personal relationships, in a society that favors individual success, self-reliance, and resilience instead. This individualist thought is ingrained in Wilbur's mind from his childhood, and is dealt with dark humor and exaggerated circumstances throughout the novel.

"The low comedy of living": dark humor and comedic exaggeration

Satirical dystopian narratives deal with the fall of society, the delusion of building utopias, and, ultimately, despair in the face of everyday absurdity. These narratives are, then, often created by using dark humor and exaggeration. On dark humor and the satiric grotesque in the modern age, John R. Clark writes that "contemporary man as presented in modern literature is caught in a dilemma, facing the paralytic horror that some dread cataclysm awaits him together with the equally shattering fear that nothing whatsoever will happen" (7). The climate of the twentieth century, then, is apt for satiric literature about the contemporary human condition of lost hope, and it stems from "decadent romanticism and excessive expectations about a grand individualist self, ideals of progress gone awry, and ruinous revolutions and world war" (ibid. 7;9). This individualism, a romantic ideal of the "performing self", has created a lasting impact on society, one which is different from the "communal and mythic past". The historic events of the twentieth century, mainly the two world wars, have led to the "demise of the idea of progress itself", progress having been replaced by a hopelessness and aimlessness, as wars and revolutions create a numbing effect on the population. This historical and societal landscape is, then, apt for dystopian literature grounded in satirical dark humor, as Clark notes that the "masterworks of the century" share themes of violence and grotesquery. Furthermore, these modern narratives of satirical decline and societal collapse offer no opportunity for growth or recantation (11-4). Clark refers in this work to the condition of the *modern* society at the start of the twentieth century, but it can be argued that this condition becomes even more exacerbated in the era of postmodernism and late capitalism, which can be seen as the defining forces that drive exaggerated individualism and the meaningless protest against it in *Slapstick*.

True to its title, *Slapstick* continuously employs comic exaggeration and dark humor to satirize capitalist individualism and late capitalist society as a whole, as well as the dystopian situation that

ensues. The novel's humor is often found in disturbing, grotesque, and taboo topics, and characters and behaviors are exaggerated to the point of caricature. The ruined landscape of New York, for instance, is dealt with in a comedic manner, with the effects and characteristics of this dystopian world largely exaggerated and made absurd. One of these characteristics is unstable and changing gravity:

> Six days have passed since I began to write this memoir. On four of the days, the gravity was medium – what it used to be in olden times. It was so heavy yesterday, that I could hardly get out of bed, out of my nest of rags in the lobby of the Empire State Building. When I had to go to the elevator shaft we use for a toilet, making my way through the thicket of candlesticks I own, I crawled on all fours. (56)

This excerpt from Wilbur's memoir includes multiple characteristics of this apocalyptic landscape and how people live in it. Firstly, the instability of gravity is, in itself, a quite exaggerated characteristic of a climate apocalypse, and no one can be sure whether it is actually caused by natural causes or some other invention by China. This introduction of unstable gravity having almost literally turned the world upside down also speaks for the unstable and constantly changing sociopolitical landscape, as people have finally congregated to their extended families in order to survive the apocalypse – the individualist ideology of the past that has caused this apocalypse is over, and only communities remain, albeit not by people's choice. The speculation that these gravity changes are caused by another Chinese invention maintains the ideology that the competing nation and its impossibly advanced technology are the cause of this dystopian world. More absurd characteristics of the apocalypse that Wilbur notes in his journal include the fact that he sleeps in a "nest of rags" in a ruined building, he and the people he lives with use the elevator shaft as a toilet, and he collects candlesticks even though, it is later revealed, there are no candles anywhere. Furthermore, Wilbur consistently feels the absurd need to write about the effects of gravity on the men in the building, himself and "Isadore, the lover of my granddaughter", noting that "every male on the island" has an erection due to the light gravity (56). The most notable

