

ralmente inadaptado, que se lanza a su comprobación sobre el terreno. La resolución de los casos no se sustenta ya en la lógica, sino en la experimentación. También cambia el enfoque: del acertijo intelectual, donde no importa más ámbito que el del crimen, donde lo trascendente es el cómo, se consolida un paradigma estético en el que lo relevante es el ecosistema social donde se comete el delito, que siempre tiene el mismo origen: el dinero, la ambición, la desesperación. Esto explica que los procesos de construcción de los héroes en ambas variantes del género sean distintos: la lógica conduce a Hércules Poirot, el personaje de Agatha Christie, mientras lo que mueve a Marlowe, el quijote de Chandler, es un cierto sentido sui generis pero absolutamente sincero de la honestidad, la decencia y la incorruptibilidad.

En este contexto, la obra de William R. Burnett constituye una feliz anomalía. Encuadrado dentro de la corriente estadounidense, bajo la etiqueta del *hard-boiled*, este escritor, aparentemente menor frente a Hammet o Chandler, modifica los códigos canónicos de su tradición por la vía de cambiar la perspectiva y dar mayor protagonismo a los criminales. Si bien no rompe por completo el esquema moral –buenos y malos– predominante hasta ese momento, su elección narrativa muestra una visión mucho más rica de la realidad social que quiere retratar. La mirada ya no se basa en la confrontación, sino en la complejidad. Un punto de partida que permite a otros –John Huston, por ejemplo– reconvertir los patrones clásicos del género hasta trascender el código inicial, aunque sea con un lenguaje –el del cine– que es diferente al literario. El camino, no obstante, demuestra que, a pesar de las convenciones que terminaron codificando el género, en el origen mismo de la novela negra laten elementos que permiten equipararla con los grandes clásicos de la literatura, puesto que la noción de clásico requiere, sobre todo, que un texto sea capaz de engendrar diferentes lecturas a lo largo del tiempo que, sin traicionar su espíritu, se adaptan a las diferentes corrientes de sensibilidad que discurren por la historia de la literatura. *La Jungla de Asfalto* es, en primer término, una novela de policías y ladrones. Pero, de igual forma, y con la misma solidez, puede ser también la historia (así nos la cuenta Huston) de cómo el sistema aplasta a los perdedores sin contemplación e, incluso, una suerte de reformulación del viejo mito de Ulises, que anhelaba regresar a su hogar en la isla griega de Ítaca. Es una historia concreta y todos esos otros relatos al mismo tiempo. Una y múltiple. Porque la buena literatura, aunque nos cuente formalmente la vida de unos hombres inexistentes en un momento determinado de la historia, habla en realidad de todos. De cada uno de nosotros.

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# Kurt Vonnegut's Quest for Identity

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/futhark.2013.i08.10>

**ABSTRACT:** The present paper analyzes Kurt Vonnegut's complex national roots, since he was an American citizen with a clearly German background who was deprived of any German education during his childhood and, consequently, had to discover the country of his ancestors when he was fighting the Nazis during World War II. Thus, his roots become an everlasting source of influence for Vonnegut. Obviously, and taking into account his rejection of Barthes' concept of "the death of the author", Vonnegut's quest for roots will become a recurring element from his first literary adventures to the last published more mature novels. The main focus of the paper will be centered on how, even without a rich German education, Germany will play a fundamental role throughout the novelist's whole corpus. In order to achieve this goal, I have examined both Vonnegut's biography as well as his literary corpus (including fictional and non-fictional Works), together with the many interviews he gave during his long and complex literary career.

**Keywords:** Kurt Vonnegut, American literature, Postmodernism, German-American Relations

In *A Man Without a Country* Kurt Vonnegut summarized an idea that he had defended numberless times before and resulted evident in the vast majority of his literary corpus: "a husband, a wife and some kids is not a family. It's a terribly vulnerable survival unit" (48). In order to fight the loneliness and sense of fragility that this situation created, the author tried to become rooted in a meaningful way to an artificial extended fa-

mily. In this paper I will analyze the two territories he explored when searching for roots: his German ancestry and American society.

