

THE NEW ART AND A FICTIONAL ANALYSIS OF KURT VONNEGUT'S BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS AND GOD BLESS YOU MR. ROSEWATER

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ABSTRACT

Kurt Vonnegut wrote Breakfast of Champions in 1974. The novel claims to set forth a reform against all the rules set by Henry James, as to the content and form. Dialogues are best examples of lack of communication in our society. The drawings and sketches which imitate those of Pop Artists reveal an ironic representation of current American values. Vonnegut approaches his own society with a critical insight. God Bless You Mr. Rosewater is the story of a millionaire who has left New York to establish a foundation in Indiana. Eliot Rosewater, the protagonist, is ready to give "infinite love" but "finite money" to anyone who comes to his door. Vonnegut criticizes this materialistic outlook to life, besides he claims that such hard-core realism destroys all hopes for a more pleasant future. His ideas harmoniously blend the theories which emerged by the end of 1960s in the U.S. and came to be known as the "New Art". In the New Art emphasis lies on self-experience both for the artist and the audience. New Art is anti-intellectual and it values immediacy and sensation. Style is important in the sense that it finds expression in comics magazines and books. Best examples of New Art can be seen in science-fiction novels, commercial and experimental films, "country-music" or even in "computer music". It also uses such mass-media as television and radio. Kurt Vonnegut through his both novels, deal exclusively with the "New Art".

ÖZET

Çağdaş Amerikan Yazınının önemli isimlerinden biri olan Kurt Vonnegut Breakfast of Champions (Şampiyonların Kahvaltısı) isimli romanını 1974 yılında yazdı. Roman biçim ve içerik olarak Henry James'in öngördüğü yazın kurallarına bir başkaldırı niteliği taşır. Romandaki diyaloglar çağımız insanları arasındaki iletişim kopukluğunu bütün canlılığı ile sergiler. Sık sık karşımıza çıkan resim ve çizimler ise modern Amerikan toplumunun tüketime yönelik değer yargılarını temsil eder. Yazar kendi toplumuna alaycı ve eleştirel bir gözle yaklaşmaktadır. God Bless You

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Mr. Rosewater (1978) (Tanrı Sizi Korusun Bay Rosewater) adlı romanı ise Rosewater, Indiana'da kendi adına bir vakıf kurmak için New York'u terkeden bir milyonerin öyküsüdür. Eliot Rosewater kapısını çalan her yabancıya "sınırsız sevgi" ve "sınırlı para" sunmaya kararlıdır. Yazar, Rosewater gibilerini ince bir dille hicvettiği bu eserinde, paranın insanları özgürce davranmaktan alıkoyduğu, değer yargılarını biçimlendirdiği ve böylesine bir yaşamın ilerisi için ümit verici olmayacağı görüşündedir.

Vonnegut ekoloji ve çevre koşullarının korunması ile de yakından ilgilidir. Üslubu ve kişisel düşünceleri onun "Yeni Sanat" veya "Pop Sanat" diye bilinen akıma ne kadar yakın olduğunu vurgular. Amerika'da 60'lı yılların sonunda ortaya çıkan "Yeni Sanat", klasik edebiyat, sanat, mimari ve müziğe bir başkaldırı olarak doğmuştur. "Yeni Sanat", gerek sanatçı gerekse okuyucu/izleyici için bir dışa vurum anlamındadır. Entellektüel olmaktan ziyade, duyular ve kişisel yaklaşımlarla bu yeni akım daha iyi anlaşılabilir. Örneklerini kurgu bilim romanlarında, ticari ve deneysel filmlerde, "country" ve "komputer" müzikte görebildiğimiz "Yeni Sanat" televizyon ve radyo gibi kitle iletişim araçlarını da kullanmaktadır. Vonnegut'un iki romanı da onun "Yeni Sanat" akımı ile yakınlığını sergilemektedir.

The New Art started in the late 1960s with Campbell soup cans, vinyl hamburgers, op art, pop art, kinetic sculpture, musicals like "Hair" and "Salvation", experimental films with titles like "Blowjob" and "Blue Movie". As time passed one thing became increasingly clear: the old categories of painting, sculpture, literature, architecture and music were being expanded and redefined to include such mixed-media, multi-sensory forms as camp, op and pop art, guerilla theatre, kinetic sculpture, posters, commercial and experimental films, country music, underground music, ballads, computer music, science-fiction, comic books and magazines, typical jewelry and clothing, television as well as radio.

Valerie Carnes summarized the characteristics of the New Art in the introductory chapter of her *New Humanities* as follows:¹

Emphasis on self-expression for both artist and audience alike

The New Art of the Sixties moves in two apparently contradictory directions. On one hand it moves toward works that "alienate" the audience, on the other hand it moves toward works that reach out, literally or symbolically, to the audience in order to involve its members into the artistic experience.

Anti-intellectualism and emphasis on immediacy and sensation

The "old art" (classical and Renaissance art through early twentieth century) took for granted that the purpose of art and criticism was to order existing reality and impose order on an often chaotic universe. By contrast the New Art and New Criticism assume that art exists in order to express a personal world view. Art thus becomes self-discovery and personal statement, expressive rather than mimetic or objective.

Carnes defines New Art as an expression of a chaotic post-war world, composed of fragments, myths, personal visional visions, dreams, nightmares, non-linear disjointed images, drug fantasies, the products of psychotherapy and hypnosis. It is

1 Ralph L. Carnes and Valerie Carnes, *The New Humanities: Culture, Crisis, Change* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 113-120.

not a mere coincidence that the twentieth-century art celebrates the unconscious mind, myth, ritual, play, magic and incantation as ways of getting beyond the "plastic" world of capitalism and industry to the "real" one, the world of natural and spontaneous existence.