aspect of Wilbur's narration nis that his journal's focus is never on survival, explanation, or even lamentation, as he only goes on to focus on either the most comically trivial or the most grotesque. He is the President of the United States writing an important memoir for future generations, but he still decides to focus on his immediate family in an absurd way. For instance, the very next topic he focuses on is the building of a pyramid to house the tomb of a dead child, his granddaughter. He feels the need to write this because it is a note for possible future archaeologists, telling them not to attempt to find any meaning in the pyramid, because that is all it is. This note on the pyramid's assumed meaninglessness means that Wilbur assumes future archaeologist will try to find some sort of meaning in the pyramid, which represents the building of this new society. Future generations may analyze the structure of the pyramid or its building method, or perhaps assume it to be the tomb of a historically significant person, a leader. Wilbur, however, sees no value in this achievement or posterity, only wanting a burial place for a member of his community. He is thus actively attempting to avoid future speculations about individual achievement or the importance of individual people via this matter of fact and grotesque statement about a dead child. Wilbur mentions his neighbor, as well, a woman who has taken to owning slaves as a means to forage and farm for food, and "she and the slaves raise cattle and pigs and chickens and goats and corn and wheat and vegetables and fruits and grapes along the shores of the East River" (16). Wilbur writes about his granddaughter and Isadore's wishes to also be her slaves one day. There is a bit of a return to nature in this dystopian landscape, then, as everyone needs to farm and forage for their meals, as well as some characteristics of the communal paradise Wilbur hoped for, in that people are indeed banding together based on their assigned families. However, Wilbur's utopian ideal of a communal return to nature and bonding with one's extended family is undercut by the juxtaposition of returning to owning slaves, as well as having to sleep on discarded rags and burying children under manhole covers. The way in which Wilbur describes all of this is never negative, never lamenting in any way about the fate of the world or the disease that has swept the

nation. He only seems happy to be with his family, as well as a part of another extended family all over the country. It is almost as if he is happy that everyone has finally started working as a community, despite the circumstances; maybe it took an apocalypse to make that happen.

The struggle to cope with an individualistic society and the subsequent alienation in this novel have less to do with the actual dystopian landscape than the circumstances that have led to it. The circumstances with which the dystopia is created to cope have to do with Wilbur and his sister's childhood, during which this ideal of individualism was first forced upon them. The entire premise of Wilbur and Eliza as characters, as well as their childhood, are wildly exaggerated in order to satirize the discontent with individuality and succeeding on their own in any capacity. As children, the two are "entombed" in a "spooky old mansion" (21) for their entire childhood, looked after by a staff of cooks, cleaners, and nurses, and far away from their parents and the rest of society, due to their severe cosmetic birth defects. The children are thus already separated from the ideologies of the outside world, "entombed" by their parents in an artificial world of their own. Locking these children in this mansion serves to both protect them from the individualized society so they learn to work together to better themselves, but also to create a sense of naivete from the workings of this society, which manifests as Wilbur's overly simplistic communal goals later in life. Wilbur characterizes him and his sister as such: "The thing was: Eliza and I were so ugly that our parents were ashamed. We were monsters, and we were not expected to live very long" (19). It does not become any clearer what the supposed birth defects actually are, only that the children look and act like "monsters" and are perceived as such by everybody they know. In reality, Wilbur and Eliza have no psychological or mental issues whatsoever, which they decide early on in their lives to keep secret from their staff and their parents. The two children are extremely intelligent, spending their time reading and writing in the secret rooms and hallways of the mansion, built by its original owner. They are only intelligent, however, when physically next to each other, and are rendered illiterate and unintelligible at worst when kept apart.

This exaggerated premise goes on to suppose, then, that society creates monsters out of people who cannot succeed on their own, as Wilbur and Eliza make two halves of one genius.

