

Disillusion in Boyhood: A Study of Twain and Vonnegut

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While there is about one century interval between Mark Twain and Kurt Vonnegut, their own styles resemble each other. In fact, Vonnegut seems to have respect for Twain, because Vonnegut admits that he "felt profoundly indebted to Mark Twain,"¹ in his third essay, *Fate Worse than Death*. In addition, he also describes "I named my firstborn son after him,"² in his second essay, *Palm Sunday*.

To give some points of the striking similarities between Twain and Vonnegut, a mind of satire, a rebellious spirit, a sense of humor and the like. Some scholars point out their similarities. For example, Robert Scholes says, "Kurt Vonnegut is a vulgar sentimentalist--a quality he shares with Dickens, for instance. He is also a crude humorist--a quality he shares with Mark Twain."³ Charles Nicol says "Indeed, Vonnegut does his best to be our contemporary Mark Twain, and since nobody else seems to want the title we can give it to him without prejudice."⁴

Both of Twain and Vonnegut describe about despair in many works. If we look back upon the history of human race, racial discrimination, religious antagonism, mass murder and world war are repeated. As to the personal life, human beings are apt to struggle with troubles, hardships and sorrows. These two novelists write on despair with satire and irony. What does Vonnegut succeed to Twain's achievements? Or what does not Vonnegut succeed to Twain's services? In this papers, I will give consideration to some points of resemblance or difference

between Twain and Vonnegut, analyzing their works concerning disillusion in boyhood.

In Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the protagonists, Huck and Billy, are boys, though Huck remains boy in the whole story and Billy becomes an adult. In either case, they face stern realities.

While the late works of Mark Twain are generally full of pessimism, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* tends to be regarded as a typical tale of adventure. In fact, this story is made into some movies and cartoon films for boys and girls. It is, however, a satirical novel. Huck runs up against many desperate incidents and each time finds a way out of his troubles.

In the background of Huck's going down the river on the raft, there is a despair toward his father. At the beginning of the book, Huck lives a stiff life with the widow Douglas and Miss Watson. As his father(Pap), who disappeared for a while, hears that Huck gets much money, he wants to beg the money. Pap leads Huck away from the house of the widow Douglas and shut Huck up in an old cabin on the opposite bank of the Mississippi, over to the Illinois shore. For Huck, the life in the cabin looks better than the refined and respectable life with the Widow Douglas, but Pap's ferocity grows stronger and stronger. In fact, he is a model of poor white, and feels animosity toward the society as follows:

It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drewed out. I says I'll never vote agin.⁶

Since America is a free and competitive society, there is great difference between a success and a failure as a matter of

course. Pap gives himself up to unreasonable anger toward the whole society. He seems to keep sanity by abusing on the weak, that is Afro-American. Besides, Pap's hatred like this turns not only for the world but also for Huck. Finally, when Pap has too much to drink, he is fuddled and goes so far as to take Huck's life. Huck is quite disappointed with Pap and runs away from Pap after pretending to be killed by someone.

As Pap turns his back on the society, so Huck flees from Pap. To say in other words, Huck has broken off with Pap. In the latter half of the book, when Huck hears of Pap's death from Jim, Huck is not shaken by the news. Twain shows that all blood relatives are not close bonds of affection. This way of thinking is reinforced by the strong ties between Huck and Jim. When Huck runs away from Pap and goes to Jackson's Island, he meets Jim there. Jim also runs off, since Miss Watson, the owner of Jim, will sell him down to Orleans. While Huck hears what happened, he does not have any ill feeling for Miss Watson. At this point, Huck has a severe racial prejudice. He regards Jim as only a tender slave for a Afro-American. As the escape journey of Huck and Jim advances, Huck's point of view changes. The most striking change occurs, when Huck tells a lie to Jim. Huck's lie hurts Jim's feelings and then Huck is awakened to the truth that Jim ought to be treated as a white man. Probably Huck feels self-hatred for the first time, but Huck can not change his mind perfectly. When Jim tells that he wants to take charge of his family, Huck thinks like this:

It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, "give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell."

Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children--children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm.⁶

Thus Huck can not conquer the racial discrimination at all. About these sentences Jonathan Bennett writes:

This is bad morality all right. In his earliest years Huck wasn't taught any principles, and the only ones he has encountered since then are those of rural Missouri, in which slave-owing is just one kind of ownership and is not subject to critical pressure.⁷

If the background of the times is taken into consideration, it is natural that Huck is bound by prejudice. Even the present age, the racial discrimination does not vanish. Huck may not rid himself of his prejudice to the end of his life perfectly. At the beginning of the escape journey of Huck and Jim, they steal a glance at three thieves in a wreck. The thieves are divided among themselves. Their mean deeds depress Huck. He learns need to be cautious about the world.

