

*SLAPSTICK;*

OR

*LAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE*

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*LAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE:*  
VONNEGUT AND SWIFT MISPERCEIVED

By  
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## A B S T R A C T

This paper is primarily concerned with demonstrating the influence of Jonathan Swift on Kurt Vonnegut; or, more specifically, of *Gulliver's Travels* on *Slapstick*. The introductory chapter establishes the possibility of a Swiftian influence from Vonnegut's proposed "Preface" to an edition of the *Travels* ("Jonathan Swift Misperceived," Chapter XIV of Vonnegut's *Palm Sunday*). Previous criticism that compares Vonnegut to Swift (Wymer, Shaw), and how this study differs from this criticism, is examined. Some general terms relevant to an examination of both authors are subsequently defined (Abrams). The Introduction closes with a brief outline of the contents of the following chapters.

Chapter One surveys and assesses some of the more important reviews and criticism on *Slapstick*, and forms a basis for the following discussion. Chapter Two, the heart of the thesis, is a direct comparison of *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Chapter Three examines how Vonnegut reads Swift, as ascertained from his proposed "Preface," and how this reading manifests itself in *Slapstick*--in essence, a

Vonnegutian look at Swift. An 'allegorical' examination of Vonnegut, constructed on the framework of the entire paper to that point, is then conducted--in essence, a Swiftian look at Vonnegut. The concluding chapter summarizes the contents of the earlier chapters, and determines the merit of the comparison study.

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## INTRODUCTION

"To whom it may concern:"

So begins Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick*. With the novel's typically unconventional premise, cast of bizarre characters, and "saucy spaghetti of ideas" (Updike 43), it is indeed difficult to ascertain just whom it *does* concern. Labels such as science fiction, satire, and black humour have been applied to Vonnegut's enigmatic style--labels that have done more to obscure than to explain his writing. Such labels are a convenient tool that critics use as a shorthand to tie authors in neat little bundles that can be handled with relative ease. What, then, is to be done with works that defy this sort of rigid classification? Why, come up with another label, of course! Some sort of amalgamation of all these labels might be appropriate--'black science satire,' for example. A more practical recourse would be to use a label that incorporates the ideas of all the labels used to describe Vonnegut. "Menippean satire" (Gill 89; Dhar 60), "fabulative satire" (Scholes 74), and "stoical or Epicurean comedy" (78) have been suggested. However, one of the best labels for Vonnegut's writing



proposed so far has to be "Swiftian satire." This label is superior to others because it has the advantage of not actually being a rigid classification, since the phrase "Swiftian satire" entails an explanation of the works of Jonathan Swift--an author who perennially has been as critically difficult to define as Vonnegut.

The comparison with Swift is not completely arbitrary. Direct influence is difficult to prove conclusively, but the circumstantial evidence is significant. Chapter XIV of Kurt Vonnegut's *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage* is entitled "Jonathan Swift Misperceived." It is "an essay" Vonnegut "submitted as a preface for a new edition of *Gulliver's Travels*," which was subsequently rejected (255). The essay first saw print in *Palm Sunday*, which was published in 1981. The actual date Vonnegut wrote this "preface," however, can be established from the piece itself. Vonnegut writes that Swift "began to write *Gulliver's Travels* when he was about my age, which is fifty-four" (256). Vonnegut was born in 1922, so, assuming that he is telling the truth here, this preface was written in 1976--incidentally, the same year *Slapstick* was published. It stands to reason, then, that Vonnegut at the very least was aware of some of Swift's writings when he wrote *Slapstick*.

Applying the term "Swiftian" to Vonnegut's satire is not new. Robert Scholes, in *The Fabulators*, refers to Swift a number of times in connection to Vonnegut, most notably when he speaks of "the king of Brobdingnag's pronouncement on European history" and compares it to Vonnegut's writing on World War II (77). In "The Excrement Festival: Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," Patrick W. Shaw observes that "in Vonnegut there is definitely some Swiftian satire" (3), and examines five scatological epiphanies in the novel in light of this (4-11). Thomas L. Wymer's article "The Swiftian Satire of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr." is perhaps the most extensive comparison to date between Swift's and Vonnegut's writing. Wymer observes that "the problems of reading Vonnegut show striking parallels with those encountered in reading Swift," and attempts to demonstrate that Vonnegut

is an unusually able satirist who, in a manner typical of Swift, although not necessarily in deliberate imitation of him, does lead us to normative judgments about the evils he attacks. (239)

Wymer explains the parallel problems encountered when reading the two authors by noting that Vonnegut "does not choose sides among those he attacks because his technique is the Swiftian one of presenting equally false theses and antitheses" (241).

Perhaps Wymer's most valuable contribution to an understanding of both authors is his discussion of what he calls "the problem of the second irony" in Swift (239). He explains, citing Maynard Mack, that the satirist, "in order to attack some evil," establishes a "satiric voice" or "persona" that represents a "more or less ideal norm" (239). The attacks meted out by this persona seem perfectly rational, but then everything that is said is suddenly undermined by an absurd proposition rendering the persona no longer trustworthy. Wymer uses Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and *A Tale of a Tub* as examples to explain this point. He concludes that "the persona thus becomes the voice not of an ideal norm but of an opposing extreme which is equally fallacious" (240). Reading Vonnegut, he says, offers similar problems (239), and he identifies the Vonnegut who appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a "satiric persona" (243). Using Billy Pilgrim as an example, Wymer discusses a recurrent Vonnegut type, the "agent-victim" (243 ff.). Basing his discussion on Tony Tanner's article "The Uncertain Messenger: A Study of the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," Wymer explains how the problem of the second irony works in *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

First we are led to see how culture, society, the universe itself seem to deny our freedom by categorizing us in terms of artificial systems and using us (the thesis layer). Then we

are led to recognize how we contribute to that process because we are users and victimizers as well, the actual agents of our own victimization (the antithesis layer). Finally, we are presented with the question of whether it is possible to break out of this cruel self-destructive pattern. (244)

In a position contrary to most critics, Wymer maintains that "Vonnegut does...suggest a more positive possibility, but it is important to realize that his 'answer,' although it will clearly imply a moral norm, will not be exactly a 'solution'" (244).

Wymer cites part of J. Michael Crichton's description of "a response to Vonnegut," which sounds "remarkably close to that produced in the attentive reader by Swiftian satire":

It is a classic sequence of reactions to any Vonnegut book. One begins smugly, enjoying the sharp wit of a compatriot as he carves up Common Foes. But the sharp wit does not stop, and sooner or later it is directed against the Wrong Targets. Finally it is directed against oneself. It is this switch in midstream, this change in affiliation, which is so disturbing. (241)<sup>1</sup>

Wymer further asserts that "the narrator functions as a reliable ironic observer for most of the novel until, in a manner typical of Swift, he becomes himself the object of satire" (256). He claims that the simple, oft-repeated phrase "So it goes"

functions ambiguously as the sign of the persona's indifference and as Vonnegut's ironic comment on

Tralfamadorian indifference, a device of double irony common in Swift. (260)

All of the connections Wymer makes between Vonnegut and Swift are well-founded. However, Wymer errs by singling out a 'real' Vonnegut and a 'real' Swift, the serious author who leaves satire and irony behind:

Vonnegut steps out of his satiric persona and gives his answer to the novel's question, thereby separating himself from Billy and the Tralfamadorians (it is analogous to Swift's practice when, after having presented his outrageous proposal as a modest one, he concludes, "Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients," and proceeds to list a set of alternatives so practical and humane that it becomes clear that the ironic mask has been dropped). (260)

Though it seems like a safe example from Swift, it is dangerous to identify him without an "ironic mask" at any point in his fiction--or at least without an ironic glasses, false nose and moustache. The same is true of Vonnegut. Neither author in his satiric works gives us just cause to trust his narrator *completely* for even a moment. The best conclusion may be that "the 'true Swift' is still, and perhaps always will be, uncertain" (Benét 950)--a statement that seems equally true of Vonnegut. Nonetheless, Wymer's piece is quite successful overall, and goes a long way towards not only explaining Vonnegut's satire but also giving fresh insight into Swift's irony.

Like Wymer's article, Patrick Shaw's "The Excrement Festival: Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," also published before *Slapstick*, is notable for its parallels between Vonnegut and Swift. Shaw makes a direct connection between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gulliver's Travels*, stating that

Vonnegut's humans-Yahoos are the most excremental, filthiest of beasts, and life among them is a misery; and, like Lemuel Gulliver, Billy Pilgrim voyages to foreign lands (Gulliver after being kidnaped by pirates, Pilgrim by spacemen) to escape the foulness of their species. Gulliver comes to love the rational Houyhnhnms, and Pilgrim the logical Tralfamadorians, and ultimately the two voyagers are left with no answers to the problems of the human condition, but only with an awareness that excreta more than reason emblemizes humankind. (3)

Again, Shaw makes the connection that "Pilgrim is reminiscent [sic] of Gulliver, who, too, was 'first a surgeon' but who, after his enlightening voyage among the Houyhnhnms, can neither help nor tolerate his fellow humans" (5). He further claims that Vonnegut is aware of the Swiftian associations in the phrase "excrement festival" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 126). However, his citation early in the article of Norman O. Brown, a rigorously psychoanalytic critic of Swift, gives us a clue to the slant that Shaw is to take. He undertakes an intense examination of the scatological elements in *Slapstick*; however, unlike Brown, he

consciously--and wisely--avoids using psychoanalysis. In summary, he argues that "*Slaughterhouse-Five* is...the waste product of Vonnegut's purgation of the imagination" (7), and that "Vonnegut uses excremental functions to connect the past and the present, the literal and the symbolic, and to weave his scatology into effective satire" (8). Though Shaw recognizes that Vonnegut satirizes the "Freudian world" (9), he fails to see that it is Freud himself whom Vonnegut satirizes. This fact is evident in Shaw's own conclusion that in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut is demonstrating that "war, in one way or another, is the collective human response to sexuality and poor toilet training" (9). Shaw's assertion that "if Swift's excremental vision is revealingly unpremeditated and unconscious, Vonnegut's on the other hand seems premeditated and conscious" (11) is probably correct, but then Vonnegut has had the benefit of Freud to make him conscious. It is also likely that Shaw is right in asserting that "Vonnegut, no doubt, would find nothing more absurdly humorous than for a commentator to draw Freudian, psychological conclusions from the numerous excremental allusions in *Slaughterhouse-Five*" (11).

This study differs from Wymer's and Shaw's on several grounds, however. First, Vonnegut's proposed preface for *Gulliver's Travels* allows

for a more direct assertion of a Swiftian influence, so this paper will make a more concrete connection. Second, Wymer and Shaw focus primarily on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and occasionally refer to Vonnegut's earlier novels. Neither of them refer to *Slapstick* for the simple reason that it was not published when each wrote his article. Lastly, Wymer refers to Swift only sparsely and Shaw concentrates on Swift's "excremental vision," whereas this study will make wider and more direct use of Swift--especially *Gulliver's Travels*. Nonetheless, it will be fruitful to keep Wymer's and Shaw's ideas in mind over the course of this paper.

Before any sort of rigorous comparison is undertaken, it will be helpful to define and explain a few general terms which have been used as labels to describe Vonnegut's works. These definitions will lay the groundwork for a basic understanding of his writing, but will also show the inadequacy of these labels. 'Satire' may be defined as

the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation. It differs from the *comic* in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire "derides"; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual (in "personal satire"), or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even...the whole human race. (Abrams 166)



Interestingly, Abrams' definition uses Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as an example of a satire against "the whole human race" (166), and Vonnegut's *Player Piano* and *Cat's Cradle* are cited as examples of "recent satires" (168). Also, it is significant that this definition ends with the qualifying statement, "the distinction between the comic and the satiric, however, is a sharp one only at its extremes" (166). Wymer, in a footnote to his article, reproves Scholes, in *The Fabulators*, for confusing "the comic with the satiric mode" (Wymer 281), but when discussing Vonnegut or Swift, it quickly becomes apparent that the distinction is, at best, blurred. In addition, the label satire has its limits when discussing either Swift or Vonnegut since, as Scholes observes, "Even Jonathan Swift's finest achievement, the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels*, is hard to call a great satire, precisely because its greatness is problematic and not satiric at all" (78).