Robert Merrill suggests that the first biographical detail that must be taken into account when dealing with Kurt Vonnegut's novels is his German heritage: "we should review Vonnegut's curious status as a German American" (73). Kevin Alexander Boon points out that Vonnegut's ancestry conditions the way he deals with life and literature:

Kurt Vonnegut is a self-professed agnostic firmly grounded in the tradition of his German freethinking relatives. As such, his morality comes without metaphysical props. Instead, his moral thinking and writing reflect a rhetorical orientation- one for which the self is never disembodied from the community, the history, and the discourses of which it is a part (135).

Dennis Stanton Smith shares Boon's opinion on how influential Vonnegut's German roots are: "The Vonnegut's, a family of German descents, held beliefs on pacifism and atheism- beliefs that figure prominently in Vonnegut's works" (5). These scholars' observations are very important, since they explain one of the most problematic points in Vonnegut's career: Kurt Vonnegut can be considered as a postmodern author from a technical point of view, but nevertheless he is much more concerned with conveying a moral message (we could even speak of a didactic aim) that found in the majority of the writers of the period, such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme or Thomas Pynchon. In this sense, Bill Gholson explains "the fact that his characters raise moral questions indicates a belief that moral decisions are possible, making Vonnegut one of the few 'postmodern' writers maintaining hope in an age when the concept of a coherent identity is in question" (140). In *Like Shaking Hands with God*, the author explains his horatian understanding of literature, and does not hesitate to state, "Your book should have political consequences" (21).

Vonnegut's embrace of a traditional understanding of literature that goes back to Samuel Johnson rather than visiting the Ivory Tower of belletristic literature attracted a legion of young readers and the attention of many scholars and fellow writers such as Tonny Tanner, Leslie Fiedler, Peter Reed, Jerome Klinkowitz or John Updike . Nevertheless, his didactic concern has made many critics consider that Vonnegut's social aim had a quite negative effect in his novels: "His books are not only like canaries in coal mines (his own analogy) but like the cormorants of the Galapagos Islands, who, in their idiosyncratic evolution, have sacrificed flight for the getting of fish" (Moore 273).

As I have defended above, Kurt Vonnegut was convinced that his social and political concerns derived from his German ancestry. Nevertheless, and regardless of how influential his German roots might be, the

author's connection with the land and culture of his ancestors must be considered as an extremely problematic one.

The dominant mood toward Germany in the US during the author's infancy wasn't very positive. As Stanley Schatt explains, the author perceived this situation and became concerned with it from an early time: "As a German, he was very sensitive about the growing anti-German sentiment on campus..." (Schatt 15).

In *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* (1981), Vonnegut devotes a whole chapter of the book, "Roots", to deal with his German origins. The author explains that due to the anti-Germanic angst of the period he was completely deprived of any German root:

The anti-Germanism in this country during the First World War so shamed and dismayed my parents that they resolved to raise me without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the music or the oral histories which my ancestors had loved. They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism (333).

As it is evident from the quotations above, Kurt Vonnegut sincerely regrets his lack of a true German heritage. *Apart from Palm Sunday*, the anxiety toward his German roots (or, more accurately, toward the lack of them) is also a very prominent theme in most of Vonnegut's short stories and novels. Vonnegut's references to his complex German roots began as soon as his college years, when he wrote a weekly column to Cornell students' magazine. As Peter Reed points out: "This column might seem to show again a German-American's concern for fairness, and to reflect some of the isolation and frankly anti-British sentiment that was still quite widespread in the country at this time." (*Short Fiction* 18). Nevertheless, the most direct references to this German theme do occur in Vonnegut's fictional texts. In this sense, it is possible to trace a series of references to German origins in almost every novel from Vonnegut's corpus, but this theme stands as a key one in mostly three of the novels: *Mother Night* (1961), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *Deadeye Dick* (1982).