The premise that the children are viewed as monstrous and incapable of cognizant thought when the opposite is true supposes that the rest of society does not see or want to recognize their intelligence because it only manifests when they are physically working together. There is constant uncomfortably dark humor to be found in the in the descriptions of Wilbur and Eliza's childhood, as the two attempt to navigate their pretense of monstrousness. Their dining and living arrangements in the mansion, for example, are described as quite inhumane, with "thick rubber padding…under all the wall-to-wall carpets", "drains on the floor, so we and the room could be hosed off after every meal" and "two chain-link fences" (21). Despite the clearly horrible conditions these children are living in, the novel manages to make their situation humorous in an absurd way. As their parents come to visit, Eliza and Wilbur's mannerisms are described as such: "We threw food at each other in our tile-lined diningroom. I hit Eliza with an avocado. She hit me with a filet mignon. We bounced Parker House rolls off the maid. We pretended not to know that our parents had arrived and were watching us through a crack in the door" (43). These indicators of wealth juxtaposed with the clinical setting of the tile-lined dining room, coupled with the children's pretense is comical but simultaneously highly disturbing. At this point in their lives, they are two-meter-tall teenagers, throwing expensive food at each other and their maid, all for the benefit of their parents who expect them to be grotesque and inhuman. The children pretending to be monsters means they are actively attempting to stay inside the mansion, in their "paradise" secured by their family's wealth, so they have a small understanding that they would get immediately separated if people found them out. The only way for them to avoid this alienating individual existence is to pretend to be completely monstrous, that is, grotesquely unfit for society. The wild exaggeration posits once again that being fit for society would mean having to participate in it alone.

The reveal that the children are actually intelligent is also dealt with in a comedic manner,

although the scene itself is, again, disturbing. Wilbur and Eliza overhear their parents talking about them in the living room at night, wishing they would either show the tiniest amount of recognition or, alternatively, die like they were supposed to many years ago. In the morning, they emerge from their bedrooms, having dressed themselves for the first time ever, exclaiming to one of their nurses with their heads pressed together: "Good morning, Oveta. A new life begins for all of us today. As you can see and hear, Wilbur and I are no longer idiots. A miracle has taken place overnight. Our parents' dreams have come true. We are healed" (51). This scene right out of a horror film, in which the children stand in the hallway in their best clothes, turns out to be traumatic to their staff and their parents, as they naively proclaim to have become extremely intelligent people overnight. The children, then, have transformed into a different kind of monster in the eyes of their family and staff, one that must be immediately dealt with. The world views the children as monsters, whether they are together as completely nonverbal or as "two halves of a single genius." The satirized issue, then, is that they are much more functional and happier together, working as one instead of as single units. Wilbur and Eliza's childhood is thus exaggerating the individualistic world view according to which people must depend only on themselves for success, even when help and community are available.

As mentioned earlier, Wilbur and Eliza come up with the utopian scheme for extended families as children, having seen the world only through old books and the manuscripts of the mansion's previous owner. These two children are confident that they can singlehandedly solve all of the world's problems, which also suggests, not that they are geniuses, but that the answers are simple; solving the world's problems is simply a question of favoring community over individualism and other values of capitalism. However, this plan to simply bring American citizens together into artificial families is depicted as naïve and childlike throughout, because the children know nothing about the world outside their mansion and their old manuscripts – answers to the world's problems seem simple from their outside perspective, since they are only able to draw on their own personal experiences. The issue of

individualism in society is systemic and deeply ingrained into the late capitalist landscape, but the children assume this to be an issue of simple loneliness and the lack of immediately available community support. By having Wilbur later use his power as the President of the United States to enact this childhood plan for the end of loneliness, the novel satirizes the naivete and the near uselessness of attempting to solve deeply systemic issues, positing a deeply alienating view of the world.

This systemic individualism is made apparent and humorously exaggerated when the children are finally found out for pretending to be unintelligent and a psychologist insists on testing them on their abilities separately. The psychologist shows an immediate dislike for Wilbur and Eliza due to their wealth: "She was so enraged by how much money and power our family had, and so sick, that I don't think she even noticed how huge and ugly Eliza and I were. We were just two more rotten-spoiled rich kids to her" (65). Her insistence on the two children making it on their own and surviving in the world by themselves leads to perhaps the most significant dialogue portraying the exaggerated individualism in the novel:

> We said innocently that we would get many more correct answers if we were allowed to put our heads together.
>
> She became a tower of irony. 'Why, of course, Master and Mistress,' she said. 'And wouldn't you like to have an encyclopaedia in the room with you, too, and maybe the faculty of Harvard University, to tell you the answers, in case you're not sure?'
>
> 'That would be *nice*,' we said.
>
> 'In case nobody had told you,' she said. 'this is the United States of America, where nobody has a right to rely on anybody else – where everybody learns to make his or her own way.'
>
> … This was the lesson: 'Paddle your own canoe.' (66)