As has already been noted, 'black humour' is a label that has been used extensively in discussions of Vonnegut. Black humour is writing that presents a traditionally tragic theme or situation in comic terms--"light" writing on "heavy" topics, if you will. Abrams calls black humour "a frequent modern literary form of humor-in-horror" (199), and notes that "much of the current vogue of *black humor* occurs in satiric

works whose butt is the contemporary state of social chaos, cruelty, or inanity" (168). He makes this point, incidently, just after citing Vonnegut's *Player Piano* and *Cat's Cradle* as "recent satires...in novelistic form." Scholes writes,

The Black Humorist is not concerned with what to do about life but with how to take it...[which is] roughly distinguishable in terms of the difference between seeing the universe as absurd and seeing it as ridiculous--a joke...What man must learn is neither scorn nor resignation, say the Black Humorists, but how to take a joke. (76)

Scholes rightly claims the "special tone" of "fabulative satire," as he describes the works of Vonnegut, is "inadequately" captured by the phrase "Black Humor" (74).

The following excerpt from a 1973 *Playboy* interview, in Vonnegut's *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*s, reveals how Vonnegut perceives his place within the context of black humour:

Vonnegut: ...the biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments and the biggest fears.

*Playboy*: Is that what's called black humor? Or is *all* humor black?

Vonnegut: In a sense, it probably is...critics picked up the term because it was handy. All they had to do was say black humorists and they'd be naming twenty writers. It was a form of shorthand. (257)

Vonnegut goes on to compare black humour to what he says Freud calls "gallows humor," which Vonnegut claims arose as a self-defense

mechanism among oppressed peoples in middle-Europe prior to World War II. He calls it "humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations," and adds, "I have customarily written about powerless people who felt there wasn't much they could do about their situations" (257). Given Vonnegut's war experience and his subsequent writing on the subject, it is not surprising to find that Vonnegut uses the context of the Second World War as his reference point for explaining black or gallows humour.

Vonnegut's disillusionment after the War is one of the reasons he has been classified as a Postmodernist. M. H. Abrams, in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, gives a definition of postmodernism that aptly describes the historical context in which Vonnegut is writing:

The term **postmodernism** is sometimes applied to the literature and art after World War II ...when the disastrous effects on Western morale of the first war were greatly exacerbated by the experience of Nazi totalitarianism and mass extermination, the threat of total destruction by the atomic bomb...(109)

The definition goes on to describe the general characteristics of the movement:

A familiar undertaking in postmodernist writings is to subvert the foundations of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the "meaninglessness" of

existence and the underlying "abyss," or "void," or "nothingness" on which our supposed security is precariously suspended. In recent developments in linguistic and literary theory, there is an effort to subvert the foundations of language itself, so as to show that its seeming meaningfulness dissipates, for an unillusioned inquirer, into a play of unresolvable though conflicting indeterminacies. (110)

Both Vonnegut's personal experience and his writing fit into the parameters of this definition almost perfectly. Vonnegut's Dresden experience and the writings that emerged from his experience (most significantly his works after *Cat's Cradle*) demonstrate the sort of subversion that Abrams describes, including the subversion of language. In fact, Abrams' definition of Postmodernism might almost be an official statement of the Vonnegut Creed, and *Slapstick* his statement of faith.

Abrams also states that utopian writing "has come to signify the class of fiction which represents an ideal, nonexistent political state and way of life" and that "most utopias...represent their ideal place under fiction of a distant country reached by a venturesome traveler" (195). However, he goes on to say that "the utopia can be distinguished from literary representations of imaginary places which, either because they are greatly superior to the real world or manifest exaggerated versions of some of its unsavory aspects, are used primarily as vehicles for *satire*

on human life and society" (195). Not surprisingly, he uses *Gulliver's Travels* as an example of this sort of literary representation. Abrams then notes that "another related but distinctive form is **science fiction**" and that "there are also diverse cross-forms; for example, an aspect or tendency of scientific research is attacked by imagining its disastrous conclusion, as in Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s, *Cat's Cradle*" (195-6). Abrams goes on to write that the word 'dystopia' "has recently come to be applied to works of fiction which represent a very unpleasant imaginary world, in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some future culmination" (196). These definitions, then, make it apparent that neither Swift nor Vonnegut can be neatly classified as strictly a utopian or dystopian writer. Each has elements of both forms in his writing, blended together with other forms. Indeed, none of the above terms serves adequately in itself to wholly describe the works of either of these writers.

By comparing his writing directly with Swift's, this study will try to dissipate some of the confusion that has been generated by the use of labels to describe Vonnegut's work. The first chapter will begin with a sampling of the reviews of *Slapstick* in order to establish exactly how

the novel was received. Next, a survey of the subsequent criticism on *Slapstick* will describe what was later written about the novel, and will lay the groundwork for this study. In the second chapter, the conclusions garnered from this body of criticism, along with other relevant material by both authors, will be used in a direct comparison of *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels*. The third chapter will deal with Vonnegut's own perceptions of Swift and *Gulliver's Travels*, as gleaned from his article "Jonathan Swift Misperceived," and *Slapstick* will be examined in light of them--in effect, a Vonnegutian look at Swift. This investigation will serve as a frame on which to construct a figurative examination of *Slapstick*, in a somewhat facetious tone--in effect, a Swiftian look at Vonnegut. Ultimately, a rough sketch of the "Vonnegut persona" as revealed in *Slapstick*, in his reading of Swift, and in some of his "autobiographical" writings will be drawn, and this sketch will in turn provide insight into the writings of Swift--or at least Vonnegut's insight.

## CHAPTER ONE

Initially, *Slapstick* was received unfavourably by most critics--if I may use some Vonnegutian (or Swiftian) understatement. Indeed, many of the early reviews of the novel were simply malicious. Some reviewers even seem to suggest that Vonnegut's novels before *Slapstick* perhaps ought to be re-evaluated in light of what they perceive to be an inferior work. Even so, a sample of the reviews is quite revealing. Given this poor reception, it is not surprising that there is far less criticism on the novel than there is on *Slaughterhouse-Five* and other earlier Vonnegut novels. *Slapstick* seems to mark the beginning of a general disenchantment with Vonnegut, in part because of the seeming lack of effort in his writing. Nonetheless, a survey of both the reviews and criticism on *Slapstick* is useful for establishing the context of this current study.

Vonnegut's works up to the time of the publication of *Slapstick* were either praised and Vonnegut hailed as a "guru," or ridiculed, and Vonnegut condemned as a hack--although those in the latter camp were

relatively quiet up to that point because of the near-unanimous acclaim for *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It is little wonder, then, that an announcement in *Book World* of Vonnegut's forthcoming novel stated that *Slapstick* "will be predictably loved or loathed" (M1). This description is at least half correct; there was a good deal of loathing, and much of it came from those who claimed to have loathed Vonnegut's work all along. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, in his review for the *New York Times*, writes that, though

it has its amusing moments...when I finished reading 'Slapstick,' I felt as if I had just devoured a bowl of air...is it because one grows weary of the author's pervasive sense of resignation, which makes him willing to settle for "a little common decency" instead of "love," and for his sister's tragic death dismissed as "slapstick"? Or is it that the tone of understatement that worked for Mr. Vonnegut in "Slaughterhouse Five"...is no longer effective in "Slapstick," where nothing much in particular, except perhaps the author's way of fantasizing, is the subject? (C19)

Lehmann-Haupt concludes, "one is left feeling empty by 'Slapstick.' Emptiness, conveyed with grace and style, still amounts to almost nothing. That is why, for all the new chic skill Mr. Vonnegut has brought to his latest novel, it still seems as if he has given up storytelling after all" (C19).



Lehmann-Haupt's assessment is indicative of the reception of *Slapstick* in general. A number of reviewers condemn *Slapstick* for its lack of substance and Vonnegut for his apparent lack of effort. For example, Walter Clemons, in his review for *Newsweek* concludes that in *Slapstick* the "author [is] experimenting with writing a book when he really didn't have one to write" (93). And R. Z. Sheppard, in *Time*, writes that

Instead of ideas, he offers whimsy; instead of feeling, merely sentiment. Vonnegut calls his method "situational poetry." This is academic jargon that may be best translated as "I'm too tired to write as well as I used to." (86)

However, the above reviewers are only *amateurs* at writing negative reviews. Robert Towers demonstrates that he is an *expert*, in his review of *Slapstick* for the *New York Review of Books*. Towers conducts a veritable work-shop on malicious review-writing:

Vonnegut's admirers find him funny, sad, and ironic. I suspect that most of the unconverted--among whom I obviously include myself--find him prankish, often silly, sentimental, and (as is often the case with bleeding hearts) more than a little cruel. They find him too thin, too lacking in depth to merit much consideration as a serious or comic literary artist. (29)

Towers calls *Slapstick* "a sorry performance" and compares it to the "bored doodling" of *Breakfast of Champions*, which he describes as "so

annoying and self-defeating a work" (29). As if "silly," "lacking in depth" and "forgettable" are not enough, Towers continues his assault with enough vehemence and bitterness to make any satirist proud. He asserts that the novel is filled with "sappiness," and that

Vonnegut seems to be saying, "Here's a bright idea. Maybe you'll think it's cute. Maybe you'll think it has something in it. But if you don't--hi ho." It is this persistent refusal to take responsibility for either his inventions or his feelings that finally renders this book so inconsequential ...Vonnegut's clownish irresponsibility toward his own creations--while it may ingratiate him to his fans--is a major source of that resistance mentioned at the beginning of this review. (29)

He concludes his article by saying that "Vonnegut's work is permeated by a sense of futility and self-contempt" (30). In an analysis reminiscent of critics of Swift earlier in this century,<sup>1</sup> Towers claims that much of Vonnegut's "doodling" suggests "an underlying depression so pervasive that the very feat of writing is like a soft-shoe dance upon the lid of his own coffin" (30). Towers' review is so extreme that it almost seems a parody.

In stark contrast, a few of the reviews on *Slapstick* are somewhat more forgiving. Richard Giannone, writing for *Book World*, gives perhaps the fairest assessment of *Slapstick*: "The novel is not amazing, not [sic] is it Vonnegut's most technically accomplished fiction.

It will be of greatest interest to those who know Vonnegut's work well and are, therefore, attuned to the personal urgency of the book for its author" (H1). In summary, Giannone's review puts *Slapstick* in the context of Vonnegut's body of writings, and is a much more objective assessment of the novel than Towers' review. Similarly, Michael Mason, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, borders on praise, writing that "there is plenty in *Slapstick* that is fresh and unexpected," and referring to the novel's "beautiful rhythmical feeling" and "the sure, delicate prose of the final text" (1385). For Mason, unlike other reviewers, the frequent repetition of "Hi ho" actually works; he claims that "one of Vonnegut's most remarkable gifts is his ability to utter phrases of this simplicity without tipping over into false naivety" (1385). However, Mason's review seems to ride on the coattails of Vonnegut's reputation, and on the fact that most fans of Vonnegut will pay no heed to what reviewers say--something he concedes at the beginning of his review.