In the autobiographical introduction to *Mother Night* Vonnegut refers to his German origins in two different manners: on the one hand the writer tells an anecdote that explains how the Vonnegut family decided to get free of their German roots, or at least to have those roots intermingled with the recently acquired American ones. In this case, Vonnegut remembers "some laughs about my aunt, too, who married a German German..." (vii). The second reference to Germany that can be found in this introduction shows how Vonnegut considers that even though he has German origins the fact of having been born in the US deprives him of belonging to Germany in a direct and meaningful manner, which taking into account the circumstances was nothing to regret after all: "If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a

Nazi, bopping Jews and Gypsies, and Poles around, laving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides" (viii).

The autobiographical examples Vonnegut offers in the introduction are certainly interesting, but the most prominent examples of the author's German roots take place in the fictional section of the book. From the very first line of the narrative, the protagonist of *Mother Night* points out how problematic his roots are: "I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination" (3). Howard W. Campbell claims to be "nationless by inclination", but nevertheless he seems to be a German by inclination: "Campbell was proud of himself as a writer in German, indifferent to his skill in English" (x). This character complains that New York is not Heaven at all but rather, "It was Hell for me- or not Hell, something worse than Hell" (15). It is not surprising that Campbell considers New York as Hell, since even he is an American citizen "by birth" he decided long time ago to live in Germany as a true German citizen: "My father and mother left Germany in 1939, when war came. My wife and I stayed on" (18).

Besides the threats of WWII, Campbell decides to stay in Germany, and even he serves the allies as a spy he keeps considering that "Germany is the most misunderstood country in the world" (64). In any case, his family does not share his ideas on how misunderstood Germany is, or his pretended loyalty to the Nazi cause, and Campbell's decision of staying in Germany and supporting the Nazi Regime (even though he was an American spy and not a real Nazi) causes his parents a great trauma: "My father and mother died. Some say they died of broken hearts... They did not disinherit me, though they must have been bitterly tempted to do so" (32). By the end of the narrative Campbell is completely obsessed with his own roots and the role he played while he was pretending to be a Nazi, and is absolutely unable to deal with his own internal dilemma, so he commits suicide. Interestingly enough he doesn't hang himself for crimes against the humanity but rather for as he himself explains before committing suicide: "I think that tonight is the night I will hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself" (175).

As we see, the question of belonging to Germany, of being a German, is central in *Mother Night* as well as in Kurt Vonnegut's life; and just as Vonnegut's belonging to Germany as a real German is impossible, Campbell's problem is the same one. The same applies to Vonnegut and Campbell's family's attitudes toward Germany. Kurt Vonnegut claims to be proud of his German roots, even those roots have been so cut off from him that he is far from being a German; and Campbell is also proud of being a German even he is "an American by birth". In both cases, too, this impossibility of becoming rooted within Germany or a German tradi-

tion is a source of anxiety and trauma to both the author and the character.

As we see, becoming rooted to Germany becomes a terrible source of anxiety to the protagonist of the novel. In the introduction to this novel Vonnegut stated: "This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don't think it's a marvelous moral, I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (vii). Nevertheless, the moral is quite ambiguous, since if we're really what we pretend to be, then Campbell is undoubtedly a German citizen, but a Nazi too. This explanation seems to be supported by Vonnegut himself, who explained in an interview, "Howard W. Campbell was an authentically bad man" (Reilly 222); but this explanation is also extremely unsatisfactory, since as Vonnegut has also expressed in many other interviews, "I've never written a story with a villain" (Shenker 22). As we see, the character of Howard W. Campbell is an extremely problematic one and his roots can only be understood in terms of a virtually impossible to be solved Schrödinger paradox.

Kurt Vonnegut's German roots re-appear from the very title of his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). The complete title of the novel, which goes back to a pre-nineteen century tradition of long and far-fetched titles, includes a broad summary of the main themes of the novel in which the Indianapolis author makes clear that the novel was written by "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. a fourth generation German-American..."

