

THE ABSURDITY OF SUICIDE: THE EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE EXPLORED BY VONNEGUT IN BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

Deanna Rodriguez
MA Literature Program Assistant
International English Honors Society
Texas USA

From *Cat's Cradle* to *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut's work is full of philosophical musings that can be read as existentialism. One of the more obvious existential dilemmas Vonnegut struggles with is the notion of suicide. Albert Camus in his collection of essays entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* explores the notion of the absurdity of suicide— absurdity being used in the philosophical sense, meaning the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any, and on what leads a man to think about suicide and ultimately how one can make the decision life is not worth living anymore. Camus explains what can spur on suicidal thoughts as— “A world that can be explained even with bad reason is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity” (Camus 6). It's a common trend in Vonnegut's writing, the loss of home as well as the hope of a promised land, or more particular in Vonnegut's case, the nostalgia of a better time and as well, the yearning for an Edenic existence. Vonnegut places so much of himself into his writing, and he even goes so far as to insert himself as a character. Particularly in *Breakfast of Champions*, he talks to himself as a character. It is through his writing that Vonnegut can truly work out his existential dilemma, and it is seen most clearly in the novel *Breakfast of Champions*. By looking at the solutions reached by not only Vonnegut himself, but also by the characters in the novel, which are clearly presenting issues of mental anguish, it's clear to see how Vonnegut is an absurd creator, in the existential sense presented by Camus.

In order to understand how Vonnegut's exploration of characters in *Breakfast of Champions* is similar to an existential reflection, a deeper look into what makes the struggles of the characters a mechanism to discover an answer to what Camus says is the “one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus 3). In an article about Vonnegut, David Streitfeld wrote that “a decade ago, Vonnegut wrote ‘Suicide has always been a temptation to me, since my mother solved so many problems with it. The child of a suicide will naturally think of death as a logical solution to any problem’” (Streitfeld). A certain trend that can be seen in a number of Vonnegut's works is a feeling of meaninglessness that is often associated with the replacement of a character by a machine. Similarly, the novelist countlessly refers to parts of humans as parts of machines, saying that going crazy is an example of “faulty wiring” or “bad chemical”. (Vonnegut 4) When combined, we get the Kilgore Trout story *Now It Can Be Told in Breakfast of Champions*, which convinces Dwayne Hoover that he is the sole being on earth that has free will and is not a machine. “You are an experiment by the Creator of the Universe. You are the only creature in the entire universe that has free will. You are the only one who has to figure out what to do next— and why. Everyone else is a robot, a machine” (Vonnegut 259). It is through this story, that Dwayne Hoover is able to understand why his wife had committed suicide— “She was that kind of machine!” (266) This relates to the point Camus makes about what drives man to realize the absurdity of life, taking a step back, and he refers to it as a “certain moment of lucidity” (15), to see how the

mechanics of life, and how following the same pattern day in and day out in search of meaning, makes one realize just how meaningless these actions are.

The works of Kurt Vonnegut spend a great amount of time dealing with the idea of a sense of uselessness, which can best be seen as existential angst, “the pervasive mood of anxiety that accompanies human freedom. This anxiety is tied to the crisis of authenticity, of being and acting true to oneself” (Tally 38). This is an important aspect of our culture to analyze, the feeling of being made useless or rendered pointless by technology, or machines, one that Vonnegut picked up back in the years when he was writing his most existential works. “The sense of wonder, the creative impulse, and the abject dread of nothingness come together in the minds of Vonnegut’s protagonists, unraveling the threads of existential skein of emotions and ideas is often the real action in the novels” (Tally 38). When the characters of his novels are suddenly forced to realize the absurdity of their lives, Vonnegut is then able to use them to work through an issue that has shaped his life, the suicide of his mother.

The moment of absurd arises when the man tries to understand how the world works, and instead finds out that everything is ruled by unreasonableness. Camus depicts this fundamental realization as the time when “my appetite for the absolute and for unity meets the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle”(51). Suicide must be rejected because without man, the absurd cannot exist. The contradiction of living a life without reason must be accepted; reason and the limits of it must be admitted, without giving one false hope. However, since the absurd can never be accepted: it requires constant confrontation, one must constantly revolt. It is in *Breakfast of Champions* that Vonnegut is best able to manipulate his characters in order to document the reaction to this realization, and show the constant confrontation and revolt of man against the absurd. At this point in his career, he is able to embrace meta-fiction, which gives him the ability to have a conversation with himself in the text, a conversation that can be seen as one of the most telling as far as his struggle with suicide– ““This is a very bad book you’re writing’ I said to myself behind my leaks. ‘I know,’ I said ‘You’re afraid you’re going to kill yourself the way your mother did,’ I said ‘I know,’ I said” (Vonnegut 198). With this revelation, and the main character’s wife having committed suicide, a glimpse into Vonnegut’s own issues with suicide can be found.