The most positive review is John Updike's in *The New Yorker*. Unlike Towers, he sees Vonnegut "relatively at peace with himself, his times, and the fact of his writing a novel at all" (41). Updike notes that *Slapstick* "has attracted comment from many reviewers, who usually find it discreditable to author and audience alike" (46), but he goes on to

explain that "there need be no scandal in Vonnegut's wide appeal, based, as I believe it is, on the generosity of his imagination and the honesty of his pain" (47). He concludes that what appears easy is not necessarily so:

[T]he pain in Vonnegut was always real. Through the transpositions of science fiction, he found a way, instead of turning pain aside, to vaporize it, to scatter it on the plane of the cosmic and the comic. His terse flat sentences, jumpy chapters, interleaved placards, collages of stray texts and messages, and nervous grim refrains like "So it goes" and (in "Slapstick") "Hi ho" are a new way of stacking pain, as his fictional *ice-nine* is a new way of stacking the molecules of water. Such an invention looks easy only in retrospect. (47)

Updike's comment praises Vonnegut for precisely the same things that critics like Towers condemn him for. What some call "a bowl of air," Updike calls "invention." As for *Book World's* prediction that *Slapstick* would be "loved or loathed" upon its introduction, few "loved" it--"liked" or "tolerated" might be a better words--but many "loathed" it. At best, there are attempts to understand and explain *Slapstick*, often with what seems to be not love but rather "common decency"--most notably from Updike, one of Vonnegut's relatives in the extended family of authors.

For the most part, reviewers obviously did not find *Slapstick* very satisfying, but how did Vonnegut feel about the novel himself? In one article in *Palm Sunday* he grades all of his books to that point (312).

He gives *Slapstick* a 'D,' the lowest grade he gives any of his books. In a "self-interview" that he wrote for *The Paris Review*, also published in *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut says,

Now, judging from the review my latest book, *Slapstick*, has received, people would like to bounce me out of the literary establishment...*Slapstick* may be a very bad book. I am perfectly willing to believe that. Everybody else writes lousy books, so why shouldn't I? (103-4)

And with typical hyperbole and, yes, black humour, he explains how he took the reviews: "I never felt worse in my life. I felt as though I were sleeping standing up on a boxcar in Germany again" (104). However, it is apparent that any disparaging assessment of the novel by Vonnegut himself is just a self-defense mechanism. After all, he *was* hurt by the reviews, which is understandable given the highly personal nature of *Slapstick*.

The subsequent criticism of the novel follows a similar pattern. Some critics consider *Slapstick* one of Vonnegut's weakest novels, while others are more forgiving. For instance, Kermit Vanderbilt's assessment of the novel, in "Kurt Vonnegut's American Nightmares and Utopias," is less than flattering and essentially echoes the negative reviews, as is evident in his plot summary:

Vonnegut's creative anger over the American present seems to be somewhat played out, however, and after nine rather dull chapters developing this autobiographical tribute to his own sister and implying that humans might display more "decency," if not love, toward each other, he has the children, at a fifteenth birthday party, confess their paired genius to shocked and unbelieving parents. (166)

Vanderbilt is at least gracious enough to concede that "Vonnegut manages the semblance of a forward-moving plot" (166)! In fact he comes to sound like one of the reviewers all over again:

Another put-down is "I had to laugh," as though his artificial extended families are, after all, just *granfalloons*. No doubt these refrains are necessary to Vonnegut's absurd-slapstick approach, an esthetic that shuns intrusive preaching and avoids at any cost the serious resolution. The tactic also denies the reader a sustained and responsible vision of utopian community, assuming Vonnegut had one to disguise. Perhaps because he raised our hopes for a significant new turn in his fiction, *Slapstick* becomes the most disappointing of all his novels. (168)

Despite this condemnation, Vanderbilt raises some ideas that are relevant to this study. He examines Vonnegut's novels from the perspective of utopian or dystopian fiction, two labels that can also be applied to *Gulliver's Travels*. At one point Vanderbilt even calls Vonnegut the writer who has come to own "the best utopian imagination in American literature since World War Two" (140). Notably, Vanderbilt traces the development of Vonnegut's utopian proposal for artificial

extended families through an interview, several speeches, and his novels to that point. Overall, he refers to *Slapstick* as "a novel which, unscrambled, could be seen to have a predominantly utopian time frame and thematic structure," something apparently "the reviewers again consistently overlooked" (165). Thus Vanderbilt puts *Slapstick* into the context of the utopian tradition, yet he condemns Vonnegut for writing a novel that does not fit into the neatly defined scope of his utopian model. But then if Vonnegut wrote a novel with the "sustained and responsible vision of utopian community" that Vanderbilt expected, he might lose his much-cherished "postmodernist" label.

One expectation that *was* fulfilled is discussed in T. N. Dhar's article, "Vonnegut's Leap Within: *Slaughterhouse-Five* to *Slapstick*." Dhar looks at how Vonnegut enters into his own "fictional universe" (57); that is, he looks at how Vonnegut creates a literary persona that becomes part of his fiction--a step Dhar claims was first taken in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (58). He asserts that with *Breakfast of Champions*, "Vonnegut pleads for a new kind of a role for the writer, which is to break through the smug exterior of things" (61). Dhar further says, of the same novel, that Vonnegut's "statements build a strident satirical persona, almost like one in the formal verse of the Roman satirists--an angry, irascible

person who pours forth his denunciations in bitterest possible words" (61)--much like Swift does in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels*. Dhar explains that a new mood emerges towards the end of *Breakfast of Champions*, one where the "private self" asserts itself over the "public self," and that "this shift anticipates the mood" of *Slapstick* (61). He considers Vonnegut's idea of artificial extended families the "one significant idea" in the narrative (62), and states that in *Slapstick* Vonnegut "is searching for the lost paradise of his childhood, and dreaming of a future in which he fights his loneliness [sic] in the comfort of large families" (63). Most significantly, he concludes that

Vonnegut is...creating a fiction of inwardness, getting more private, though not totally withdrawing himself from his involvement with public affairs. His leap inward is, therefore, not merely a technical device which gives a radical orientation to the form of his books; it gradually becomes indicative of a change in his attitudes as well, in his priorities and concerns. He is using fiction to come to terms with himself. (63)

Dhar is one of the few critics who finds in *Slapstick* a progression in Vonnegut's development as an experimental writer of creative fiction.

Peter J. Reed's "The Later Vonnegut" puts *Slapstick* in the context of the Vonnegut's other works:

*Slapstick* brings Vonnegut back closer to the direction of his first five novels...*Slapstick* too is autobiographical,



but...in a perhaps less private way, and in a manner closer to the sense in which the earlier fiction was autobiographical. (184-5)

Perhaps most relevant to the present study are Reed's observations on Vonnegut's attitude, which he says "remains one of sympathy for the human lot" (184). Though his novels are often highly pessimistic and he "portrays some rather nasty people and shows plenty of suffering caused by human action" (184), it seems Vonnegut has never been accused of being a brooding misanthropist or somehow psychologically deviant, in the way that Swift has. Reed explains how Vonnegut and *Slapstick* have avoided such an assessment through an evolution in "tone":

*Slapstick*, for all the bleakness of content, exudes an affirmative assurance. That tone...derives less from the content than from the author's attitude. Vonnegut appears more confident, more comfortable with the world and himself in *Slapstick*...(185)

Reed here echoes the sentiment about Vonnegut's confidence that Updike mentions in his review of the novel.

Russell Blackford's article "The Definition of Love" examines *Slapstick's* dystopia in order to discover how "Vonnegut achieves something of a definition of what love is and what it should be" (208). Besides scrutinizing the novel's pervasive themes of death,

meaninglessness and fate, Blackford also examines the book's unconventional narrative technique:

No sustained attempt is made to treat characters' motivations...[which] implies that individuals are finally unknowable to other individuals, that the claims of realistic novelists to give explanations as to why people behave as they do are pretence [sic]. (214)

He goes on to write, "The main forms which *Slapstick* parodies are romance and such variations of romance as the Gothic tale, the exotic travelogue, and the science fiction story" (215)--a description which may just as readily be applied to *Gulliver's Travels*. Referring to *Slapstick* as "a low comic version of the romantic hero's life as described by Northrop Frye" (215), Blackford accordingly assesses the novel using Frye's parameters. He then conducts an exhaustive comparison between the novel and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and examines how the idea of artificial extended families is a remedy for the lack of what Vonnegut calls "common decency." Overall, Blackford essentially heralds Vonnegut as an experimental and revolutionary 'realist.'

Though Lucy Fischer's paper "Slapstick: From Laurel and Hardy to Vonnegut" was delivered at a conference on film, it is nonetheless useful in a study of Vonnegut. Her paper is primarily concerned with the novel *Slapstick*, placing it into the context of the

slapstick tradition of film, and showing how Vonnegut "weds the tradition of the novel to that of film" (116):

In most comparisons of novels and films the lines of influence are seen to run in one direction: from literature to cinema. But in examining Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick* we find a case in which those dynamics are reversed. For rather than serving as the source for a movie, the novel is formulated as an elaborate homage to two beloved *personae* of film history: Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. (111)

Throughout her discussion, Fischer emphasizes the autobiographical dimension of the novel and speaks of Vonnegut's philosophy in broad terms. Interestingly, she states that Vonnegut "transforms" the details of his life into a "Swiftian fantasy" (112)--but she leaves it at that, never examining what is Swiftian about the novel. Basically, Fischer's article explains the significance of the title and dedication of the novel by examining the slapstick of Laurel and Hardy.<sup>3</sup>

R. B. Gill's article "Bargaining in Good Faith: The Laughter of Vonnegut, Grass, and Kundera," looks at Vonnegut in the context of comedy and laughter and of the so-called absurdist and black-humorist genres. He sees *Slapstick* as delivering a positive message beneath all the seeming gloom (78). Gill views laughter as a key element in Vonnegut's writing, and his comments once more seem to beg some sort of comparison with Swift:

Laughter in Vonnegut's novels is self-conscious and wistful, certainly never boisterous. Such laughter is the wry reaction of a healthy, knowing psyche adjusting itself to facts. It is the self's small moment of triumph as it observes the ignorance and incongruities of others, as it feels its own superiority to an absurd world. This is the laughter that liberates the self from the unnecessary bonds and unthinking rigidities that less adaptable people allow themselves to fall into. That healthful, liberating laughter has been the cause of Vonnegut's popularity as a writer. We admire him precisely because he can laugh at the irrationalities of our world without attempting to substitute the morals of satire or the solutions of comedy. Such laughter, we feel, is full of intelligence and common sense, in touch with ideals and realities at the same time. (81)

Though Vonnegut's "laughter" does not often solutions, it certainly does offers morals, contrary to Gill's assertion. His concluding description of the three authors he discusses may equally suit Swift: "We must be careful in labeling our three authors because they lack the radical alienation that frequently underlies black humor and comedy of the absurd, and they purposely withhold from their pronouncements the sense of certainty that usually validates satiric judgments" (89). Though his comments on "laughter" are useful in this study for coming to an understanding of how Vonnegut's--and, by association, Swift's--satire works, Gill's article is also notable for his discussion of Menippean satire (89-90).

There seem to be a number of patterns in the reviews and criticism of *Slapstick*. Many of the immediate reviews express disdain for the novel, as does some of the later criticism. On the other hand, the more positive reviewers and critics are somewhat conservative in their praise, and often do little more than explain, or merely apologize, for the novel. It is also apparent that many of the comments and ideas of reviewers and critics alike might just as readily be used to describe Swift's writing. Thus, it is easy to understand why earlier critics, like Wymer and Shaw, saw direct parallels between Vonnegut and Swift. Given this foundation in criticism, this study will seek to take the parallel a step further.

