

The Anti-hero and the Anxiety of Authorship in Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*

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Abstract:

This chapter inspects the anxiety of authorship that is manifested through the character of Trout in Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions (1973). It demonstrates how the author struggles in an American society that is totally submissive to the capitalistic system. Such inspection is highlighted through anti-heroes Trout and Dwayne: each of them stands for a specific aspect that aims at criticizing the condition of the American life. The study relies for its theoretical framework on Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes' theorizations concerning authors and authorship. Their arguments will be used to help us understand the anxiety that the writer undergoes in Breakfast of Champions. Vonnegut projects his anxiety as a writer through the character of Trout. The author's anxiety concerns his influence on society and whether he will make a room for himself in the canon.

Key Words: anxiety, fear of failure, anti-hero.

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is an American writer who is well known for his mastery of postmodern techniques and style. He is one of the cardinal representatives of the contemporary literary age; and is elected as member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1973. Vonnegut has been one of the Honorary Presidents of the American Humanist Association. He has written various literary works: novels, plays and non-fictional works. Vonnegut is known for his satirical literary style, he imbues his works with an apocalyptic taint that nonetheless embodies a light in it. The first impression the reader gets is the gloomy and deteriorating state of individuals and their social world, yet Vonnegut succeeds in transmitting a message of hope.

Breakfast of champions (1973) is a novel about America in the 1970s. The novel's events revolve around an art festival in Midland City, which is a miniature sample of the postmodern age. Both Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout have anti-heroic tendencies, each in his special way. Before their meeting, each one of them has his own life and own concerns that torment him. Dwayne is a wealthy businessman in Midland City, yet he has bad chemicals that lead him to gradually lose his sanity. He starts questioning the environment he lives in, the individuals who surround him. On the other hand, Trout is a science fiction writer, who lives in New York, strives to be a successful writer whose art is acknowledged and praised. Various attempts to find

a good publisher to his novels failed, yet he succeeds ironically later in publishing them in pornographic magazines. Eliot Rosewater, who is the only and lonely fan of Trout's fiction, invites him as guest writer, a great discovery of a gifted novelist to the art festival. By the end of the novel, the meeting turns to be disastrous and has a horrific effect on Dwayne. The latter reads Trout's last novel *Now It Can Be Told* that infects his mind and turns him into a monster with no feelings for others since he considers them mere machines without emotions. Dwayne loses his sanity; he becomes violent and uncontrolled, leading twelve people to be urgently taken to hospital.

What Should an Author Be ? Dead or Alive!?

Breakfast of Champions depict the struggle that an author faces in the postmodern world in order to secure a place in the canon. In 'What is an Author?' (1998), Michel Foucault explains that " The coming into being of the notion of "author" constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences"(p.205). The author is a generator of ideas who has a heavy responsibility in transmitting them. The failure or the success of the author in circulating his discourse is what haunts the character of Trout, whom Vonnegut creates to enable himself to be free without being in a direct contact with his own society. The attribution of a discourse to an individual is a complex operation that aims at constructing a "being of reason" that is known as "author". Being an author requires an individual with a creative power and a deep insightful motive that can be found in his or her writing.

Writing, in a transcendental fashion, paves the way for the projection of the hidden meaning that the work can embody. According to Foucault (1998), the work has a critical dimension which incorporates a set of signs that project the determination of the author. Such representation forms an image of an author amid an attempt of neutralization in which the author is situated in a grey zone (p.209). In an extreme tendency, Ronald Barthes (1977) considers writing as a means of destruction of every voice that projects an opinion. It is more of an act of neutralization in which all sort of identity dissolve (p.142). Despite the attempt of neutralization, the author's name will be out-burdened with a responsibility. Every piece of information that is revealed about certain author makes the functioning of that name exposed to change. The latter is the result or the outcome of a social and an artistic responsibility that is expected from the author. In other words, the author's name stands for certain discourses within a given society for it functions as a generator and a distributor of certain discourses within a culture. This role creates a crucial responsibility that falls upon the consciousness of the author, establishing for him a kind of duty towards his society. On the other hand, this massive importance in terms of responsibility creates a feeling of anxiety in other authors, who quest academic acknowledgment. Knowing that discourses are risks to be taken and that authors choose to share with their societies, the fear from rejection and failure is what often hunts them. Such fear from failure is the result of a comparison with the founders of discursively as Marx and Freud who made

differences in the literary academic field with their discourses. For that, the writer is in a state of dilemma whether to sacrifice himself for the sake of the concentration on the symbol rather than the function of the generator (Barthes, 1977, p.142), or the invention of multiple selves in the same work to discover the implicit meaning that resides in the text (Foucault, 1998, p. 215-16).