Nevertheless, the novel in which this fourth generation German-American author deals with his complex German roots in a more direct and interesting manner is *Deadeye Dick* (1982). The protagonist of this novel, Rudy Waltz, is in many ways an alter ego of Vonnegut and the author makes this point clear from the autobiographical preface to the novel: "The crime he committed in childhood is all the bad things I have done" (10). Even this character is not a German but an American citizen, and even though he never gets to visit Germany or to speak German at all, Germany becomes a key aspect in his life. When Rudy's father was a young man he was sent to Vienna to be treated of a sexual illness and to study art, and during this period he become in love both with Austria and Germany. His fascination with the Germanic culture became intensified when he met a young Austrian painter: Adolf Hitler. Rudy's father helped Hitler, who was extremely poor at that moment, and they almost immediately became friends, so as we see Rudy's Germanic roots are quite complex from a moral point of view ("Think of that: My father could have strangled the worst monster of the century, or simply let him starve or freeze to death. But became his bosom buddy instead" 17). His father's relation with Hitler will change Rudy's life in a crucial manner: "I sometimes think that I would have had a very different sort of soul if I had grown up in an ordinary little American house..." (19). So, when

Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany he invites Rudy's family to visit him and spend some time in Germany as the Führer's guests. The whole family accepts the invitation and goes to Germany, excepting Rudy, who was only two years old at that point. When Rudy's relatives return from Germany six months later their love and admiration of Germany and Hitler were even bigger:

According to Mother, he (Father) had undergone a profound spiritual change in Germany. He had a new sense of purpose in life... He would become a teacher and political activist. He would become a spokesman in America for the new social order which was being born in Germany, but which in time would be the salvation of the world (36).

Thus, Rudy's life starts to be affected by Germany in a crucial way: "I myself am in one picture of the paper. It is of our entire family in the street, in front of the studio, looking up at the Nazi flag" (35).

Rudy's family came back from Germany, and flew the Nazi flag, in 1934, a time in which "flying a Nazi flag in Midland City was no more offensive than flying a Greek or Irish or Confederate flag, or whatever" (ibidem). As a matter of fact, before the US entered World War II there was certain sympathy towards the Nazi movement in Indianapolis, as Vonnegut explained in his introduction to *Mother Night*:

My personal experience with Nazi monkey business was limited. There were some vile and lively native American Fascists in my home town of Indianapolis during the thirties, and somebody slipped me a copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, I remember, which was supposed to be the Jews' secret plan for taking over the world (vii).

In any case, as soon as the US entered World War II against the Nazi regime and its allies, the situation changed, and Rudy's family's sympathies with Hitler and his regime became certainly problematic: "Somewhere in there the Nazi flag fall down. Father stopped travelling... Father wouldn't even leave the home or talk on the telephone, or look at his mail for three months or so." (38) Once World War II had ended the neighbours didn't forget (or excuse) Rudy's family's "Nazi" past. So, Rudy was raised in an environment in which the Germanic tradition was praised as the highest cultural and historical manifestation in the world, but at a certain point he was suddenly and completely deprived of this source of influence: "The subject of Hitler and the new order in Germany seemed to make people angrier with each passing day, so he (Father) had better find something else to talk about." (44). Besides his family reluctance to go back to their "German" past, the neighbours kept insisting on blaming them and Rudy was often attacked by other local boys in the following terms: "Ey, Nazi" (89)... even Rudy did never get to visit Germany or know Hitler... or even understand the Nazi question very



well since he was just a two years old boy when his father became such a pro-German activist.

The references to Germany, German characters or characters that are related in a way or another to a Germanic past are very frequent in the rest of Vonnegut's corpus as well, but it should be noted that in his most recent novels the author deals with his German origins in an increasingly more indirect and subtle way, till the point that as Robert Merrill points out, "In *Bluebeard* Vonnegut's Germanic heritage is so transformed it becomes Armenian!" (81).