## CHAPTER TWO

In general, arriving at an understanding of Swift's or Vonnegut's writing is no simple task. Indeed, the greatest mistake of readers and critics alike may well be thinking that it is one. This is readily done by reading the various works of both authors and deciding precisely what was meant and what was intended--in essence, providing "frameworks in terms of which they can be clearly understood" (Wymer 239). Such simplistic interpretations would be successful if these two authors wrote only in simplistic terms--that is, if they did not have an ironic or satirical element in their works. Hence, since both authors' works are often complex and difficult to critique, one of the more useful ways of arriving at an understanding of Swift and Vonnegut is by comparing them. What is learned by examining Swift's works may be applied to Vonnegut's, and vice versa, and a greater comprehension of each will result. The two works under consideration in this study, Vonnegut's *Slapstick* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, will be compared generally in form, which will be discussed in terms of style and the

nature of the narrative voice, and then their content will be specifically discussed.

The style of both *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels* may be the single factor most responsible for a simplistic reading of each. Swift's prose style is very clear and direct, qualities especially conspicuous when compared to the convoluted style of other writers in his time. For example, the opening sentence of the *Travels* is an unadorned statement of fact: "My father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the third of five sons" (15). Much of the book is similarly straightforward description. Vonnegut certainly cannot be accused of using complicated and protracted sentences either. His style in *Slapstick* is exceptionally simple and often colloquial--so much so that it makes it difficult at times to take Vonnegut as a "serious" writer, which is likely one reason so many reviewers rejected the book. *Slapstick* opens with descriptive statements that are even simpler than the *Travels*: "It is springtime. It is late afternoon" (21). Vonnegut breaks his already short chapters--forty-nine of them, plus a prologue and an epilogue in a mere 243 pages--into almost countless subsections. There is also frequent repetition of the phrase "Hi ho" throughout the novel. This seemingly lightweight style gives the novel the quality of a children's story.

*Gulliver's Travels* has perennially been considered a children's tale. Numerous children's versions and even an early animated feature film adaptation of the book have been produced. The many elements of the fantastic, such as giants and the like, have made it especially appealing to children. In *Slapstick*, the references to Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*--for example, the lyrics of "We're Off to See the Wizard" (202) and the name of the little girl who leads the meeting, Dorothy Daffodil-7 Garland (212)<sup>4</sup>--conjure up a comparable Swiftian tale. Russell Blackford suggests that the connections between the two works are in no way arbitrary or merely frivolous:

Even Vonnegut's use of *The Wizard of Oz* has a serious purpose. Dorothy and her friends...are able to overcome obstacles and survive dangers by constant co-operation and teamwork. Their companionship seems to conquer all. Vonnegut's novel also stresses the importance of companionship. It expresses a simple morality based upon this quality; it is thus appropriate that it should largely be informed by the situations of a children's book. (218)

Vonnegut, then, not only makes direct reference to *Oz* but also follows a "simple" moral pattern based on principles that may be found in Baum. Using *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a point of comparison, similarities between Baum's tale and Swift's are not difficult to find: there are the Munchkin-like Lilliputians, though Swift uses a much-reduced scale, of



course; Gulliver himself becomes something of a Munchkin among the giants of the land of Brobdingnag; there is the flying island of Laputa; and there are horses that can communicate intelligently and behave in a most civilized manner. These examples sound much like the sort of fantastical things that were later to be found in Baum's tale. The idea of "the importance of companionship" in *Oz* and *Slapstick* emerges in Swift as well, since "Friendship and benevolence are the two principal virtues among the Houyhnhnms" (216). *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels* thus both have a good deal in common with children's tales, such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in their simple style and in the fantastical elements of their basic narrative. It seems, however, than many reviewers of Vonnegut's novel considered such qualities as 'childish,' rather than 'childlike.'

Another factor that has led to the treatment of *Gulliver's Travels* and *Slapstick* as 'simple' books is the nature of the narrative voice. Although he is relating an incredible tale, it seems possible that the narrator of the *Travels* may be trusted in the early parts of the book. After all, it is not until the fourth part that Gulliver shows signs of being insane. However, the letter "From Capt. Gulliver to his Cousin Sympson" that appears at the beginning of the work (3-6) reveals that he

transcribed *all* of his "travels" after his "Voyage to the Houyhnhnms," and the misanthropic attitude that emerges at the end of the book informed the whole--an attitude also evident in the opening letter. It is, therefore, safer to see a double irony throughout the whole of *Gulliver's Travels*; that is, it is advisable *never* to trust the narrator completely. To explain the intensely misanthropic narrative voice in the *Travels*, critics and readers in general have often divided Swift's personality into two distinct "sides"--the "good" side of the venerable Anglican prelate and the "evil" side of the malicious satirist.<sup>5</sup> The inherent problem with irony, though, is that it blends these sides together, making them inseparable most of the time. That problem, coupled with a narrator who can seldom be trusted, compounds the difficulty in finding the author's true views. On the whole, it is advisable when reading *Gulliver's Travels* to never take opinions expressed by Gulliver as Swift's own personal viewpoint. Certainly many of his views are within the work, but to strain the irony out of them is virtually impossible.

Overall, such a cautious approach is advisable when reading Vonnegut too. In the "Prologue" to *Slapstick*, Vonnegut relates a number of autobiographical details. However, the style of the "Prologue" resembles the rest of the novel: it is broken into short passages; the

diction is straightforward and often colloquial; and there is even occasional repetition of the phrase "Hi ho." As a result, Vonnegut's seemingly serious autobiographical account is undermined, and the parallels between the narrative voice in the "Prologue" and the narrative voice for most of the rest of the novel, that of Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, make Vonnegut's commentary suspect. It is no wonder, then, that Vonnegut at one point asserts, "This really happened" (12). Nonetheless, undermining the serious aspect of his own life story serves to bring out the idea that his life is nothing but "slapstick."

In addition to these aspects of form, much of the content of *Slapstick* is comparable to *Gulliver's Travels*. One of the more obvious points of comparison between *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels* is that Vonnegut incorporates Lilliputian-sized people into his novel. Swain casually mentions the idea of miniature people as something the Chinese were working on: "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" (64). This idea of saving food by being smaller recalls Gulliver's description of the huge quantities of food he is fed by the Lilliputians relative to the small quantities they consume themselves (19). Swain next mentions the

miniaturization experimentation when the Republic of China closes its embassy in Washington (118). At that point, the ambassador is sixty centimetres tall--which is still a good deal bigger than the inhabitants of Lilliput, who are less than six inches high (Swift 17). Later, however, Swain is actually visited by "a Chinese man the size of [his] thumb" (145), who is "much, much larger...than an average Chinese" (146). Once more he relates his guilt at the wastefulness inherent in his relatively great size: "He made me feel immoral, too. It was greedy for me to be so big. My supper that night could have fed a thousand men his size" (148).

There are other parallels to Swift in regards to the perspective of a much smaller being:

My little visitor motioned for me to come closer, so he would not have to shout. I presented one ear to him. It must have been a horrible sight--the tunnel with all the hair and bits of wax inside (145-6).

This image of the grotesqueness of a human's physical appearance from the perspective of a tiny observer, as a result of accordingly heightened faculties, is similar to several passages in the *Travels*. For example, Gulliver relates a Lilliputian's impression of his appearance:

He said he could discover great holes in my skin, that the stumps of my beard were ten times stronger than the bristles of a boar, and my complexion made up of several colours altogether disagreeable: although I must beg leave to

say for my self, that I am as fair as most of my sex and country...(74)

Gulliver also recounts the similar perceptions he has of the giant inhabitants of Brobdingnag:

Their skins appeared so coarse and uneven, so variously coloured, when I saw them near, with a mole here and there as broad as a trencher, and hairs hanging from it thicker than pack-threads; to say nothing further concerning the rest of their persons. (95-6)

A third example, from Gulliver's account of an execution from his tiny perspective, is exceptionally graphic:

The veins and arteries spouted up such a prodigious quantity of blood, and so high in the air, that the great *jet d'eau* at Versailles was not equal for the time it lasted; and the head, when it fell on the scaffold floor, gave such a bounce as made me start, although I was at least an English mile distant. (96)

In comparison, Swain's few details of how he supposes his ear looks to his miniature visitor are not nearly as explicit. However, the inclusion of such details on perspective serve different purposes in the two works: in Swift, it serves to show the vanity of appearances and the inanity of observing physical "defects" with a "magnifying glass" (74), as well as to satirize the obsessive detail of the travelogue genre; conversely, in Vonnegut, such details are, more or less, just a 'realistic' description of the perspective of a very small human being. However, the Chinese in

Vonnegut's novel ultimately shrink to be much smaller than the Lilliputians, becoming small enough to invade a full-sized human body as a virus. Here is where an element of horror, at least as great as Gulliver's description of the execution, is introduced, because, for all the intellectual and technological superiority of the Chinese, they inadvertently kill many people through the "Green Death" and they, in turn, are killed by the "trillions" by the "antidote" (206)--an atrocity that seems to have its roots in Vonnegut's Dresden experience.

Vonnegut confesses in the prologue that in the novel he is "experimenting with being old" (19), and, accordingly, he makes the narrator of *Slapstick*, Dr. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain, "one hundred years old" (21). His experimentation with old age is vaguely reminiscent of the "*struldbuggs* or *immortals*" that Gulliver encounters in the kingdom of Luggnagg (167), another hypothetical examination of old age. Gulliver initially is intrigued by the idea of people who live forever:

I cried out as in a rapture: Happy nation where every child hath at least a chance for being immortal! Happy people who enjoy so many living examples of ancient virtue, and have masters ready to instruct them in the wisdom of all former ages! But happiest beyond all comparison are those excellent *struldbuggs*, who being born exempt from that universal calamity of human nature, have their minds free and disengaged, without the weight and depression of spirits caused by the continual apprehension of death. (167-8)

Gulliver, by observing the struldbruggs, is examining western civilization's obsession with eternal youth. Like those in western society, he is initially enraptured with the idea of living forever, and imagines the wonderful possibilities of being able to live so long (169). In *Slapstick*, it almost seems that Swain has actually succeeded in living the life Gulliver projects if *he* were to live forever. That is, Swain "procures riches" and applies himself "to the study of arts and sciences" just as Gulliver proposes he would do were he given the opportunity to live forever (Swift 169). However, although the struldbruggs lived much longer than Swain's one hundred years, they degenerate after the age of thirty, until by the age of eighty "they had not only all the follies and infirmities of other old men, but many more which arose from the dreadful prospect of never dying" (171). Thus, extreme old age is considered a curse by the Luggnaggians and death a necessary or even good thing, just as Swain's death at the end of *Slapstick* is little less than a blessing, in light of his tumultuous life.<sup>6</sup>

Another point of comparison between the two books is the 'obscenely' sexual and scatological elements that appear frequently in both. For example, Swift integrates a schoolboy's lewd joke into the opening pages of the *Travels*. Gulliver states he "was a bound apprentice

to Mr. James Bates" (15), and subsequently refers to the same man as "my good master Mr. Bates," "Mr. Bates, my master" (15), and finally as the inevitable "my good master Bates" (16). In *Slapstick*, Swain similarly makes reference to a juvenile "dirty" joke:

Eliza, with her fingertips almost brushing my cheek, quoted from a dirty joke Withers Witherspoon had told another servant when we were children. We had heard it through a wall. The joke had to do with a woman who was wildly responsive during sexual intercourse. In the joke, the woman warned a stranger who was beginning to make love to her.