After Huck goes down the river, he is involved in a discord between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. When Huck drops into on the Grangerfords, he makes friends with a boy by the name of Buck. Buck gives an explanation of the strife of both families.

"Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills *him*; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the *cousins* chip in--and by and by everybody's killed off,

and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time."⁸

This vicious circle continues for about thirty years without having doubts. And at last Buck is killed in the strife and Huck nearly gets dragged into it. He runs away in a hurry.

The Grangerfords is the owner of a great farm and their way of living overwhelms Huck. At first, Huck is fascinated by Col. Grangerford, because Col. Grangerford stands on his dignity and seems to be a perfect gentleman. As a matter of a fact, he is a model of the privileged class people of the South. Huck is quite disappointed with the upper classes. Twain satirizes on southern aristocracy.

In addition, Huck happens to witness a murder case at a little one-horse town in the State of Arkansas. Old Boggs is shot dead by Colonel Sherborn on the grounds that he only call Colonel Sherborn names. People in the town try to punish, but they are overcome by Colonel Sherborn. The mob are stupid and coward, and Colonel Sherborn is cruel tyrant. Twain is cynical about both sides. The tyrant and coward people--this pattern is repeated many times in the world. There has been a thought that the strong are sure to win and the weak resign themselves especially in America.

As Huck meets some rough, greedy, deceptive and stupid people in the escape journey, he must be felt more and more discouraged. He, however, thinks going down the river on a raft as comfortable. The raft in this novel may be regarded as a kind of utopia. For instance, Huck talks with Jim.

We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.⁹

If Huck and Jim go on traveling on the raft interminably, they will become the inhabitants in utopia. The raft, however, a makeshift shelter anyway. Besides, the raft, a place of refuge, is occupied by the King and the Duke. They are frauds, whom Huck and Jim get to know on the way of the escape journey. Both of the King and the Duke are good talkers and efficient workers and take use of piety of people of the South. The King impersonates a contrite pirate, sheds sham tears in the camp meeting and makes money. The Duke takes advertisements for the false paper. Huck is good enough to overlook such an illegal deed, but when they try to cheat three poor orphans out of their legacy by pretending to be their two uncles, Huck prevents them from committing a crime. After the affair, the King and the Duke join in the escape journey of Huck and Jim again, and in the end they sell Jim as a fugitive slave. At the time Huck goes through an ordeal. As Huck remains tied to prejudice yet, he is at a loss what he ought to do with Jim. If Huck pays no attention to Jim, Jim must work hard among strangers in lifetime. Even if Huck reports it to Miss Watson, Jim may be sold and Huck must be blamed on the grounds that Huck helps Jim to run away. There is no way out no matter which way he turns. At length Huck chooses not social conscience but his own conscience.

Even the good people, for instance, the widow Douglas and Miss Watson, are insensible to human rights. They are pious Christians and sometimes preach the teachings of the Bible, but Miss Watson decides to sell Jim without much hesitation. The neighborly love in the Bible does not reach to slaves or Afro - Americans. Although the social background in those days is taken into consideration, Miss Watson is unfeeling about the distress of their neighbours. While Philip Fisher says, "*Tom*

Sawyer ends with boys made rich; *Huckleberry Finn* with men made free,"¹⁰ Jonathan Arac says, "What other than Jim has been made free at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*?"¹¹ Either of the thoughts are regarded as quite right, but the latter is accepted better than the former. Indeed Jim is set free, but Huck is free from the beginning. On second thought, Jim's freedom is not won and the situation is not changed. The idea that human race is all equal is not established in Huck's consciousness. If Jim is a bad person--Jim tells a lie toward Huck or Jim plays Huck false, Huck may inform against Jim. At least Huck may not be worried about trouble between the social conscience and the individual conscience.

Every time Huck is confronted with despair, he finds away out of his troubles by his wisdom and resources, and runs away. Even at the end of the novel, Huck does not want to be a civilized person and runs away to the Territory, as if he looks for utopia. This conclusion, however, can be admitted in those days, because the frontier existed at Huck's boyhood yet. Vonnegut deplors that there is few means of escape from the difficulty.

There is no contemporary equivalent to the unhooking device Mark Twain was able to use with success before World War I and World War II and all the rest of it, at the end possibly the blackest of all well-known American comic novels, *Huckleberry finn*. This, of course, was the unhooking: Huck, resourceful and tough and adorable, and with most of his life still ahead of him, says he is going to 'light out for the territory.'¹²

In our time there is no free land to escape, when we face despair. Vonnegut may deal with the way how a man of today

confronts difficulty.

Viewed in the light of despair of boy, Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* has lost faith in the world obviously. Billy's despair seems more serious than Huck's despair, because Huck can overcome his difficulties by using his brains and run away "the Territory," while Billy turns his back on the world entirely. As there is "or The Children's Crusade/A Duty-Dance with Death" in the epigraph of this novel, it has the theme of boy's tragedy of war.