As I have shown in this section of my paper, his parents, who were somehow ashamed of their own roots due to the tensions between Germany and the US in World War I, and very especially because of the Nazi regime during the next World War, did not give Kurt Vonnegut a German education. But in any case, I cannot agree with Robert Merrill's opinion that "Vonnegut's childhood roots are known primarily by their absence." (76)

I have demonstrated so far that Kurt Vonnegut's family decided not to provide his son with a German education and tried to educate him in a set of truly American ideals and beliefs. In the case of Kurt Vonnegut the notion of America (and consequently of being American) must necessarily be linked with the historical period of the Great Depression and post-depression years. During the past fifty years Kurt Vonnegut has been targeted by a number of labels, and trying to pigeonhole his literature has been one of the greatest concerns of the critics. He has been labelled as a science fiction author, a black humorist, a satirical author, a postmodernist.

The author has always rejected all these labels, arguing the following: "I'm part of the generation of 1922 and that's it. We have a large number of writers- myself, James Jones, Joe Heller, Norman Mailer- who were all born in 1922." (Abádi-Nagy 33). As it results evident from this quotation, Kurt Vonnegut has always wanted to call attention upon the Great Depression years. As Jerome Klinkowitz explains, the Great Depression had a negative effect on the family economy, but nevertheless it helped Vonnegut to understand life in a more egalitarian manner, so for Vonnegut these years were not traumatic at all: "(the Great Depression) (...) forced Kurt into a more egalitarian life- style which he now credits as one of his greatest childhood treasures" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 1). Professor Klinkowitz also makes clear the importance the Great Depression had in Vonnegut: "Although the firebombing of Dresden is usually considered the most traumatic event in Vonnegut's life, both as a writer and as a person, he himself considers the Great Depression to have been a far more difficult ordeal for the country as a whole." (Void, 31), and William Rodney Allen shares Klinkowitz's opinion (xiii).

The Great Depression had a number of immediate effects on Vonnegut and his family: the father, who had been a very prominent architect, became jobless most of the time and the mother “became depressed and withdrew from her children’s lives” (*Marvin Companion* 3). Kurt Vonnegut explains how the Great Depression affected his mother in several of his novels. In the autobiographical prologue to *Jailbird* (1979) Vonnegut explains: “My mother... had declined to go on living, since she could no longer be what she had been at the time of her marriage- one of the richest women in town” (8). Vonnegut also expresses this idea in his last novel: “My mother was addicted to being rich, to servants and unlimited charge accounts, to giving lavish dinner parties, to taking frequent first-class trips to Europe. So one might say she was tormented by withdrawal symptoms all through the Great Depression” (*Timequake* 28).

As a matter of fact, Vonnegut’s mother was never able to overcome the trauma produced by the Great Depression, and on Mother’s Day, 1944, she decided to take her own life by consuming a fatal overdose of sleeping pills. Vonnegut’s novels show many references to mothers who are distant, crazy and there are also some extremely important references to mothers killing themselves with sleeping pills. In this sense, Klinkowitz thinks that this fact is especially evident in the novel *Deadeye Dick*: “had *Deadeye Dick* been provided with a prologue as full as those in the novels that preceded it, Kurt Vonnegut might well have retold the story of his mother’s death” (Klinkowitz, *Fact*, 125).

Unlike his mother, Vonnegut’s father did not resent this lack of social status or by the economic situation of the family (that was not that bad after all, especially if we compare it with the situation of most of American middle class families of the period), but was certainly affected by the Great Depression, as Vonnegut explains in his autobiographical prologue to *Jailbird*: “So I have to say that my father, when I got to know him, when I myself was something like an adult, was a good man in full retreat from life... So an air of defeat has always been a companion of mine.” (10). This “air of defeat” certainly seems to permeate the whole of Vonnegut’s corpus but it is especially evident in *Galápagos*, a novel in which a human-induced apocalypse dooms humanity to de-evolution... a phenomenon that, in Vonnegut’s opinion is not a bad thing at all, since as we are explained in *A Man Without a Country*: “ Evolution can go to hell, as far as I am concerned. What a mistake we are” (9).