The psychologist takes something as self-contained as IQ testing these two teenagers and turns it into an analogy of individualism in the United States, as well as a moral lesson about the virtues of

individual success and self-reliance. The humor in the children's answer, "That would be nice", comes from their sheer ignorance to the outside world and how it functions, but it is also portrayed as a completely reasonable answer to the psychologist's ironic suggestion. This dialogue, then, depicts the psychologist as unreasonable and unstable one, satirizing her unconditional and absolutist beliefs. The psychologist expresses more of her opinions relating to the individual value of the children in the world, specifically in the job market: "She said our case was not a sad one, since there were no big jobs we wished to hold. 'They have almost no ambition at all,' she said, 'so life can't disappoint them'" (69). Wilbur and Eliza's average intelligence when they are far away from one another is only perfectly acceptable to the psychologist because they do not have any career goals and no important jobs they want to hold. They are thus still separated, even though they are better, happier, and more intelligent together, because Wilbur is able to somewhat function, as well as read and write, without Eliza, which will secure him a future. When the children obviously protest again, she says: "'What kind of world do you think this is?' (71). Thus, in these exaggerated and completely unfair circumstances, the psychologist represents the values of individualism and making it on one's own, without anybody's help, guidance, or company, in the job market and in the world in general.

The apocalyptic landscape of *Slapstick*, as well as the novel's descriptions of Wilbur's childhood, then, are exaggerated and described through dark and absurd humor due to Wilbur's clear sense of alienation in this individualistic world. The novel satirizes the culture of individualism under late capitalism that prevents the American people from working together to prevent a climate catastrophe, and who only start working as a community after an apocalypse has taken place. It also satirizes the individualistic logic of American society by having the climate catastrophe be caused by foreign technology which has been invented with communal interests in mind. Wilbur is made aware of this individualist culture from childhood, and is portrayed as only caring about making his country and the world a less lonely place to live, in a naïve and overly simplistic way. As his utopian dream in

which no one is left without a community to help them fails and turns into the end of the world due to the inability of everyone else to share his wishes, he narrates his memoir about the new dystopian landscape in an apathetic fashion, focusing only on the comical or the absurd in his surroundings. Wilbur's goals to solve the issue of individualism in the novel are childlike and simple, but the argument remains anti-individualistic and anti-capitalist, as Wilbur's simple goals satirize the fact that the force of individualism, as many other late capitalist societal forces, is not easily escapable or solvable due to their systemic and deeply ingrained nature. *Slapstick*, like the other two novels discussed earlier, is thus an example of satire being used to criticize late capitalist societal issues using the viewpoint of a protagonist who cannot see the entire picture due to their confusion, apathy, and alienation, unable and at times unwilling to even try.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has argued that three novels by Kurt Vonnegut deal with the theme of alienation under late capitalism using differing forms and manifestations of satire. Seeing that postmodernism and late capitalism are inseparably linked in the after-war period, and that satire has historically been more prevalent in culture and art in times of change and sociopolitical crisis, this thesis has posited that there are multiple alienating aspects about the postmodern period and the postmodern condition which lend themselves to an abundance of satire once again. Throughout the history of satire, its use has been seen to increase during periods of substantial change or sociopolitical crisis. In the western world, the use of satire has been prominent in first-and-second-century Rome, both late sixteenth- and eighteenth-century England, and seventeenth-century France, for instance, due to either great moral and societal conflict and change, or completely fixed moral norms to which satire can appeal. Times of internal division and inequality between societies, for instance, have seen a prolific production of both satire and parody works, due to social classes being strongly separated, as it was in England between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, when different classes were so far separated from one another that satirizing other classes became popular. Continuing the trend, the postmodern period, starting after the Second World War, has similarly seen a spike in satirical works. The satirical works of the postmodern period often deal with the rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape due to the prevalence of globalism, the power of large corporations, and rapid technological and scientific advancements, all of which make the postmodern period one of change and instability, as well. The subjects of satire in the postmodern period, then, are strongly connected to late capitalism, which makes it the most prominent force behind the need for satire in the postmodern age.