Eliza passed on the sultry warning to me: 'Keep your hat on, Buster. We may wind up miles from here.' (127)

Vonnegut also includes a description of low-gravity-induced erections that seems purely incidental and becomes clinical rather than obscene. The language he uses, as well as the comparison he makes with "plumbing," help to create this perfunctory effect:

The gravity is very light today. I have an erection as a result of that. All males have erections on days like this. They are automatic consequences of near-weightlessness. They have little to do with eroticism in most cases, and nothing to do with it in the life of a man my age. They are hydraulic experiences--the results of confused plumbing, and little more. (24)

This passage resembles one of Gulliver's descriptions of an experience in Brobdingnag. He speaks of his visits to the apartments of the maids of honour:



They would often strip me naked from top to toe, and lay me at full length in their bosoms...they would strip themselves to the skin, and put on their smocks in my presence, while I was placed on their toilet directly before their naked bodies...The handsomest among these maids of honour, a pleasant frolicsome girl of sixteen, would sometimes set me astride upon one of her nipples, with many tricks, wherein the reader will excuse me for not being over particular. (95-6)

Though potentially erotic, this passage too is rendered clinical by Gulliver's extreme disgust at the smell and appearance of these women as a result of his "more acute" senses. Vonnegut goes further than Swift, however, when he describes the incestuous relationship between Wilbur and Eliza, his twin sister. When the two worked together to complete an aptitude test, they "wound up under the table--with our legs wrapped around each others' necks in scissors grips, and snorting and snuffling into each others' crotches" (104). As well, they unite later in a five-day "orgy" (128). Vonnegut is also more blunt in his use of profanity than Swift, such as we see in Swain's advice to those seeking help from a non-family member, "why don't you take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut? Why don't you take a flying fuck at the moooooooooooooon" (163). Also, David Daffodil-11 von Peterswald, a sufferer of "Tourette's disease," rhymes off strings of expletives (232-3). However, his excessive profanity is, in effect, an absurd example of the obscene and becomes a parody of

itself. It seems Vonnegut, unlike Swift, does not have his storyteller ask the readers to excuse him for "not being over particular."

Numerous scatological episodes occur throughout the *Travels*. For example, Gulliver urinates on the palace to put out a fire (45), and there are several accounts of taking care of "the necessities of nature" (23). Scatological episodes take place in *Slapstick* as well. For example when Eliza shows up in a helicopter at Wilbur's graduation, Wilbur speculates, "It seemed possible to me that she might shoot me from there, or hit me with a bag of excrement" (138). Gulliver at one point explains the inclusion of scatological details within his narrative:

I hope the gentle reader will excuse me for dwelling on these and the like particulars, which, however insignificant they may appear to grovelling vulgar minds, yet will certainly help a philosopher to enlarge his thoughts and imagination, and apply them to the benefit of public as well as private life, which was my sole design in presenting this and other accounts of my travels to the world; wherein I have been chiefly studious of truth, without affecting any ornaments of learning or of style. But the whole scene of this voyage made so strong an impression on my mind, and is so deeply fixed in my memory, that in committing it to paper I did not omit one material circumstance: however, upon a strict review, I blotted out several passages of less moment which were in my first copy, for fear of being censured as tedious and trifling, whereof travellers are often, perhaps not without justice, accused. (76)

Thus, like the inclusion of endless grotesque details from the perspective of a miniature being, Swift uses the scatological to satirize the then popular travelogue genre. The above explanation also ridicules empiricists of Swift's day, in general, for their obsession with trivial detail. In contrast, Vonnegut's use of obscene and scatological references is used to parody the use of such references themselves, which is evident from their blunt and excessive use.

*Gulliver's Travels* and *Slapstick* may further be compared in their comments on the raising of children. Rather interestingly, both books have something to say about the education of children. Gulliver describes the education system of the Lilliputians in detail:

The nurseries for males of noble or eminent birth are provided with grave and learned professors, and their several deputies. The clothes and food of the children are plain and simple. They are bred up in the principles of honour, justice, courage, modesty, clemency, religion, and love of their country...They are dressed by men until four years of age, and then are obliged to dress themselves, although their quality be ever so great...Their parents are suffered to see them only twice a year; the visit is not to last above an hour. They are allowed to kiss the child at meeting and parting; but a professor, who always stands by on those occasions, will not suffer them to whisper, or use any fondling expressions, or bring any presents of toys, sweetmeats, and the like. (49)

This passage, especially the limited parental visits, sounds much like the isolated upbringing of Wilbur and Eliza. The descriptions of the Lilliputian education system seem to be delivered in a manner that suggests that Swift's views are coming through to the surface. The tone of this passage hardly seems ironic, and many aspects of the system may even seem reasonable in light of the education system as it existed in Swift's time. However, to define a "serious" side of Swift is, as has already been observed, risky and limiting. As mentioned above, ultimately we find that Swift's narrator cannot be trusted. It would be wise to view the above passage on education as one of those times when Swift is simultaneously serious *and* mocking.

In *Slapstick*, the raising of children is referred to at two significant points. First, there is the education of Wilbur and his twin sister Eliza. Their upbringing resembles the education of the children of Lilliput in a number of ways, such as their regular personal care: "There were two practical nurses who fed us and dressed us and undressed us and bathed us" (30). They too were constantly supervised by a "learned" individual, Dr. Stewart Rawlings Mott--or, as Wilbur and Eliza called him, "Flocka Butt" (43). As noted, like the children of Lilliput, Wilbur and Eliza seldom saw their parents; in fact, it was an

annual event on their birthday (35). In short, Wilbur and Eliza were treated like they were "idiots." Just as Swift's description of the education practices of the Lilliputians seems to condemn the education system of his time, so Vonnegut's description of how Wilbur and Elizabeth are treated seems to condemn the way children are brought up today. However, Vonnegut uses a different approach from Swift, choosing to present an extreme and absurd picture of the children's upbringing rather than a plausible one. This approach emphatically mocks the way parents send their children away to school to avoid raising them themselves. Even so, the pervasive irony in the novel, as in *Gulliver's Travels*, undermines any serious or conclusive statement about Vonnegut's personal views. The second time the raising of children is mentioned is when Wilbur and Eliza physically come together for the last time, the product of their "orgy" is "a manual on childrearing" (131). The fact that this is the only product of the final union of the twins may be saying little more than that the raising of children is an extremely important matter. Indeed, through all of the irony, this is about the only conclusion that can be reached about the views of both authors on education and childrearing in general.

Both *Gulliver's Travels* and *Slapstick* have something to say about the concept of a 'progressive' civilization. In the land of Brobdingnag, Gulliver reads a treatise that includes a theory that civilization is in a deteriorating state, and that "nature was degenerated in these latter declining ages of the world, and could now produce only small abortive births in comparison of those in ancient times" (111). This theory advanced by a Brobdingnaggian author opposes theories of progress and evolution, which were apparently fashionable topics for debate at that time. According to Louis Landa,

The idea of the decay of nature was pervasive in seventeenth-century thought. It held that both man and civilization had declined from their earlier excellence, that just as man passes through a cycle of youth, old age, and death, so do nature and human culture in all of their aspects. This concept of universal decay came under attack as the idea of progress developed. (509)

Parts of *Slapstick* seem to raise the issue of progress as well, as demonstrated by Wilbur and Eliza's joint thoughts on evolution:

We criticized Darwin's Theory of Evolution, I remember, on the grounds the creatures would become terribly vulnerable while attempting to improve themselves, while developing wings or armorplate, say. They would be eaten up by more practical animals, before their wonderful new features could be refined. (52)

This passage seems to share some of the pessimism about progress that we see in the passage from *Gulliver's Travels*. Furthermore, Swift's support of the "Ancients" over the "Moderns" throughout his works may be seen as a further advocacy of the theory of decay. However, the battles he stages between the two sides are farcical for the most part. Likewise, one passage in Vonnegut that supports the idea of progress seems purely humorous:

The gravity is so light today, that I feel as though I might scamper to the top of the Empire State Building with a manhole cover, and fling it into New Jersey.

That would surely be an improvement on George Washington's sailing a silver dollar across the Rappahannock. And yet some people insist that there is no such thing as progress. (24)

As well, the Neanderthal-like appearance of the twins (28) suggests an anti-evolutionary process is at work in nature. Thus, once more we find it difficult to separate fact from irony and resolve how either author actually feels about the notion of progress.

The "Houyhnhnms" of the infamous fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels* are an integral part of Swift's satire, and they have their parallel in the highly-superior Chinese civilization of *Slapstick*. However, there is another parallel to the Houyhnhnms in Vonnegut's novel. In the *Travels*, the Houyhnhnms are described as "horses" (182). The

description of Wilbur and Eliza as having "massive brow-ridges, sloping foreheads, and steamshovel jaws" (28) seems somewhat horse-like, and thus offers a tenuous parallel to the Houyhnhnms. There is also a reference to Eliza's "*mare's* nest of...coal black hair [italics added]" (61). Wilbur even has horses at his children's hospital, and a special horse of his own:

My hospital itself had twenty horses by then--and wagons and carts and carriages and sleighs. I had a horse of my own, a great Clydesdale. Golden feather hid her hooves. "Budweiser" was her name. (144)

During his presidential campaign, Wilbur declares, "I used to be so lonesome...that the only person I could share my innermost thoughts with was a horse named 'Budweiser'" (161). It is interesting that Budweiser dies the first time that gravity increases (154), perhaps symbolizing that any Houyhnhnm-like influence has come to an end and that chaos is about to ensue.

There are also parallels in *Slapstick* to the "yahoos" of the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver describes the yahoos as follows:

Their shape was very singular, and deformed... Their heads and breasts were covered with a thick hair, some frizzled and others lank; they had beards like goats, and a long ridge of hair down their backs, and the foreparts of their legs and



feet, but the rest of their bodies were bare, so that I might see their skins, which were of a brown buff colour. (181)

In the same passage that seems to describe Wilbur and Eliza as Houyhnhnm-like, there are details that also seem to resemble yahoos: "we were not mongolian idiots, although we had the coarse black hair typical of mongoloids. We were something new. We were *neanderthaloids*. We had the features of adult, fossil human beings even in infancy" (28). When Gulliver travels to Brobdingnag, he originally describes the inhabitants as "monsters" (69). As well, he refers to a yahoo as an "ugly monster" (181). Similarly, Eliza's lawyer Norman Mushari, Jr., observes of the twins after the orgy, "You looked more and more like Frankenstein monsters to me" (134). Furthermore, when Gulliver is in the clutches of a monkey in the land of Brobdingnag, he notes, "I have good reason to believe that he took me for a young one of his own species" (98). The yahoos too are described as rather ape-like, and Gulliver observes "in this abominable animal, a perfect human figure" (186). There are similar connections made in *Slapstick*: "They were innocent great apes, with limited means for doing mischief, which, in my opinion as an old, old man, is all that human beings were ever meant to be" (36). And Eliza later describes her mother and Wilbur in

similar terms: "But I can see where you and Mother might want to boast about your guilt. After all, it's the only thing you two *monkeys* ever earned' [italics added]" (123). Lastly, Fifteen-year-old David Daffodil-11 von Peterswald observes that Wilbur looks "like the biggest baboon in the world" (236).

The preceding points of comparison seem to associate the Chinese in *Slapstick* with the Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*, and the rest of the characters with the yahoos. However, Wilbur and Eliza appear to be exceptions. Their physical appearance is distinct from the others in the novel: it is somewhat horse-like, suggesting they are like Houyhnhnms; yet their appearance is also somewhat monster- and ape-like, suggesting a link with the yahoos. How might this paradox be explained? Well, it seems that when Wilbur and Eliza put their heads together they improve their reasoning faculties to the extent that they seem to be Houyhnhnms--and together they even have four legs. However, when they are apart, as Bobby and Betty Brown, they quickly become yahoos, and, hence, are described as such. The twins then may be viewed as an example of what is implicated as the ideal being in the *Travels*, which is something of a cross between the characteristics of Houyhnhnms and yahoos.

