Existential Concerns in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*

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Abstract: Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) was one of the most popular literary voices to emerge from the post-war era. Even though he has not been recognised as an existentialist writer, Vonnegut has often explored existentialist themes such as the individual struggle to find a meaning for one's existence, determinism and free will in his works. It is easy to overlook the underlying depth of his thematic concerns, owing to an irreverent and playful tone, fantastical elements, and absurdist humour. Initially ignored as a science fiction writer, Vonnegut ultimately won critical acclaim for the topicality of his fiction. This paper attempts to examine the existential concerns in Vonnegut's second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959).

Keywords: Vonnegut, existentialism, determinism, free will, fate, meaninglessness, satire.

"Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself," (1) thus begins Kurt Vonnegut's highly ingenious and original second novel, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), wherein he reflects on themes such as the meaning of life and whether human beings have free will. The first sentence of this science fiction novel indicates that it will be completely different from other literary works of the genre published around that time. Although Vonnegut employs various conventions of science fiction and space opera, which were in vogue during the 1950s, he uses them to expose and satirise the follies of human beings.

The plot of the novel is so fantastical and far-fetched that it reads like a parody or send-up of a typical science fiction novel. Taking place during "the Nightmare Ages....between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression," (2) the novel tells the story of Malachi Constant, a dissolute playboy and the wealthiest person in America. His life changes when he is invited to the estate of the millionaire Winston Niles Rumfoord to witness his materialisation. Rumfoord and his dog Kazak only exist as "wave phenomena" (5) ever since he ran his private spaceship into a "chrono-syn-clastic infundibulum," (5) a funnel-shaped warp in space, causing them to be scattered through time and space. Now Rumfoord and Kazak both briefly materialise once every 59 days on Earth and once every 111 days on Mars. Being chrono-synclastic infundibulated, Rumfoord says he can witness all points in time and space at once: "everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been." (14) Rumfoord informs Constant that he can read minds and can see into the future. He believes that the universe they exist in is meaningless and indifferent. Rumfoord's wife Beatrice believes him to be insane for his "highly improbable prophecies." (25) Constant will travel to Mars and will be "bred by the Martians" (14) with Beatrice. He would father a son named Chrono. It would be followed by his journey to Mercury, coming back to Earth again before finally reaching Titan, his "ultimate destination." (17) Constant wishes to avoid this fate but a worldwide depression and the stock market crash causes both him and Beatrice to become bankrupt. He is then visited by two recruiters of the Martian army, and he agrees to go with them. Beatrice, on the other hand, seeks her husband's help in avoiding her fate, who points out the futility of such an enterprise. Rumfoord uses the symbol of a roller-coaster to describe the deterministic nature of human life. He explains that humans do not possess the free will to avoid riding on the roller-coaster: "I didn't design the roller coaster, I don't own it, and I don't say who rides and who doesn't. I just know what it's shaped like." (37)

The action moves forward a few years later when Constant is now known as Unk, a veteran of the Martian army. He was among the many people who were taken to Mars and had their memories erased before being recruited into the army for a doomed Martian invasion of the Earth. All these "recruits" are

then controlled by the radio antennas installed in their skulls. The Martian army (including women and children) is thoroughly routed by the Earthlings. This suicidal invasion of the Martians was, in fact, orchestrated by Rumfoord in order to establish a new religion on Earth known as "The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent" (127), which is intended to establish a universal brotherhood of mankind, free of all divisions such as nationality, race, religion, etc. The motto of this newly formed religion is: "Take Care of the People, and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself." (127) The tenets of this new religion have been laid out in *The Winston Niles Rumfoord Authorized Revised Bible*. Rumfoord intends to bring about a utopia on Earth where people will depend entirely upon themselves for the betterment of their lives instead of relying on an invisible and indifferent God. A recurring theme throughout Vonnegut's fiction is that human beings' effort to establish a utopian society always creates a dystopic future. In order to attain equality, the followers of The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent are made to wear handicaps and weights, similar to the society depicted in Vonnegut's famous dystopian short story "Harrison Bergeron." Vonnegut utilises this fictive religion to satirise how various religions tend to manipulate their adherents. He would later revisit this theme of the impact of an "invented" religion on society in his fourth novel, *Cat's Cradle* (1963).

Rumfoord eventually reunites Unk/Constant with Beatrice and Chrono in front of his followers on Earth. Before sending them off to Titan, he recounts to his followers the various sins of Unk/Constant, who is a reviled figure in the new religion. Rumfoord ironically describes him as "one of outrageous fortune's cruelest agents," (114), not realising his own culpability in causing the massacre of Martian invaders. Constant, Beatrice and Chrono spend the remainder of their lives on Titan, where they live separately but care for each other. Beatrice lives in *Dun Roamin*, a "reproduction of the Taj Mahal." (196) She busily keeps working on writing a long, unending book titled *The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System*, a refutation of Rumfoord's deterministic worldview. Chrono leaves home to live with the giant native bluebirds of Titan. Constant becomes "self-sufficient," (225) building his own shelter and making his own food. In their old age, Beatrice and Constant fall in love. They come to a late realisation that "a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved." (223)

It is later revealed that all of human history, including Rumfoord's actions, have been controlled and manipulated by the aliens from the planet Tralfamadore to get their stranded messenger Salo a spare part to repair his broken down ship on Titan. Rumfoord had earlier hinted this to Beatrice when he said that he had been ruthlessly used by someone to "disgustingly paltry ends." (41) Characters like Beatrice and Constant are able to realise that they lack free will and they are slaves to forces beyond their control. Unlike Rumfoord, they are able to recognise the true value of human relationships. He is able to manipulate the adherents of his religion but is unable to form and cherish any lasting friendship or relationship with anyone. The love and compassion of Beatrice and Constant cannot alter their fate or destiny, but they are able to transform themselves into characters. Through their life journey, Vonnegut seeks to highlight that even if they lack free will, people can determine their own characters through their individual responses to the circumstances beyond their control. Vonnegut suggests that instead of stoically surrendering to the deterministic forces that control their actions, people can assign a purpose to their existence through human traits like love and friendship. As the narrator proclaims at the beginning of the novel, people should look within themselves for the meaning of their existence instead of looking outward. If people can accept their limitations in the face of an absurd universe and act towards each other with decency and kindness, they can discover the truths that lie within them.

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