As I advanced, above, Vonnegut’s father’s reasons for retreating from life were quite different from his wife. In his case, the Great Depression deprived him of what was most valuable to him: not his social status or his properties, but his job. As Thomas F. Marvin explains, Kurt Vonnegut senior was one of Indiana’s most prominent architects , but “the Great Depression of the 1930s put a halt to building, and Kurt, Sr., had no work from 1920 to 1940.” (2). Without any project to carry on, Vonnegut’s

father felt he was completely useless, becoming a “dreamy artist” (Reilly 227), just as Rudy’s father is a dreamy artist in Deadeye Dick .

Because of the family’s economic situation, young Vonnegut had to leave Orchard School, the expensive private high school he was attending to and was enrolled in a public institution. Besides the lost of social status and academic prestige this situation implied, Kurt Vonnegut was delighted with this change: “I got pulled out of an elitist private school... and sent to a public high school. Which was swell. I liked it; it was interesting. The Depression cost me nothing.” (Allen 270). In another interview the author explains that, paradoxically enough, the Great Depression was a positive experience not only to himself but to American society as a whole, since it created a sense of union and brotherhood that is: “How did Americans beat the Great Depression? We banded together. In those days, members of the unions called each others ‘brother’ and ‘sister’.” (op.cit, 103) This sense of brotherhood is one of Vonnegut’s main obsessions, since as he explained in the famous 1973 Playboy interview: “Do you know what nucleation is? I don’t, but I’ll pretend I do. It has to do with how big something has to be in order to grow rather than to die out” (Standish 82).

The idea of loneliness being the most frequent and worst problem in American society is almost omnipresent in Vonnegut’s novels, as well as being a common feature in many other postmodern authors, from Donald Barthelme to Salman Rushdie. I think the most interesting examples of this theme occur in the following novels: *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) and *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* (1976). From my point of view, Lawrence R. Broer is completely right when he explains that “while most critics stress the sociological aspects of this novel (*Slapstick*), it is its psychological dimension that constitutes the story’s complexity and special poignancy.” (66)

In the novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* Vonnegut deals with this theme of isolation in the following way: Eliot Rosewater is an extremely wealthy American citizen who has inherited a huge fortune as well as the direction of an ancient foundation inaugurated by his ancestors, The Rosewater Foundation. Traditionally this foundation had been a way of evading (or at least cutting down) taxes, but Eliot Rosewater decides he is going to direct his foundation in a way that’s beneficial to the poor people and not only to the Rosewater family. At the beginning of the narrative Eliot is drinking far too much, he has no descendants and his marriage is collapsing.

Searching for a way to find himself Eliot abandons New York and begins a journey through the US that’s really a spiritual quest, always a Bildungsroman. Anyways, his journey and quest prove unsuccessful till he arrives to Rosewater County, a small town in Indiana from where his family (and fortune) originated. Once in this community, Eliot’s search

can be considered over, and his spiritual quest fulfilled: "I am home. I know now that this has always been home..." (41).

Eliot's main purpose in Rosewater County will be that of helping Rosewater people: "I am going to care about these people" (sp). Eliot considers Rosewater people need him, as a paternal-like figure, to care about them because they live in a state of absolute loneliness and isolation; so he will play the role of the father in this community. Nevertheless, and besides his noble intentions, his goals are extremely difficult to reach. On the one hand Eliot's own family is even more disturbed than before, since his wife cannot cope with Eliot's obsessive piety and is finally diagnosed "Samaritrophobia... hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself" (48); and finally abandons him. If his own family is not able to become a part of the bigger family Eliot is trying to form, Rosewater people isn't either.