There are two parts in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. One consists of the episodes of the narrator, who can be viewed as Vonnegut. The other consists of Billy's stories. In the former part, the narrator tells us how the novel starts. When the attack on Dresden by British and U.S. bombers was executed in the Second World War, the narrator happened to be on the scene as a prisoner of the war. Though he wants to turn his experience in Dresden into a novel, it was too pathetic a sight to write easily. As he is unable to make any progress with the manuscript, he calls on his old war buddy, Bernard V.O'Hare in order to get the hint. From the beginning of the call, O'Hare's wife is in a bad temper. She presses for an answer as follows:

"You were just babies in the war--like the ones upstairs!"

I nodded that this was true. We *had* been foolish virgines in the war, right at the end childhood.

"But you're not going to write it that way, are you."

This wasn't a question. It was an accusation.

"I--I don't know," I said.

"Well, *I* know," she said. "You'll pretend you were men in stead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of

those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs."¹³

Here Vonnegut's assertion of pacifism is described very clearly and rather sentimentally. After all the narrator promises not to write a warlike novel and to entitle it 'The Children's Crusade.' The Children's Crusade was the expedition aiming at the Holy Land in the twelfth century. Some were wrecked, some were sent back home and some were sold as slaves. This tragic ending is a symbol of misery in this novel. There are many victims in the history of the world in both of the Children's Crusade and *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

An English infantry colonel, whom Billy gets to know at a period of the prisoner, says like this:

"You know--we've had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. " 'My God, my God--' I said to myself, 'It's the Children's Crusade.' "¹⁴

In this way, even the serviceman does not know that many youngmen go to the front. People may notice the real state of things too late.

In the latter part, the episodes of Billy's whole life--his infancy, the times of the Second World War, the middle years of his life as an optometrist, the period of kidnapped by a flying saucer from Tralfamadore, the term of entering a hospital--are not connected in the linear passage of time but placed at random to all appearances.

At the time of the Second World War, Billy views the most

impressive scene. When he is a student at the Illium School of Optometry, he is drafted into the army in the Second World War. In the Battle of the Bulge, Billy loses sight of his own military unit, and he wanders without wearing a steel helmet and combat boots. Billy joins the three young American soldiers behind the new German lines. The three wandrers call themselves "The Three Musketeers" and dream of getting Bronze Stars. One of the three soldiers, Roland Weary, regards Billy as a coward, because Billy is "empty-handed, bleakly ready for death."¹⁵ Billy and "The Three Muskeers" set each other off well. It is an irony that Billy survives the Second World War and "The Three Muskeers" die before the war comes to end. Since Billy is taken prisoner by the Germans, is led to Dresden and encounters the bombing, he suffers the trauma all his life. After Billy is discharged from the Army, he is suffering a mild nervous breakdown and not enthusiastic about living. Billy's despair is more serious than Huck's despair.

In addition, Huck and Billy are different in the point of love for their blood relations. While Pap is a dropout of his life and Huck deserts Pap at last, Billy feels affection of his mother and sorry for her.

She upset Billy simply by being his mother. She made him feel embarrassed and ungrateful and weak because she had gone to so much trouble to give him life, and to keep that life going, and Billy didn't really like life at all.¹⁶

Thinking that Billy's emotion is a kind of guilty feeling, his disappointment is more grave than Huck. And he is not so insane as he looks. When Billy has been in the hospital because of an airplane accident, he shares a room with Professor Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a Harvard history professor.

Rumfoord sets about editing the history of the Second World War. He is favored with status, fame and money. He has little interest in others. When he hears Bill's delirium, he regards Billy as a boring person. Even when he knows that Billy encounters the bombing on Dresden, he only justifies the America's position.

"It *had* to be done," Rumfoord told billy, speaking of the destruction of Dresden.

"I know," said Billy.

"That's war."

"I know. I'm not complaining."

"It must have been hell on the ground."

"It was," said Billy Pilgrim.

"Pity the men who had to *do* it."

"I do."

"You must have had mixed feelings, there on the ground."

"It was all right," said Billy. "*Everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore."¹⁷

The sentence, "*Everything* is all right," implies not so much indignation as resignation. As Billy realizes that anger is futile, he does not blame the U.S. Army and war itself.

Tralfamadore is the planet, where Billy has been kidnapped by a flying saucer on the night, when Barbara, his daughter, gets married. Billy spends for some years on the planet Tralfamadore, but others notice the fact, since the passage of time is different from the earth. Billy is awakened to the truth by the idea of Tralfamadore.

"The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die.