It is important to stress upon the fact that the development that the postmodern age witnesses led to a change in the promotion of literary works. Foucault (1998) theorizes that "the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function" (p.221-222). It is the case for Trout who is in fact an intentional creation of Vonnegut to depict him, the science fiction writer is in reality treated as unimportant and trivial, yet his ideological writing manifests the spirit of the postmodern age. Vonnegut is in a state of betweenness, he is neither a dead author nor fully restful in terms of authorial impact upon his society.

The Anxiety of Authorship

The use of popular genres in contemporary works is one feature that metafictional writers deploy to project either the ills of a certain culture or the multiplicity of culture in itself. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut uses science fiction to project the ills of the American culture in an indirect allegorical fashion that aims at enlightening the reader's mind through defamiliarization. The latter grants the opportunity to the reader to take a neutral stand and reconsider his life and the social system that rules his life. Both Trout and Dwayne's stories encapsulate crucial elements of the American history and their effects on individuals as in the case of slavery, and the great depression. Trout does best abridge the anxiety and invisibility of Vonnegut as a writer. The employment of Trout and Dwayne in the novel is similar to Becket's use of characters as vehicles that reveal introspective thoughts and actions about an often neglected vision of a vague and a dim universe.

Science fiction in *Breakfast of Champion* is a crucial means via which Vonnegut conveys his thoughts and visions through Trout about the condition of the world. Stefan Weißhampel argues in *The role of Science Fiction Asimov & Vonnegut a Comparison* (2008) that "Science fiction is symbolic but strongly focuses on details rather than on poetic language. The estrangement in science fiction, a distinct difference between the reader's reality and the reality presented with the text is not metaphysical or supernatural" (p.25). The only aspect that constitutes the difference between the two realities is the aspect of estrangement which resides mainly in the atmosphere or the physical environment. Both worlds share the same social and moral issues, what makes the difference between them is mainly their presentation. Science fiction writers opt for a non-ordinary presentation in which they distance their narratives from the earthly planet; they include in their fiction aliens from other planets who become the alternative representatives of humans. Vonnegut chose for Trout to be a science fiction writer who deals with foreign planets to comment on the deterioration of the human world. For

Foucault(1998), the author's function resides in the distance and the division he makes among the different selves present in the work. Such separation makes the difference for it enables the reader to discover what is beyond the obscured content of the work. By creating an alter ego, the author creates a critical distance and channels meanings (p.215). Via Trout, Vonnegut science fiction exposes the sufferance of humans. By using Trout who stands for defamiliarization, Vonnegut succeeded in creating a critical distance that enables him to be speared from any sort of attack. To phrase it very schematically, Vonnegut escapes the burden of criticizing his society directly by creating another self, Trout, who is able to convey the implicit meaning that Vonnegut wants to transmit.

The literary character of Trout embodies the fears, worries and aspirations of that an author can experience Trout stands for the self-awareness of Vonnegut. Sharon Spencer explains in *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* (1971) that "what captures the excitement of the novelist is the possibility of a character as a persona, a voice through which the author may express a special attitude toward reality"(p.5-6). In Vonnegut's case, Trout is not only a voice through which the writer communicates his thoughts; he is a self that author employs to unveil the implicit significations in the text. The plethora of novels and short stories that Vonnegut has attributed to the character of Trout epitomize the ideas and the criticism that he intends to show up. Vonnegut through Trout questions every aspect of American lifestyle and culture, which seems ordinary, by doing so, he invites the reader to reconsider and revisit his society with an attitude of detachment that is acquired from science fiction.

It is important to highlight the character of Kilgore Trout to demystify the struggle that the postmodern author endures. Trout has a depressing life that makes of him the most suitable character to display the ills and the burdensome spirit of the postmodern age. The fear of being unsuccessful writer leads Trout to be in a desperate condition. He reaches the state of publishing his works in pornographic magazines for the sake of having them read. The deteriorated situation of the society created in Trout a feeling of invisibility and inattention to his status as a writer, amid the sexual revolution. Trout's art brought him only "doodly squat" because it only served as a filling gap for the flourishing pornographic magazines that subverted the balance of ordinariness and legitimized moral degeneracy. The public enactment of these immoral magazines under the slogan of art and freedom of expression causes Trout's invisibility along with his fiction. This brings to mind what has been discussed by Foucault (1998) in terms of discourse circulation, stating that "modes of circulation, valorization, attribution and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each"(p.220). Trout, or to be more precise, Vonnegut rejects the idea of being an entertainer stating in a tone of exclamation "open your eyes!", "Do I look like a dancer, a singer, a man of joy?"(p.233). Vonnegut struggles to have a voice and a discourse that would have the possibility to affect his society, yet he is haunted with notion of the death of the author, leading him to create the character of Trout. The pathetic journey of Trout from New York to Midland city enables the