Traditionally, Houyhnhnms are upheld as the epitome of civilized behaviour and yahoos as corruption incarnate. However, the Houyhnhnms exemplify ratiocination to an extreme, and, as such, their resulting passionlessness may be considered a negative quality. For instance, the utterly unemotional attitude towards bearing offspring among the Houyhnhnms rivals Swift's *Modest Proposal* in its cruel utilitarianism:

When the matron Houyhnhnms have produced one of each sex, they no longer accompany with their consorts, except they lose one of their issue by some casualty, which very seldom happens: but in such a case they meet again, or when the like accident befalls a person whose wife is past bearing, some other couple bestows on him one of their own colts, and then go together a second time till the mother be pregnant. This caution is necessary to prevent the country from being overburthened with numbers. (216-17)

Gulliver also notes that the Houyhnhnms "have no fondness for their colts or foals, but the care they take in educating them proceed entirely from the dictates of reasoning" (216). They also have a similarly cold detachment when it comes to matters of marriage (217) and death (221-2), which emerges lastly in the behaviour of Gulliver's "master" Houyhnhnm when they part (227-8). At the end of the fourth part, a balance between Houyhnhnm and yahoo is offered in the person of Don Pedro de Mendez, the captain of the ship on which Gulliver returns

(231). However, Gulliver, who seems virtually insane at that point, fails to recognize Don Pedro as such an ideally balanced person. Wilbur and Eliza together are the equivalent of Don Pedro, Swift's implied ideal, in *Slapstick*.

From time to time in *Slapstick* there are darkly pessimistic, "Swiftian" assessments of the human race such as we see in the fourth part of the *Travels*. Dr. Cordiner observes, with Gulliveresque bitterness, that "the world is full of people who are very clever at seeming much smarter than they really are...They dazzle us with facts and quotations and foreign words and so on, whereas the truth is that they know almost nothing of use in life as it is really lived" (98). Similarly, the visiting thumb-size emissary Fu Manchu, when Wilbur asks him about "the Chinese use of gongs in the treatment of cancer," says, "I'm sorry...but your civilization, so-called, is much too primitive. You could never understand" (149). However, like such sentiments coming from the pen of Gulliver, Vonnegut puts these words in the mouths of characters that cannot be trusted as "bearers of truth," nor as representatives of the author's views.

A parallel within *Gulliver's Travels* to the pervasive notion in *Slapstick* of the artificial extended family does not seem to exist.

However, on September 29, 1725--about a year before *Gulliver's Travels* was published--Swift wrote the following concerning his forthcoming book in a letter to Alexander Pope:

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is toward individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-one, and Judge Such-a-one: so with physicians--I will not speak of my own trade--soldiers, English, Scotch, French, and the rest. But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth. This is the system upon which I have governed myself many years, but do not tell, and so I shall go on till I have done with them. I have got materials toward a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition *animal rationale*, and to show it would be only *rationis capax*. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy...the whole building of my Travels is erected (494).

The system established by Wilbur when he became president is based on similar principles, as described in a paper written when Wilbur and Eliza were children:

It said that there was nothing new about artificial extended families in America. Physicians felt themselves related to other physicians, lawyers to lawyers, writers to writers, athletes to athletes, politicians to politicians, and so on.

Eliza and I said these were bad sorts of extended families, however. They excluded children and old people and housewives, and losers of every description. Also: Their interests were usually so specialized as to seem nearly insane to outsiders. (156-7)

Like Swift in his letter to Pope, Wilbur and Eliza detest the current forms of "extended families" based on profession or nationality or other 'superficial' connections. The twins go on to suggest a system of "artificial extended families" that would break down the harmful exclusive barriers of existing "families":

"An ideal extended family," Eliza and I had written so long ago, "should give proportional representation to all sorts of Americans, according to their number. The creation of ten thousand such families, say, would provide America with ten thousand parliaments, so to speak, which would discuss sincerely and expertly what only a few hypocrites now discuss with passion, which is the welfare of all mankind."  
(157)

Interestingly, the ambassador from China rejected their plan as "ridiculous" (156), demonstrating that the ultra-rational, Houyhnhnm-like Chinese have no place for ideas that foster love or "common decency."

Despite the system of massive artificial extended families that Wilbur implements as president, he still seems to be fundamentally lonely. Nothing can replace the "nation of two" (71) that he had with Eliza. At the end of the novel, the key to manipulating the universe is revealed to be through "combining harmonious minds" (237), like Wilbur and Eliza were able to do in the earlier part of the novel. This indeed

harkens back to Swift who saw personal, intimate relationships with "individuals" as the sole objects of deserving his love. If what Swift writes in his letter to Pope is to be believed, then *Gulliver's Travels*, especially the fourth part, is not as pessimistic and brooding as it seems, but merely seeks to eliminate the current exclusive system of professional and political organizations in favour of the individual.

*Slapstick* closes with the remainder of Wilbur's story as told by an intervening narrator who takes over at the climax of Wilbur's tale. It is nothing short of a farcical allegory--a highly Swiftian genre<sup>7</sup>--of Vonnegut's own life. The reference to the "Dresden candlestick" (240) recalls Vonnegut's own experiences in Dresden during the Second World War, which were first referred to in the prologue of *Mother Night*, and later served as the prime subject matter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The image of "a famished child, pregnant and clasping a Dresden candlestick" (241) seems to be a phoenix-like rebirth out of the ashes of Dresden. The image leaves us with an ultimately optimistic hope in the children and grandchildren of the following generation, similar to the hope that Don Pedro offers at the end of the *Travels*.

Ultimately, we find that Swain, like Gulliver, is little more than a literary device. Swain is basically a figure Vonnegut uses to relate and

comment on his own life and on life in general. Similarly, Lemuel Gulliver is little more than something Swift uses to create situations that enable Swift to make comments on British and European politics and on human nature in general. As we have seen, there are numerous parallels between *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels*, which seem to be significant enough to not only show that the two books are similar but that Vonnegut was influenced by Swift's writing. It remains to be seen, then, how Vonnegut interprets Swift ideologically and how this interpretation is reflected in *Slapstick*.



## CHAPTER THREE

Vonnegut claims that the publisher rejected his "preface for a new edition of *Gulliver's Travels*" because he "had sentimentalized Swift, having failed, apparently, to have read any detailed accounts of his life and character" (*Palm Sunday* 255). Within the preface itself, he relates some of his own impressions of Swift, citing a handful of biographical details to substantiate his ideas. He refers to Swift as "one of the most bitterly funny writers of his or any time" (256), and adds that "in our own thin-skinned and solemn society, it would be impossible for such a ferocious satirist to become the head of a cathedral and a treasured public man" (256). Vonnegut not only presents his impressions of Swift but also his understanding of *Gulliver's Travels*. His views are useful in looking at *Slapstick*, as it seems that his reading of *Gulliver's Travels* had an influence on that novel. It is fitting, then, to examine what Vonnegut has to say about Swift in the preface and then to reexamine *Slapstick* in light of his views.

According to the "preface," Vonnegut perceives that beneath the satirical veneer of *Gulliver's Travels* there is a more sober moral purpose:

[Swift's] motives were invariably serious...and I now suggest that *Gulliver's Travels* can be read as a series of highly responsible sermons, delivered during a crisis in Christian attitudes, one that is far from over yet. The crisis is this, in my opinion: It simply will not do for adult Christians to think of themselves as God's little lambs anymore. (256)

Thus, for Vonnegut, Swift has some sort of elevated intent behind his work and writes to address a "crisis." Vonnegut seems to imply, then, that past the enigma of the man Swift, and through all the humour and irony, there *is* a serious Swift--no matter how difficult this personality is to define. As mentioned above, it is very often a mistake to define a "serious" Swift, just as it may be a mistake to define a "serious" Vonnegut. For Vonnegut to claim Swift's motives "invariably serious" may imply that beneath all of Vonnegut's humour and irony he too is invariably serious--if one may be so bold as to assume that Vonnegut is presupposing that the attributes he ascribes to another writer, specifically Swift, are attributes that he has himself. To classify *Gulliver's Travels* as "a series of highly responsible sermons" is rather unconventional. Critics of Vonnegut, most notably Towers, have accused Vonnegut of irresponsibility. Is it possible that Vonnegut considers his

own novel "a series of highly responsible sermons" as well? And, since he considers the "crisis in Christian attitudes...far from over," is he aiming his homilies at the same problem?

Gill's description of how laughter works in Vonnegut's writing seems to answer the former question, since it sounds as if he is describing a sort of sermon, or at least a disguised exhortation:

[T]here is in his attitude a laughing resilience that goes beyond black humor. He hurls some vigorous obscenities at the pathos of humanity but avoids the pretension of a tragic pose...Vonnegut's message is more how to cope than the impossibility of coping. In *Slapstick* the absurdity of life fosters social neuroses, which one can at least begin to treat.  
(78)

As Gill also points out, Swain's "suggestions" for how members of artificial extended families might help each other "end with a faint echo of the Gospel of Matthew" (79), in the words "by visiting them in a jail or hospital" (170). Giannone's description of the style of *Slapstick* goes beyond just sounding like a sermon but actually compares it to the Psalms:

The novel is a compilation of 50 poem-chapters, which proceed through association. Each sequence is lyrical meditation on the mysterious ways of God, and together they read like so many laments in the Psalter seeking deliverance from agony. Appropriately for our age, which is a time of the eclipse of God, Vonnegut addresses his skeptical prayers to the Deity in the anonymous form of "to whom it may

concern." The achievement of *Slapstick* is just such plumbing of human problems through a tone which we find in the psalms. (*Book World* H1)

The novel's form thus resembles a series of sermons, but it remains to be seen how Vonnegut is responding to the "crisis in Christian attitudes" in his message.

Vonnegut's sermon is delivered in fragments throughout *Slapstick*. To begin with, in the following passage recounting the upbringing of the twins, there is an assessment of Christian ethics:

Consider: We [Wilbur and Eliza] were at the center of the lives of those who cared for us. They could be heroically Christian in their own eyes only if Eliza and I remained helpless and vile. If we became openly wise and self-reliant, they would become our drab and inferior assistants. If we became capable of going out into the world, they might lose their apartments, their color televisions, their illusions of being sorts of doctors and nurses, and their high-paying jobs.  
(41)

This comment on "heroically Christian" virtues in effect warns against the negative consequences of false Christian charity. Here the motives of those who "cared for" the twins are examined, and they turn out to be based on selfishness. The key phrase that reveals this fact is "in their own eyes." Wilbur and Eliza play along with the charade in order to keep from upsetting the "natural orders of things." Vonnegut continues his preaching by saying that "all the damaging excesses of Americans in

the past were motivated by loneliness rather than a fondness for sin" (160). Some of Vonnegut's remarks and observations in the Prologue mirror these sentiments, such as his uncle's membership in Alcoholics Anonymous (9).

Also in the Prologue, Vonnegut goes on to preach a Gospel of "common decency": "I have had some experiences with love, or think I have, anyway, although the ones I have liked best could easily be described a 'common decency'" (2). He further elaborates on this theme in a Sermon-on-the-Mount-like tone:

Love is where you find it. I think it is foolish to go looking for it, and I think it can often be poisonous.

I wish that people who are conventionally supposed to love each other would say to each other, when they fight, "Please--a little less love, and a little more common decency."  
(3)

Real life, flesh and blood extended families are to be founded on such mature common decency, and common decency essentially becomes Vonnegut's key to salvation in *Slapstick*:

Bernard [Vonnegut's brother] and I belong to artificial extended families which allow us to claim relatives all over the world...This is amusing and comforting to both of us. It is nice.