The three novels discussed in this thesis were written during the first three decades of the

postmodern period, and they offer a varied perspective on the use of different forms of political and

social commentary during this time, so they have been analyzed in this thesis as an example of the

portrayal of alienation through satire in the postmodern world. Postmodern writing, much like the

postmodern era, can be characterized by a sense of irrationality, absurdity, and discontinuity, and satire

in postmodern writing often draws on the absurdity of the world, as well as dark humor and the

grotesque. Alienation, discussed here as a Marxist term, is a product of capitalism, as people under a

capitalist system experience a sense of alienation from the product of their labor, their nature, their

activity, as well as themselves and other people. The three protagonists of these three novels experience

alienation due to different aspects of their late capitalist societies – *Player Piano* satirizes the absurdity

and meaninglessness of corporate culture, the disillusionment of the American dream, as well as

consumer capitalism and propaganda. *Jailbird* satirizes the political landscape in the mid-century as

well as the 1970s, criticizing anti-communism, overt patriotism, and American democratic capitalism.

Finally, *Slapstick* works as a criticism of individualism under capitalism, and makes fun of the

prominent notion of needing to make it on one's own without the help of a community. These three

novels achieve their means by using different forms of satire. *Player Piano* uses parody to create an

exaggerated version of a large corporation, as well as a fictitious automatized society to parody the

cult-like nature of corporations and labor conditions. *Jailbird* uses cosmic irony to indicate that its

protagonist is alienated from every aspect of his life because it is controlled by outside forces beyond

his control, and *Slapstick* makes use of a dystopian narrative, as well as dark humor and exaggeration

to show the alienation of its community-driven protagonist in an individualized society. All three

characters are similar in that they desperately want to escape their circumstances and even make the

world a better place to live in, but they are consistently thwarted by systemic forces beyond their

control, as well as their own naivety and ignorance. The concept of fate and free will under late

capitalism has emerged as a common theme in these novels, then, as the protagonists' alienation is

often portrayed through apathy and inactivity.

Vonnegut's work has been widely studied on its use of satire and social commentary, but incorporating the specific theoretical framework on the relationship of his satire to late capitalism in postmodernism to analyze alienation in the novels' protagonists, this thesis has attempted to show that alienation specifically is a large aspect of Vonnegut's work. The oeuvre of Kurt Vonnegut is full of satirical narratives of alienation under late capitalism; one novel which shares these characteristics is *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), a novel about a millionaire giving away his wealth to anyone who bothers to come by his office to see him. Much of his other work, such as *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and *Mother Night* (1962) to name two, share similarities with the three novels analyzed in this thesis, in that they satirize modern technology, war, the significance of human actions, and the concept of free will. The recurring satires of these concepts all point to the portrayal of alienation in many of Vonnegut's protagonists, as the narration often portrays them as apathetic, confused, and resigned to their circumstances. The postmodern nature of his narration, namely its self-referential, non-linear, and intertextual aspects, further connect this alienation to the postmodern era. Secondly, it is possible to argue that American postmodern, mid-century works in general tend to, first of all, deal with alienation, and second of all, handle it with using satire, parody, and humor. An apt example of another early postmodern work on capitalist demands and alienation from one's work is Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), which also discusses the American dream and its impossibility. Other examples include Don DeLillo (e.g. *White Noise* 1985) and Norman Mailer (*An American Dream* 1965).

In the contemporary context of the twenty-first century, as noted at the very beginning, satire seems to have begun to flourish once more through late-night television and social media, much like it did during the introduction of the novel a few hundred years earlier. Satirical entertainment targeting corporations and billionaires stems from the exact same source and the exact same impulse – living under alienating sociopolitical circumstances, or, for the past eighty years or so, living under late

capitalism. Satire expressing alienation in the twenty-first century, then, draws on satirical conventions of the past, and the history of satire repeats itself; throughout its history, satire has been used to criticize unequal, unjust, and traumatic circumstances for the individual, and it has been shown to emerge in times of societal crises, and the postmodern era is not any different. Using Vonnegut's work as a relevant and significant example of satire's prevalence in the mid twentieth century, this thesis has argued that during the postmodern period, satire has been used to deal with postmodern alienation caused by late capitalism, especially in an American context.

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