writer to encounter other depressive persons who suffer from the mechanic system that governs America. In short, Trout projects the sufferance of a writer who quests acknowledgement, in a world where pornography becomes the bestseller of publishing houses. Such act showcases the deteriorating situation of Americans in terms of readership; people become more interested in immoral writings that have no value. The fear of being unsuccessful ensued a feeling of anxiety, a feeling of an authorial death or a lack of literary acknowledgment. Besides being a tormented writer and unsuccessful family holder, Trout is the manifestation of the intellectual anti-hero who triggers through his fiction the repressed madness in Dwayne. The latter suffers from a psychological distress that Trout's novel aggravates, leading him to be a violent person. On a larger scale, Vonnegut violates and blurs the boundary between the fictitious realm and the one of reality. He interacts in the novel with his characters, in fact, by the end of the novel he becomes one of the central characters. Trout, Dwayne and Vonnegut form a triangle of characters interlinked to one another. Each of these characters has an impact on the others: Vonnegut writes the novel and creates the science fiction writer, Trout, who can be considered his alter ego; who writes a novel that triggers Dwayne's insanity.

Vonnegut's fictive selves are what make of him a schizophrenic metafictional writer and character within the same time. Vonnegut is more than a simple writer who is telling a story, he is rather a self-divided individual who enters into dialogue with his unordinary creativity. He exposes his fears to the reader in a dialogue with himself, reflecting his schizophrenic writing. He states "There in the cocktail lounge, peering out through my leaks at a world of my own invention, I mouthed the word schizophrenia. The sound and the appearance of the word has fascinated me for many years- I did not and do not know for certain that I have that disease"(Vonnegut, 1973, p.193). It is important to highlight the relation between Vonnegut and Trout; the former uses the science fiction writer as an alter ego who is burdened with all the ills and the fake values of the American society. In other words, he makes of Trout the figure that represents his struggles as an author in a world fully mechanized and deprived of freedom and free will. The scene of the parrot with Trout, in which the bird refuses to go out of the cage, encloses the aspect of liberty for it showcases the state of Trout's literary production. Expressing ideas and criticism on the condition of the American society in a direct way is a disturbing act for Trout. The latter opts for science fiction to secure his state as writer and avoid being attacked. One short story of Trout entitled "Dancing Fool" exposes that the inability of individuals to comment on and criticize their environment is only a way of preventing progress. Michel Foucault explains in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (1988) that:

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest... We must free ourselves from the sacralization of the social as the only reality... Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one

believed, to see what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult (p.154-155).

The collected novels and short stories of Trout demonstrate the corruption of the American people, the destruction of the planet earth and the decay that runs over peoples' brains. Such approach to life makes of America an anti-self-help nation.

Science fiction that exists in *Breakfast of Champions* deals with social and individual issues in a comic and tragic fashion. Both are interlinked to each other, the comic notion that the reader gets when reading the story is imbedded with the gloomy representation of humans' destiny. It is a call in disguise to any reader to free oneself from the blind conformity to certain economic and cultural systems. It is important to give credence to the moral dimension that these science fiction stories present to the reader. Vonnegut by means of the character of Trout enlightens the reader's mind by creating a sort of a social awakening. These plots deal with problems of free will, overpopulation, gender condition and race that American society suffers from. Peter J. Reed (2000) explains that these plots give "alternative worlds [that] are almost always closely connected to our own, in the theme and moral if not in features, And their threats identifiable with those we know"(p.35). The purpose of Vonnegut is to raise awareness in an atypical manner that brings novelty to his mode of writing. He adopts a comic-tragic mode to emphasize the human insensitivity. This brings to mind Northrop Frey's (1968) opinion about comedy that it "is designed not to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge"(p.81). Nevertheless, some of the stories are not comic but rather generates pain in that they embody discord and divergence of the chaotic postmodern world. Trout states thoughtfully "maybe an unhappy failure is exactly what they need to see"(p.37). Such statement airs the seriousness and the depth that Vonnegut projects in Trout's allegorical writings, so people can wake from their hibernation.