It’s important, then, to look into the words of the man, as his writing is often a reflection of himself– while not always the most truthful reflection, it is worth noting that despite the fact that he often put on facades to the public, as he states in his novel *Mother Night*– “We are what we pretend to be”(Vonnegut 2). Casper Melville, who wrote an article about Vonnegut after his death, stated that he “frequently wrote about his melancholic upbringing in German Indianapolis which left him with a ‘deep-boned sadness’ fueled no doubt by his mother’s suicide” (Melville). It’s an interesting notion that children of suicide are more likely to commit suicide themselves though through the comparison lens of suicide as absurd as defined by Camus, it’s possible to see that it should only aid the children into accepting their absurd fate sooner. The suicide of his mother most likely helped Vonnegut to realize the meaninglessness of life more clearly, and it is in the nature of man to constantly question the absurd. As stated before, man must constantly question, confront and revolt against the absurd, which an early introduction to the meaninglessness life would allow for. The best example of how Vonnegut, in his own life and in his own way, did this was to remark how “his weakness for filterless Pall Malls as a ‘honorable way to commit suicide.’” (Melville) This is just such a Vonnegutian way of dealing with the absurdity of life. When he actually tried to commit suicide, he considered himself and his floor mates to be “existential rather than biochemical suicides. The latter blame the wiring of the brain; the former, the universe” (Streitfeld). This statement further demonstration Vonnegut’s tendencies to relate people who have not yet reached the

acknowledgement of the absurdity of life, as machines, who killed themselves out of faulty wiring, versus a realization that the universe is meaningless. Camus also makes the distinction between machine-like behaviors of people who place unfounded meaning into their daily actions, as stated in his essay- "weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time, it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness."

Towards the end of the novel, Vonnegut becomes something that Camus explored in his essays, the absurd creator. Camus states that "it being understood that living in this case is just as much experiencing as reflecting. The work then embodies an intellectual drama. The absurd work illustrates thought's renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason. If the world were clear, art would not exist"(98). *Breakfast of Champions* is a perfect example of an absurd work of art. Vonnegut ignores what is found in a normal conventional novel, adding artwork, and using non-linear narrative. Including a jarring abrupt ending, with a bizarre Meta epilogue, he further explores what Camus defines as absurd.

Another aspect that lends Vonnegut to Camus' idea of the absurd creator is the similarities between Vonnegut's autobiographical character Kilgore Trout and Sisyphus, the mythological example given by Camus at the end of his book to illustrate the concept of the absurd hero. In the myth, Sisyphus was condemned to push a rock up a hill for the rest of eternity after attempting to cheat death. Camus focuses on what Sisyphus' thoughts when marching down the mountain would be, about to start the same task over again. This is the truly tragic moment, when the hero becomes conscious of his miserable condition. "All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols" (Camus 123). Camus claims that when Sisyphus acknowledges the futility of his task and the certainty of his fate, he is free to realize the absurdity of his situation and to reach a state of contented acceptance. Camus concludes, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123).

Like Sisyphus realizing his place in his own existence, at the end of *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut, the narrator, tells Kilgore of his existence, therefore forcing the realization of absurdity on him at that moment, and then lets Kilgore have his own free will. While Sisyphus was forced to complete the same action over and over again what Camus used as a metaphor for daily futile actions in life- "The workmen of today works every day of his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious," (Camus 121) Kilgore Trout has the tragic moment of becoming conscious of his absurdity through the "gift" of free will. Because of this, Sisyphus and Kilgore Trout can be seen as examples of absurd heroes, which is described by Camus as one who "lives life to the fullest, hates death, and is condemned to a meaningless task"(Camus 121). It is important to note, however, that while Sisyphus accepts his fate and is happy with it, Vonnegut, and to the extent his character Kilgore, never do quite reach the state of happiness that Sisyphus does and never actually reaching the status of a true absurd hero. The usage of ETC at the end of the novel further cements the connection of an absurdist approach to his writing. It does not end, as the ending of a novel is meaningless, and it continues to exist in various forms, through various outlets, as it is free to dictate itself. This open ended-ness lends itself to the opportunity of the characters to maybe ultimately reach the sort of happiness that Sisyphus.

Works Cited

- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*. New York: Vintage International, 1991. Print.
- Horn, Gregory D. "Breakfast of Champions." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition* (2010): 1-3. Literary Reference Center. Print. 19 Apr. 2012.
- Melville, Caspar. "Deep-Boned Sadness." *New Humanist* 122.3 (2007): 31. Humanities International Complete. Print-Archives. 19 Apr. 2012.
- Streitfeld, David, *Washington Post*. "'Kurt Vonnegut's Big Chill The Existential Author Addresses His Own Suicide Attempt in His Latest Collection of Essays and Recollections.'" *The Orlando Sentinel* 07 Sept. 1991: NewsBank - Archives. Web. 19 Apr. 2012.
- Tally, Robert T. *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography*. New York: Continuum, 2011. Print.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Breakfast Of Champions*. New York: Dial Press, 1973. Print.
- Vonnegut, K. *Mother Night*. New York, New York: Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2009. Print.