It is lucky, too, for human beings need all the relatives they can get--as possible donors or receivers not necessarily of love, but of common decency. (5)

Vonnegut does not seem to be abolishing love, of course, but rather replacing a term that has become overused, clichéd and abused, which has resulted in its negative connotations. He is trying, by replacing the term itself, to bring back a sense of mutual respect and consideration which has been lost in the word "love." Indeed, he implies that the word has become more of a license *not* to show respect and consideration. Hence, he simply offers an alternative phrase that attempts to bring back these elements to what was formerly called love.

Vonnegut looks to the films of Laurel and Hardy to show just how insignificant love, at least as in its degenerated sense, has come to be in his own life and experience:

Love was never at issue. And, perhaps because I was so perpetually intoxicated and instructed by Laurel and Hardy during my childhood in the Great Depression, I find it natural to discuss life without ever mentioning love

It does not seem important to me.

What does seem important? Bargaining in good faith with destiny. (2)

Thus we come to another point in Vonnegut's sermon that is echoed throughout his novel, that of "bargaining in good faith with destiny." The message that Dr. Mott, the man who looked after the twins when they were children, gives Swain when they meet years later at his graduation party constitutes a qualifier to the 'Golden Rule' that

incorporates the notions of "common decency" and of "bargaining in good faith with destiny". The message, a quotation from Hippocrates, says, "If you can do no good, at least do no harm." (141). The "scriptural text" of the novel, if we may continue the analogy with a sermon, comes from Matthew 6:34, which Swain quotes to Vera Chipmunk-5 Zappa, a farmer and his closest neighbour:

"Take no thought for the morrow," I told her, "for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"Amen," I said. (207)

This verse epitomizes the fatalistic attitude that Swain adopts later in life. To "take no thought for the morrow" in the context of this novel results, in essence, in an attitude tantamount to treating life as "slapstick."

To return to where this discussion of "sermons" began, it would seem that in his preface to *Gulliver's Travels*, Vonnegut is making the mistake of identifying a "serious" Swift. Moreover, throughout his "preface" he not only suggests that he understands Swift's vantage point, but he clearly defines and explains it, albeit in relatively broad terms. However, at the end of the article, Vonnegut states that "in praising the sanity of *Gulliver's Travels*, I have made it sound altogether *too sane*"

(*Palm* 259), which, in effect, undermines much of what he has said about a "serious" Swift. This assertion, in turn, serves to undermine the "series of sermons" in Vonnegut's novel. Vonnegut's even less sane novel *Slapstick* may even be viewed as something of a tribute to Swift's work.

Further on in his proposed preface, Vonnegut describes, in rather loose terms, the philosophical, theological and scientific atmosphere in which Swift wrote the *Travels*:

There were certainly strong hints around [in Swift's time] that the natural orders of things, so long so stubborn and mysterious, might in fact be wonderful clocks which could be tinkered with, which might even be taken apart and reassembled. Human reason was in the process of assuming powers to change life such as only armies and disasters had possessed before. So Dublin's first citizen found it urgent that we take an unsentimental look, for the good of the universe, at the great apes that were suddenly doing such puissant thinking. Lambs, indeed! (256-7)

Vonnegut poises Swift on the verge of a great revolution in human reasoning, and sees Swift not as a prophet of doom but as a "canary in a coal mine,"--someone sensitive enough to perceive the dangers ahead--just as Vonnegut sees himself.<sup>8</sup> Like Swift, Vonnegut too is reacting to a disturbance in "the natural orders of things," a disruption that became clear to Vonnegut when he was a witness to the fire-bombing of Dresden. It seems, by implication, that Vonnegut is saying that in the twentieth



century "human reason" has lost some of its "powers to change life," and has once again been overshadowed by the powers of "armies and disasters." This becomes apparent when Vonnegut asserts that "the history of the past hundred years" has proven Swift to be right (258), because recent advances in war technology have eclipsed recent advances in "human reason." Here once again we find the idea of progress questioned, and Vonnegut leaves us with a sense of hopelessness. Ironically, Vonnegut seems to be looking back to Swift's time with admiration, while Swift himself saw his own time in negative terms.

Later in the preface, Vonnegut expands and clarifies some of his ideas and themes. For example, he states that

In *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift sets such high standards for unsentimentality about human beings that most of us can meet those standards only in wartime, and only briefly even then. (257)

This connection between "unsentimentality" and war reinforces the connection Vonnegut feels he has with Swift. Interestingly, Vonnegut has been ridiculed for being "sentimental." Thus, he may not only see himself as responsible like Swift but also as unsentimental--at least on occasion. His sentimentality works effectively as a slapstick-filled contrast to the unsentimental horrors and atrocities he relates, and the

laughter goes beyond black humour--"black slapstick" would perhaps be a fitting description.

With this understanding of Swift, Vonnegut summarizes *Gulliver's Travels* accordingly. Once more we see Vonnegut's own experience emerging in his assessment of Swift's writing:

He [Swift] shrinks us, urinates on us, expands us and peers into all our nauseating apertures, encourages us to demonstrate our stupidity and mendaciousness, makes us hideously old. On paper he subjects us to every humiliating test that imaginative fiction can invent. And what is learned about us in the course of these Auschwitzian experiments? Only this, according to Swift's hero, Captain Gulliver: that we are disgusting in the extreme. (257)

Once more, Vonnegut makes a connection between *Gulliver's Travels* and the atrocities of the Second World War, drawing a parallel from his own experience and writings. On close examination, *Slapstick* may be observed to do the very same things as Vonnegut describes Swift to be doing in *Gulliver's Travels*. Certainly, Vonnegut "subjects us to every humiliating test that imaginative fiction can invent." In addition, an initial impression of *Slapstick* could easily resemble the impression of Gulliver, that "we are disgusting in the extreme," since both works basically present a rather bleak picture of human existence. However, Vonnegut recognizes that Gulliver is Swift's literary device, and, as a

result, sees a distinction between the content of *Gulliver's Travels* and Swift's personal views:

We can be sure that this is not Swift's own opinion of us, thank God--for, before he allows Gulliver to declare us no better than vomit, he makes Gulliver insane. That *has* to be the deepest meaning of Gulliver's adoration of horses, since Swift himself had no more than average respect for those dazed and skittish animals. Gulliver is no longer the reliable witness he was in Chapter I. (257)

Vonnegut here attempts to discount Gulliver's credibility in the latter part of the book, thereby undermining the misanthropic views at the end. Vonnegut's literary device, his narrator Swain, is also insane through much of the latter part of *Slapstick*--or at least is rendered so by his addiction to "tri-benzo-Deportamil." Thus, anything that Swain says as well is undermined.

With this perspective on Gulliver, Vonnegut, via anecdote, further discusses insanity and the possibility of separating Swift from his literary creation:

I had a teacher in high school who assured me that a person has to be at least a little insane to harp on human disgustingness as much as Swift does. And Swift harps on it long before Gulliver has gone insane. (257)

It may initially seem that Vonnegut here concedes that Swift was perhaps psychologically unstable. However, he goes on to explain that Swift's "harping" actually serves a satirical purpose:

I would tell that teacher now, if she were still alive, that his harping is so relentless that it becomes ridiculous, and is meant to be ridiculous, and that Swift is teaching us a lesson almost as important as the one about our not being lambs: that our readiness to feel disgust for ourselves and others is not, perhaps, the guardian of civilization so many of us imagine it to be. Disgust, in fact, may be the chief damager of our reason, of our common sense--may make us act against our own best interests, may make us insane...In my opinion, *Gulliver's Travels* is a remarkable effort to inject us with an overdose of disgustedness, and thus to immunize us from that most dangerous disease. (257-8)

So ultimately we see, according to Vonnegut, that Swift is not insane but in fact *Gulliver's Travels* works to protect us from the evil virus "disgust" that can make us insane. Here it certainly seems that Vonnegut is attributing to Swift what he himself is doing in his novels. That is, he is using overstatement to shock us and hopefully "immunize" us from such harmful disgust, such as he does with the incestuous relationship between the twins. A better example of this sort of immunizing overstatement is the "involuntary streams of obscenities" that David Daffodil-11 von Peterswald utters (232). Whether Swift is actually using the approach Vonnegut says he is, and whether it works or not, is moot.

But then, the same is true of satire's ability to reform and cure in general. Though "the truth immediately strikes every reader with conviction" (Swift 5), readers seldom act on this conviction.

Before this discussion concludes, it seems a Swiftian digression is in order to examine the idea and connotations of "slapstick" in greater depth. Hopefully, this examination will shed light on Vonnegut's writing, and, in turn, on Swift's. It may also show why Giannone claimed that *Slapstick* "will be of greatest interest to those who know Vonnegut's work well" ("Gags" H1). "Slapstick" was hardly an arbitrary title for Vonnegut's novel. The term has autobiographical origins, since in the Prologue of *Slapstick* we are told that the idea for equating life to "slapstick" comes from Vonnegut's sister Alice:

[S]he had died among strangers in New Jersey, of cancer--at the age of forty-one.

"Soap opera!" she said to my brother and me one time, when discussing her own impending death. She would be leaving four young boys behind, without any mother.

"Slapstick," she said. (11)

Simply put, tragedy has become slapstick--not just ordinary tragedy, but perhaps the greatest personal tragedy in Vonnegut's life, a tragedy piled on top of his Dresden experience. Similarly, after the extended family system is put into place in the novel, everything becomes pure slapstick

for Swain. It is at that point he begins to laugh at the absurdity of everything, noting a number of times that he "had to laugh" (182, 184, 198). Indeed, Swain begins to laugh *only* at slapstick humour, and to him the most tragic events and circumstances become simply slapstick:

Aside from battles, the history of nations seemed to consist of nothing but powerless old poops like myself, heavily medicated and vaguely beloved in the long ago, coming to kiss the boots of young psychopaths.

Inside myself, I had to laugh. (224)

Ultimately for Swain, then, all of history has come to be nothing but slapstick. Even the very time spent on earth is merely slapstick: "This is *forever!* Where you are now is just nothing in terms of time! It's a joke!" (234)

Perhaps this is how Vonnegut perceives the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*--that is, as pure slapstick. It is in the fourth part that the complexities of Swift's satire are essentially set aside for simple, unadulterated laughter. Swain goes on to show that he considers life slapstick, with his reference to "the low comedy of living" (225), again revealing a Gulliver-like pessimism. He also notes at one point, "I felt as though I were God" (228). In a sense, Wilbur *is* God as he is writing his own story, since he is the creator and omnipotent ruler of everything that goes into his autobiography. Furthermore, by implication, this

places Vonnegut and writers in general in a similar position as creators of fiction and of their imaginative worlds.

In the Epilogue, we are presented with Wilbur's proposed epitaph:

And how did we then face the odds,  
Of man's rude slapstick, yes, and God's?  
Quite at home and unafraid,  
Thank you,  
In a game our dreams remade.

This poem not only reiterates that life is but slapstick to human beings, but also asserts that human beings are God's source of slapstick. Therefore, if the writer is god of the fictive world, then writing is the writer's slapstick. What Vonnegut is showing us, then, is that virtually everything--even the very words that he is putting down on the page--are nothing but Laurel-and-Hardy-like base humour. To say that "all is slapstick" seems roughly equivalent to saying "all is meaningless"; however, the tears and hopelessness that the latter statement inspires are replaced by spontaneous laughter, which inherently brings a sense of hope. Laughter is how Vonnegut has chosen to respond to the tragedy of life. Hence, an appropriate alternate title for *Slapstick* might be *Laughterhouse-Five*.