From a popular standpoint, people believe that science fiction is allegorical to the present rather than a prophecy. This belief depends on the writer's motif whether using science fiction to hope for a better future or to denounce the technological development and the notion of progress. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut demonstrates his disquiets about the perils of technological progress through the character of Trout, who despises the technological development. Such evolution leads humans to commit a slow process of suicide on two levels, personal and global. Alternatively, Vonnegut denounces the effects that technological progress, under the pretext of prosperity, generates on the planet and on the people from physical and moral standpoints. The Sexual revolution under the pretext of freedom of expression and ecological destruction under the slogan of technological development are the main aspects that Trout is subjected to parody in his Science fiction.

Trout is a replica of postmodern writers in search of truth, in a world that did not grant them the possibility of even having "doodly-squat". Trout's experience as a struggling writer

demystifies multiple issues of the American society. Broer Lawrence explains in *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* (1994) that Trout "is given Vonnegut's social conscience and artistic goals but a pessimism so great that it negates his artistic mission and vitiates his moral zeal"(p.102). One should hint at the fact that Midland city is a miniature sample of the postmodern American society in which the writer and his anti-heroes unmask the miserable state of Americans and the rotten lifestyle they adopt. The apocalyptic atmosphere that the reader senses has a paradoxical nature; there is a feeling of confusion whether it serves as warning to human kind or as negative pessimistic depressive outcry. Both Trout and Vonnegut indirectly break the stable rhythm of life by introducing the reader to a feeling of instability and wandering. This binary existence of pessimism and optimism in *Now It Can be Told* creates an ambivalence that makes the reader unable to condemn or side with Trout's work. In fact, the pessimism that Trout generates has a double function either to awaken consciousness of the individual or to infect his mind; which is the case for Dwayne.

The Anti-hero as Social Critic

Despite the fact that Trout's fiction is allegorical of the ills that the American society suffers from; his last work embodies a dangerous idea that accentuates the madness, residing within the individual as in the case of Dwayne. Later on, the healing power of ideas that Trout focuses on enables him, surprisingly, to get a Noble Prize in the field of medicine instead of literature "We are Healthy only to the extent that our ideas are Humane"(p.16). Ideas have a power that is similar to chemical medicines; they heal the mind and help the individual to be sane. However, these ideas may have, as well, a destructive effect upon the individual, leading him to be an extremist full of psychological and mental problems. To be more precise, ideas have a dual nature that depends on the intention of their generator, whether he is sane or insane, conformist or a non-conformist and on the reader's spirit. The reader is highly linked to his environment for "No man is an island". Dwayne's schizophrenic mind pictures the chaos of the American society, making of him an explosive bomb that is ready to blow up at any time, needing only a slight trigger. The psychology of the raisonateur or the thinker is crucial in terms of effects upon the audience or the receiver, especially when the subject matter is related to fiction. One best example that illustrates the danger of ideas is Trout's work *Now It Can Be Told*. The novel brings out the suppressed madness that resides within Dwayne; it grants him a feeling of superiority over other humans whom Trout describes as machines. The mechanization of human beings in *Breakfast of Champions* is similar to Herbert Well's dehumanization of the working class in *The Time Machine* (1895). This dehumanization or robotism embodies an early Marxist critique of the robotic effect that capitalism generates upon individuals. The novel preaches free will from an extreme perspective, a free will that makes of Dwayne a hysteric individual with insane behavior. It is vital to highlight the negativity that free will can bring into play when it is approached from an extremist perspective. The excessive belief in free will may lead to a state in which the individual frees himself from all humane restrictions and laws. It violates the individuals' lives and the mechanism of the community in general. Such violation is

what constitutes of Trout an anti-hero from an experimental perspective. The novel is a mere experiment that Trout seeks its result and impact on the individual.

Anti-heroism in the work of Vonnegut undergoes an act of partition. Trout represents the intellectual anti-heroic dimension whereas Dwayne stands for the enactment of the intellectual anti-heroic percept of Trout, especially in the cocktail lounge where Dwayne reads the novel and passes into action. Though both anti-heroes are different, Jerome Klinkovitz states, in *The Vonnegut Effect* (2012), that the plot "brings two raisonneurs together, making this work Vonnegut's most thoroughly developed novel of ideas"(p.105). It is all resumed in the act of reading the novel *Now It Can be Told* which has an immediate impact that indicates the inability of Dwayne to tell apart what is right, what is wrong and what is real and what is fictitious. Borer (1994) explains that "Trout's book gives "shape and direction" to Dwayne's craziness"(p.103). Trout states in his novel *Now It Can Be Told*:

You are surrounded by loving machines, hating machines, greedy machines, unselfish machines, brave machines, cowardly machines, truthful machines, lying machines, funny machines, solemn machines," he read. "Their only purpose is to stir you up in every conceivable way, so the Creator of the Universe can watch your reactions. They can no more feel or reason than grandfather clocks."(p.254)

This makes of Dwayne a manifestation of an awareness that is characterized by a kind schizophrenia.