He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always will exist.¹⁸

He is drummed the idea of Tralfamadore entirely. Indeed it makes Billy relieve and enables him live somehow or other, but this nonsense episode gives a ridiculous impressios of this novel. Is it necessary to make use of the story of a flying saucer or creatures from outer space? Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl say as follows:

If the very existence of Tralfamadore is in doubt, one might wonder about the ideas Billy Pilgrim encounters there.... The Tralfamadoreans would seem to be as jovial about life as the later Mark Twain.¹⁹

If Vonnegut does not use the existence of Tralfamadore, this novel will become neat and not be open to criticism of the stupid science fiction. But Vonnegut cannot write this novel seriously, because his experience in Dresden is too severe. Besides, to describe straightly becomes too sentimental.

From the other point, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is developed by determinism. In Vonnegut's world, human beings are victims of the enormous power. The power is beyond their control. No matter how human beings work hard, they can not change their destiny.

There are almost no characters in this story, and almost dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless play things of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters.²⁰

In many novels of Vonnegut, free will is made light of. According to his idea, the cause of the tragedy in the world does

not in society but individual. This statement is expressed in the next paragraph.

I think about my education sometimes. I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the Department of Anthropology. At that time, they were teaching that there was absolutely no difference between anybody. They may be teaching that still.

Another thing they taught was that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting.²¹

In fact Vonnegut creates many odd characters, but there is something humorous about them.

If we give the common point between Huck and Billy, both of them are travelers. Huck goes down the river and Billy wanders in time as his family name, Pilgrim, shows. We often compare life to journey. Certainly, Huck may well grow up during the going downstream. While Huck chooses his own conscience by free will, Billy can not exercise free will. He looks as if he is a puppet. It seems reasonable to conclude that Vonnegut's despair is more serious than Twain's despair.

As mentioned so far, both Twain and Vonnegut describe the sufferings of the boys in the absurd world from a satirical point of view. It is clear that they denounces the social system, but we regard their works not as gloomy but as cool, because they are brimful of the sense of humor. Indeed, Twain's spirit of satire is carried to by Vonnegut, but on the other hand, Vonnegut's novels are eccentric and extreme in comparison with Twain's ones. For Vonnegut goes through the World War actually and witnesses the bombing in Dresden. And the world is more and more dangerous. If the next World War breaks out, the whole world will be ruined in a large proportion. As we have

not learned the past history, some battles still exist. Since Vonnegut may not be able to describe the tragedy of war in a straight and serious manner, he seems to choose a cynical and unique manner, as he writes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Twain and Vonnegut, however, do not put only stress on people's foolishness. Both of them give a description of decent behaviour. They approach the investigation of the complexities of human nature. These two writers always look at human beings both warmly and coolly.

In other words, they believe that anyone is worth while living. It is only natural that human beings are foolish and their speech and action are inconsistent. If they face despair, they may well escape, be defeated and be resigned, because there is something attractive about the characters of Twain and Vonnegut. Therefore their novels do not give a gloomy impression on readers, though both of the writers deal with the theme of despair several times. Vonnegut says that he "would bring chaos to order."²² Probably they would receive the world in chaos. And they seem to think that the real life does not begin until we experience despair.

Notes

1. Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worse than Death* p.61. he tells the similarities with Hemingway. ".....We were born in the Middle West, we set out to be reporters, our fathers were gun nuts, we felt profoundly indebted to Mark Twain, and we were the children of suicides."

2. Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* p.172. In this essay he gives one chapter to Mark Twain.

3. Robert Scholes, "Chasing a Lone Eagle: Vonnegut's

College Writing" in *Vonnegut Statement*, eds. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer. p.451.

4. Charles Nicol, "The Ideas of an Anti-Intellectual" in *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. Leonard Mustazza. p.139.

5. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* p.34.

6. *Ibid.*, p.124.

7. Jonathan Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn." *Philosophy*. Apr. 1974. p.125.

8. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* p.146.

9. *Ibid.*, p.155.

10. Philip Fisher, "Mark Twain" in *Columbia Literary History of the United State* ed. Emory Elliot p.629.

11. Jonathan Arac, "Nationalism, Hypercanonization and Huckleberry Finn." *boundary 2*. Spr. 1992. p.19.

12. Kurt Vonnegut, *Fates Worth than Death* p.186.

13. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* p.14.

14. *Ibid.*, p.106.

15. *Ibid.*, p.32.

16. *Ibid.*, p.102.

17. *Ibid.*, p.198.

18. *Ibid.*, p.26.

19. Robert Merrill and Peter A Scholl, "Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: The Requirements of Chaos" in *Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. Robert Merrill. p.145.

20. Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* p.164.

21. *Ibid.*, p.8.

22. Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champion* p 210. In this novel Vonnegut says his way of writing. "Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun

story telling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as anyother. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order, instead, which I think I have done."

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