Why did Vonnegut continue to write after his sister and the memory of her that he kept alive vanished, after all reason for laughter ended, in essence? After all, his sister "was the person [he] had always written for," his "audience of one":

For my own part, though: It would have been catastrophic if I had forgotten my sister at once. I had never told her so, but she was the person I had always written for. She was the secret of whatever artistic unity I had ever achieved. She was the secret of my technique. Any creation which has any wholeness and harmoniousness, I suspect, was made by an artist or inventor with an audience of one in mind.

Yes, and she was nice enough, or Nature was nice enough, to allow me to feel her presence for a number of years after she died--to let me go on writing for her. (15)

He goes on to note that by the time he was on the plane on his way to his uncle's funeral, "she had vanished entirely as [his] audience" (16). Alas, Vonnegut was left without anyone to write for. Could this be why his novels since that time have seemingly lacked the intensity and creativity of his earlier works? The answer to this question, of course, may be found in an explication of the word "slapstick," as do the answers to all life's questions. But seriously, a deeper understanding of the word as it represents what Vonnegut writes about in the novel at least helps.

There is a passage in *Slapstick* that reveals the historical context that Vonnegut feels himself to be in. Like Swift, he sees himself



in a time of tinkering. But he too is misunderstood because only other artists, his fellow canaries, can smell the gas in the mine shaft. The passage describes how a "strapping young man" is received when he stands up at a family meeting of "Daffodils" in Indianapolis and openly displays his zeal for war:

To my surprise, he was scolded by several speakers for his military ardor. He was told that war wasn't supposed to be fun, and in fact wasn't fun--that tragedy was being discussed, and that he had better put on a tragic face, or he would be ejected from the meeting. (213)

Let us now take this passage out of context, as critical license allows. This simple and underrated act will present us with a tidy little allegory. And since we are in the midst of an extended Swiftian digression, a light, ironic Swiftian style seems appropriate.

Let us say that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut writing about war in "fun" terms. And let us say that he is "scolded" for it. In the role of a so-called postmodernist, Vonnegut both reacts to tragedy and writes about it in a highly unconventional way. What is the conventional way? As the most elevated of forms since Aristotle declared it so, and Pope declared it canonical law, tragedy is sacrosanct, and **not** to be tampered with. Certainly, the occasional insertion of the comic is allowed, but not

too much, just enough for 'relief.' What Vonnegut does, the postmodernist that he is, is to subvert--make that *invert*--the elements of comedy and tragedy. So what we end up with in Vonnegut is 'tragic relief' within an essentially comic piece. Failure to put on his tragic face means that Vonnegut has to be ejected from our allegorical meeting, which, no doubt, suits him just fine.

What the rest of the assemblage fails to understand is that beneath his comic breastplate, Vonnegut conceals a heart of tragedy. When they scream at him to sit down it is because they cannot understand him; they cannot understand him because he is speaking another language. It is a tongue they do not recognize, although they hear its German roots. Of course they do not recognize it because it is a new language. But then why would anyone attempt to create a new language? Though this seems a rhetorical question, it does have an answer--because the old languages no longer work. This is how Vonnegut tinkers--that is, by experimenting with language and forms. Vonnegut sees a need for a new language since the "natural orders of things" have degenerated into chaos from *overtinkering* and from "what has happened in the past hundred years or so." Existing language fails to communicate the horrors of death camps, blitzkriegs, firebombings and

Hiroshima. It fails to communicate Korea, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, the Berlin Wall and the Persian Gulf. As a result, modern society has been left mute.

Modern literature has long been searching for a new language. Joyce in his works progressively creates a language that ultimately becomes all but intelligible in *Finnegans Wake*. Sailing across the sea in the search for a new language, let us look into the pool of American Literature. There we see Hemingway paddling around. His style is a response to the language problem, and in *A Farewell to Arms* he offers us place names as a symbolic shorthand for communicating ideas beyond words (202). And Faulkner, in *As I Lay Dying*, desperately calls for a linguistic lifejacket:

I [Addie] learned that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When he [Addie's son Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride...[A word is] just a shape to fill a lack. (163-4)

Into this context Vonnegut floats, picking up an oar here, waterwings there, and making it look so easy that some want to join him, yet others want to drown him. Surely, it may be said Vonnegut uses the English

language and it is easily recognizable as such. Granted, but he rejuvenates it by using a stock character base, folding in a few lumps of scatology, adding a huxley of dystopia, more or aldous, flavouring it with a cran of artificial extended families, and spicing it with a dash of "the second irony"--a recipe he borrows from Swift. Returning to our earlier hyperextended allegory, we find that Vonnegut has been ejected from the meeting into rather illustrious company. Was the meeting he was ejected from an assembling of spiders and Vonnegut a bee? Time has shown Swift to be a bee.

How, then, does Vonnegut himself perceive his novel *Slapstick*?

In his own words,

[*Slapstick*] is about desolated cities and spiritual cannibalism and incest and loneliness and lovelessness and death, so on. It depicts myself and my beautiful sister as monsters, and so on...It is about this terribly old man in the ruins of Manhattan, you see, where almost everyone has been killed by a mysterious disease called "The Green Death."

He lives there with his illiterate, rickety, pregnant little granddaughter, Melody. Who is he really? I guess he is myself--experimenting with being old.

Who is Melody? I thought for a while that she was all that remained of my memory of my sister. I now believe that she is what I feel to be, when I experiment with old age, all that is left of my optimistic imagination, of my creativeness. (18-19)

This description of *Slapstick* is what Vonnegut "*feels*" his life is like (1). As such, the novel is a work of impressionism. Vonnegut paints a somewhat abstract picture of "neanderthaloids," an incestuous orgy, miniature human beings, variable gravity--all ways of showing what Vonnegut "*feels*." Thus, the language that Vonnegut writes in is a language of impressions, fitting for something he has "dreamed" (18).

## CONCLUSION

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slapstick* was not well-received. Indeed, Vonnegut himself did not seem to receive it well. For the most part, the reception may be a result of viewing *Slapstick* in the wake of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and not as a work on its own. As we have seen, *Slapstick* is more complex than it initially appears. It is a highly Swiftian novel--a fact that may serve either to elevate Vonnegut's writing or to derogate Swift's. It is also a novel filled with Vonnegut's *feelings* about his own life--his 'autobiographical impressions,' if you will. The novel's Swiftian and autobiographical elements are factors that have led to misconceptions about *Slapstick*, just as Swift has been "misperceived" by numerous critics.

The circumstantial evidence for the case that Vonnegut was influenced by Swift when he wrote *Slapstick* is overwhelming, since parallels between *Slapstick* and *Gulliver's Travels* abound. For example, both books have a simple style (though often homiletic) that has led to the treatment of one as a children's work and the other as a childish

work. As well, Vonnegut incorporates Lilliputian-like characters into his novel in the form of miniature Chinese people, although for different purposes. Vonnegut also provides parallels to Swift's "struldbruggs," Houyhnhnms, and yahoos, to his scatology and pessimism, and to his ideas on education and progress. Even a link to Vonnegut's notion of artificial extended families can be found in Swift. And, like Swift, it is very difficult to single out a "serious" Vonnegut; or, in Vonnegut's words, "one of the biggest mysteries about him [is] whether he [is] kidding or not" (*Breakfast* 86). It is not surprising, then, that a recent description of Vonnegut's writing sounds like a description of Swift's: "The body of Kurt Vonnegut's writing contains some of the most uncomfortably funny social satire in English" (Skow 83). Perhaps Vonnegut did not consciously imitate *Gulliver's Travels* when he wrote *Slapstick*, but at least the way he thought about Swift's book is reflected in the novel.

Not only is *Slapstick* Swiftian, it is also intensely autobiographical. However, the autobiographical content of the novel is delivered in terms of Vonnegut's *feelings*, so the distinction between external fact and internal impression is essentially obliterated. As Dhar says, in *Slapstick* the "private self" comes to assert itself over the "public self" (63). This process makes the novel innovative for its "fiction of

inwardness" and for its ability to allow the author to "come to terms with himself" through his fiction (63). To shed light on the introspective function of *Slapstick*, let us turn to a syllogism, presented in the introduction to *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon*, that perhaps explains how Vonnegut came up with the name "Melody." At one point he states, "fiction is melody" (xx), and shortly after he asserts that "I myself am a work of fiction" (xxi). To take this one step further, if Vonnegut himself is a work of fiction, then *Slapstick* is Vonnegut on paper, making the novel cathartic as such. Vonnegut's persona enters his fiction in the guise of Swain. Becoming a character within his own writing is an approach he has used a number of times, most notably in the latter part of *Breakfast of Champions*. This approach further muddles the image of the 'real' Vonnegut and lends him the stature of a fictional character even outside of his novels. Thus, in answer to the question, who *does* the novel *Slapstick* concern, it concerns Vonnegut himself, and the novel is just Vonnegut's "nightly prayer":

The old man is writing his autobiography. He begins it with words which my late Uncle Alex told me one time should be used by religious skeptics as a prelude to their nightly prayers.

These are the words: "to whom it may concern." (19)



Nonetheless, the confusion of fact and impression causes the reader to question Vonnegut at *all* times, even when he claims "This really happened" (12). But then, this process of questioning leads us to re-examine the distinction between fiction and non-fiction in general. After all, does any piece of writing exist that is purely fact? Is it possible for an author to write something that is not somehow influenced by personal impressions? Given that people are not passionless machines, of course not. Vonnegut thus exposes a facade at the very core of how we view literature, something he describes in *Breakfast of Champions*:

I thought Beatrice Keedsler had joined hands with other old-fashioned storytellers to make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end (209).

*Slapstick's* excessive absurdity mocks the traditional form of storytelling. The novel offers Vonnegut's alternative approach to realistic writing, an approach that dispenses with the fallacy of the objective observer, and confounds the orthodox unities used by "old-fashioned storytellers."

It is understandable, then, that one often becomes uncomfortable when dealing with *Slapstick* and Vonnegut's later books. Most of his books up to *Slapstick* seem to fall neatly under the label 'Modernist.' The discomfort experienced when dealing with his

subsequent novels comes from the difficulty of putting a label on his later work, since labels make concepts easier to grasp. Much of Vonnegut's earlier books are infused with personal impressions, but the end of *Breakfast of Champions* marks his displacement of "accumulations of nit-picking details" (278) with a barrage of *feelings*. Given this view of the personal significance of *Slapstick*, as well as its many Swiftian qualities, perhaps all of Vonnegut's books published since *Breakfast of Champions* deserve a second look.

## NOTES

1. Wymer cites Crichton from "Sci-Fi and Vonnegut," *New Republic*, 26 April 1969, 35.

2. For example, see Aldous Huxley, "Swift," in *Do What You Will* (London 1929), 81; George Orwell, "Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of *Gulliver's Travels*," in *Shooting an Elephant* (London 1950), 93-4; and Middleton Murry, *Jonathan Swift* (London 1954), 439.

3. Interestingly, Vanderbilt makes note of Laurel and Hardy's last comedy, *Utopia* (256), which Fischer does not mention.

4. Blackford identifies a number of other similarities between *Slapstick* and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, 217-18.

5. For example, see Irvin Ehrenpreis, *The Personality of Jonathan Swift*, 39-40; and Donald J. Greene in *Sewanee Review*, LXXV, no. 1, 684.

6. Interestingly, the fact that Wilbur runs for president when he is seventy years old seems absurd--that is, until Reagan ran for president in 1980 at about the same age, revealing that it truly *is* absurd.

7. For example, see the elaborate parodical political and religious allegory of the "Tramecksan" ("High-Heels") and the "Slamecksan" ("Low-Heels") parties, and the "Big-Endians" and the "Small-Endians" in Part I, Chapter IV of the *Travels*.

8. Vonnegut explains his "canary in a coal mine" theory in *Wampeters*:

Writers are specialized cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society--just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down

into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continue to think artists--all artists--should be treasured as alarm systems. (238)

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