Both Trout and Dwayne are anti-heroes in their own ways; each of them manifests the chaos and the unbalanced life in his manner. Dwayne projects no feelings of compassion towards his surroundings which is due to his heartbreaking personal life. He estranges his only son and loses his wife as she commits suicide by drinking Drano, as a sign of the failure of their wretched marriage. All these tragic events drove Dwayne to disregard the other characters who share his daily routine. The absurd complexity of the postmodern life makes him psychologically unstable and distrustful, leading him to be an ungovernable lunatic on the verge of madness and perdition. This brings to mind Charles Glicksberg's account of the modern man, 'The Tragic Hero' in *Heroes and Anti-heroes: A Reader in Depth* (1968), stating that the individual "is consumed by a feeling of purposelessness, believing in nothing. Besieged by doubt, divided within, he is engaged in a perpetual monologue of introspection"(p.357). Dwayne's behavior towards his mistress and unjustifiable attitudes reflect his sense of doubt and feeling of uncertainty about the world he is living in and the people who surround him. On the other hand, Dwayne symbolizes the capitalistic spirit that consists of the constant urge for wealth. He owns various businesses and diverse shares in other companies, reflecting the hunger for the acquisition of money, which makes of the individual an empty soul that gains its social meaning only from a certain economic code. In short, the lust for wealth and power of Vonnegut's characters depicts the materialistic nature of postmodernism. Joseph Campbell explains in *The Hero with Thousand Faces* (2008)

that man who is a "social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization...it's ideals are of the secular state, in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and recourses"(p.334). In a further explanation about the American system, Todd Davis argues in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism (2006)* that "Even in the United States, in a nation whose governmental processes and legislation appear to embrace pluralism ... there is an economic system, free enterprise that simultaneously exploits and deters the proliferation of certain factions" (p.28). From a financial perspective, Dwayne captures the image of the American economic system which strips away the humanity of the individual.

Unlike the absurd hero who does not grant so much importance to the irrationality that exists in the world, Vonnegut's anti-heroes are attached to life, they question their reality and its authenticity. However, there are various points that Trout, Dwayne and the absurd hero share with each other. The question of suicide is of crucial importance, the absurd hero is haunted with the idea of suicide, trying to deduce relevance from the state of being alive. Trout and Dwayne experienced the temptation of suicide in different ways as well as Vonnegut himself. Crime is another point that both the absurd hero and Dwayne refer to, the latter's post reading of Trout's novel leads him to submerge the violent monster that resides within him. The fact that he harms eleven innocent people due to his misconception of the idea of free will, makes him invoke the dark violent side that each individual tries to hide and cover. A further common point is the acceptance of the absurdity of the world, Vonnegut through Trout's fiction criticizes the American legacy along with the allegedly noble values; yet, he deals with his characters differently in that both anti-heroes are not acting for a heroic change but rather for an attempt to accept the status quo. What is important to clarify is that Vonnegut's anti-heroes acceptance is neither passive nor active; it burdens the reader with the choice of deciding whether it should be positive or negative. The author employs his anti-heroes to incite the reader to deduce from their experience the importance of reason and awareness for the human being. Vonnegut's approach is to accept reality but within the same time to affect a change on the personal level. In other words, the author highlights the importance of affecting change on the personal level by embracing one's awareness and working towards a more reasonable approach to life.

Conclusion

To sum up, the chapter's intention is to project how Vonnegut depicts the struggle of an author in the postmodern age. Vonnegut opts for a specific type of characters, anti-heroes, who can best depict the chaotic condition of the contemporary American society in general and the individual in specific. Both Dwayne and Trout exhibit the suffering that Americans are exposed to, regardless their social status. Vonnegut through Trout presents to the reader a pretty apocalyptic science fiction via which he criticizes the American culture and mirrors his fear of being an unsuccessful author who is unable to affect change in his society. On the other hand,

Dwayne is representative of the postmodern man who is fully imbued with a capitalistic taint, however he projects the feeling of loss in a mechanistic society.

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