Rosewater citizens do really admire Eliot and in a way he is beloved, but as a "monarch" (46) not as a father. So, Eliot's foundation, besides his motto "HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?" (57), is not very successful in fighting the isolation Eliot so cleverly identified. In any case, Eliot's actions are not fully fruitless, since he is able to make Diana Moon Glampers feel she was a member of a real family for the first time in her sorrowful life: "... (she) was a sixty-eight-year-old virgin who, by almost by anybody's standard, was too dumb to life. No one had ever loved her. There was no reason why anyone should. She was ugly, stupid, and boring." (65) Eliot does not offer Diana any money, or other sort of material help. Since her problems are social and of bad health there is not much Eliot can do besides listening to her and making her feel she is important to somebody, in other words, to make her feel that she is a member of a family. But by helping her in this way Eliot Rosewater is really helping her more than any of her real relatives had ever helped her, and thus Diana understands how important and beautiful Eliot's aims are: "You gave up everything a man is supposed to want, just to help the little people, and the little people know it. God bless you, Mr. Rosewater." (70).

Besides the affection Rosewater people feel toward Eliot Rosewater and the success with Diana Moon Glampers, this character's utopia began to fall apart. On the one hand it starts to collapse due to Eliot's father's desire to have his son medically treated, and on the other hand it's Eliot Rosewater's own personal situation that makes his dream unviable: "He had had one hell of a night, not only with telephone calls, but with people coming in person at all hours, more of half of them drunk." (171). The situation becomes extreme when a young lawyer, Norman Mushari, decides to take Eliot to Court to prove his sanity (in the hope he is declared legally insane and deprived of the control of the Rosewater Foundation, that will be from that point on directed by a far-away relative

of Eliot, who is, obviously, Norman's client). From that moment on, Eliot's father decides enough has been enough: Eliot must abandon Rosewater County and his failed utopian extended family: "This part of your life is over. It had to end sometime" (179).

By this point, Eliot is so disenchanted with his project that "accepted this, or seemed to. He didn't argue with it, allowed that he had better washed up and get dressed for the trip." (180) As for Rosewater people, they really feel sorry for Eliot's departure: "Oh, Mr. Rosewater- if you go away and never come back, we'll die" (184), but they are also conscious of the fact that Eliot's presence in Rosewater County was not so necessary at all, since when Eliot asks one of the people asking him to stay why are they afraid of his absence the woman cannot really formulate a coherent answer: "I don't know" (185).

After this incident Eliot Rosewater finally understands his utopia is over and he must go away, and thus when he is asked whether he wants a one way or a round ticket out of Rosewater County, "Eliot did not hesitate.' One way, if you please'" (200). When he is finally in the bus and leaving Rosewater and his project Diana Moon Glampers tries to stop him for the last time: "You're my church group! You're my everything! You're my government. You're my husband. You're my friends" (201), but Eliot's own emotional breakdown and sense of failure are so intense that Diana's moving words does not make him feel any better at all.

Shortly after having finally abandoned Rosewater County "everything went black for Eliot" (206). The blank period lasts for a long time (about a year), and when he finally recovers his consciousness he is at a mental hospital, with a fit and slim body and a mental condition that makes a popular magazine asks his readers whether he is "(the) SANEST MAN IN AMERICA?" (210) Besides his apparent ideal state, "Eliot felt his soul cringe, knew he could never stand to return to Rosewater County again" (217), so he decides that he must keep being a part of the Rosewater community, the Rosewater family he tried to create, by becoming an actual relative of many of the inhabitants of Rosewater County. Thus, he decided that "(he) will legally acknowledge that every child in Rosewater County said to be mine is mine, regardless of blood type. Let them all have full rights of inheritance as my sons and daughters" (221-2).

As we see, the way Vonnegut deals with the theme of isolation and America and the solution he proposes is certainly complex. If well it's true that Vonnegut acknowledges that an excessive doses of idealism may drive to terrible consequences (alcoholism, lost of the wife) with few real benefices to the community the author also wants to make clear that even this extreme example may be beneficial to those suffering from loneliness in a more extreme way, as the case of Diana Moon Glampers proves. At the end of the narrative Eliot Rosewater is certainly disenchanted with his past experiences with utopia, but it is not less true that

he keeps considering that becoming a family is the only viable option in order to avoid loneliness, and thus he becomes the father of many Rosewater children.

*Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* (1976) introduces an even more radical proposal to fight loneliness in the American society. It is true that *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* is not Vonnegut's best novel, as many critics have fervently demonstrated (in a 1977 interview Vonnegut explains that after the publication of the novel, "All of a sudden, critics wanted me squashed like a bug" [Hayman 184]), but nevertheless I think it is the novel that best expresses Vonnegut's obsession with creating an extended family in order to fight loneliness. In the prologue to the novel Kurt Vonnegut states two points that are especially relevant to our study: on the one hand, Vonnegut declares that "this is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography" (1), and on the other hand Vonnegut mentions explicitly "my childhood in the Great Depression" (*ibidem*), and explains that this historical period conditioned the way he understands life in general and literature in particular.

Vonnegut explains that one of the reasons why he had such a happy childhood besides the Great Depression was that, "when we were children in Indianapolis, Indiana, it appeared that we would always have an extended family of genuine relatives there" (4), but "by the time the Great Depression and a Second World War was over, it was easy for my brother and my sister and me to wander away from Indianapolis." (5)

The reasons why after the Depression and WWII the Vonnegut family becomes much shorter and less important to young Kurt and his brother and sister are various, but especially because of the lost of the German roots I alluded to previously and secondly because of the high mobility demanded by the post-WWII American society.

The premise of the novel *Slapstick, or Lonesome no More!* is the following one: loneliness and the problems deriving from this loneliness are the causes of the majority of the problems contemporary American society suffers, and thus Dr Wilbur Daffodil-II Swain, the main protagonist of the novel, decides to devote his life to fight loneliness in America. In order to do so he campaigns to become the President of the U.S. As the character explains in a quite honest manner: "I spoke of American loneliness. It was the only subject I needed for victory, which was lucky. It was the only subject I had" (112).

Kurt Vonnegut sincerely shares Dr Wilbur Daffodil-II Swain's opinion on how terrible loneliness results to American citizens. In any case, and as it happened in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, the solution offered by the protagonist of the novel is completely utopic and unviable. In the case of *Slapstick*, the way of fighting loneliness is to give each American "ten thousand brothers and sisters... one-hundred and ninety-thousand cousins" (113).

In order to provide all American citizens with that many relatives, a series of computers gave everybody a new middle name that was "selected at immaculate random, and was not intended as a comment on my character or my appearance or my past" (119). Once the new middle name is issued everyone with a common middle name (that can not legally be changed under any given circumstance, 122) becomes legally (and is supposed to do the same from a moral point of view) a relative of every other person sharing the same middle name.

As we see, President Daffodil-II (née Rockefeller)'s project is as simple as absurd... and obviously the results of this naïve invention are terrible: the nation becomes divided in a number of different independent regions... and even kingdoms! Taking into account Vonnegut's natural tendency toward humor and menippean satire, the very title of the book and the nature of the plan itself, this bizarre and somehow ridiculous result is not surprising at all.

I consider that both *God Bless Your, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slapstick or Lonesome no More!* are the best examples of Vonnegut's concern with loneliness, a concern coming from his childhood during the Great Depression. As we see, Vonnegut seems to miss his childhood, when he was surrounded by a real extended family that made him feel shelter and beloved, but at the same time he is absolutely unable of offering a viable way in which our contemporary society may go back to such an ideal past.

In *Like Shaking Hands with God* Kurt Vonnegut affirmed the following: "That's the story of my life, too. I went to a good high school, and everything was noise after that" (77). In this paper I have studied in depth the questions that obsessed the author during this period of his life: trying to come to terms with his complex German roots at the same time he became a true American citizen.

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