Emphasis on style

The New Art is an art of "style". It finds expression in comics magazines and books which gained popularity because of their oversimplified version of reality. The New Art brought a brand-new life style. In the 1960s "fashion" was transformed from mere clothing into a pre-packaged life style. It exhibited not only one's taste and socio-economic standing but also, and more importantly, his political opinions, cultural ideals, aesthetic apprehensions and general outlook to life. Such intense interest in style in turn led to a consumer —and media— oriented art, created by and for a consumer society.

The old theory of art had assumed the purpose of art and criticism was to bring order out of chaos. In accordance with the requirements of the New Art and the New Criticism Kurt Vonnegut views art as an expression of a personal world view. He sees no order around him, because he asserts, there is no well-defined culture in his own society.

He expresses his views in *Breakfast of Champions* as follows:

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 storytelling. I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order².

In a Post-war world where things fall apart and the center cannot hold, Vonnegut as an artist celebrates the natural and spontaneous existence of his soul beyond artificial cultural elements. What has happened to "culture" in America? Has it really been replaced by material goods or commercial myths? In order to find explanations one needs to survey the popular art of the 1960s. Pop artists like Claes Oldenburg, late Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein dominated the past decade with their pictures of coke bottles, soup cans, automobiles and light switches. Roy Lichtenstein defined Pop art as "the use of commercial art as subject matter in painting"³ In fact Pop Art turned out to offer a life-style which operates in vicious circles. For example, producers created "more economic" and "better" goods for the disposal of the consumers. Brainwashing on these items flourished on TV and radio commercials. Consumers, in amazement, indulged into the depths of extravagance. Artists eventually amused themselves with this panorama and so on. Andy Warhol, once asked to define Pop Art, had responded as follows:

Someone said that Brecht wanted everybody to think alike. But Brecht wanted to do it through Communism, in a way. Russia is doing it under government. Its happening here all by itself without being under a strict government.

2 Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Breakfast of Champions* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1974), p. 195.

3 Barbara Rose, *Readings in American Art 1900-1975* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), p. 152.

Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way. I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody⁴.

Andy Warhol wanted to say that Pop Art is liking things and liking things is like being a machine, because one does the same thing over and over again. Moreover he approves of that as an artist. Thus the New Art can be defined as an association of images rooted in the society's unconscious. It is simple and flexible; stretch it from both ends and its scope reaches out to embrace everything and everybody we see around. Meanwhile it is "soluble", it dissolves in every pot. It is "musical"; its rhythms fill one's ears loud enough, though sometimes less pleasantly. The New Art is comprehensible with all five senses: It is alive.

Following this brief introduction to the New Art we can look into Kurt Vonnegut's literary genius as represented in his *Breakfast of Champions* (1974). The novel revolves around a wealthy Midwest Pontiac dealer named Dwayne Hoover and the science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout. Hoover and Trout are supposed to meet at an Arts Festival. Vonnegut describes the movement of both Trout and Hoover to the Festival in alternating chapters. As revealed in the first chapter Hoover learns from a Trout science-fiction novel that he is the only person on Earth with free-will and he goes temporarily insane, maims some people and loses all his money through law suits. Trout on the other hand, becomes famous and even wins the Nobel Prize for Medicine. *Breakfast of Champions* in many respects is an anti-novel, a reaction to the fictional theories set forth by Henry James that have dominated American fiction for almost a century. Against the conventions Vonnegut does not use third-person point of view, instead he speaks directly to his reader. The novel appears to lack unity of time, moreover it is not tightly plotted.

Vonnegut's characters are his own creations and they obey to his dictates. From time to time he destroys the suspense or stops describing his characters. Supposedly he wants his reader to concentrate upon his own ideas instead of becoming occupied with the characters' destinies. Vonnegut also confesses that he dislikes the artificiality of the old-fashioned ending that neatly ties together everything⁵. For Vonnegut plot is so unrealistic that it always rewards the good and punishes the evil.

Throughout the novel dialogues illustrate the hopelessness of communication among individuals. Here is a typical conversation between Kilgore Trout and a truck driver who has picked up the hitch-hiking science-fiction writer:

The driver mentioned that the day before had been Veteran's Day.

"Um", said Trout.

"You a veteran?" said the driver.

"No", said Trout. "Are you?"

"No", said the driver.

Neither one of them was a veteran⁶.

When Vonnegut ironically states neither man was a veteran he is as if to claim that people tend to exchange polite but meaningless messages. Most of their conversation is futile.

4 Ibid., p. 155.

5 Stanley Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 99.

6 *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 100.

As for the drawings and sketches in the book which imitate those of Pop Artists, they reveal an ironic representation of current American values. In fact Vonnegut reveals in his Preface why his novel contains so many references to commercial products:

I think I am trying to clear my head of all the junk in there —the assholes, the flags, the underpants. Yes— there is a picture in this book of underpants. I'm throwing out characters from my other books, too. I'm not going to put on any more puppet shows.

I think I'm trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this damaged planet fifty years ago.

I suspect that this is something most white Americans, and non-white Americans, who imitate white Americans, should do. The things other people have put into my head, at any rate, do not fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head.

I have no culture, no humane harmony in my brains. I can't live without a culture anymore⁷.

Beyond those material goods and illusions that materialism provides, what the artist sees most of all is chaos, overpopulation and pollution.

A detailed interpretation of Vonnegut's works is by Stanley Schatt who has published the book titled *Kurt Vonnegut Jr* in 1976. It is a helpful guide in understanding Vonnegut's style. Schatt asserts that *Breakfast of Champions* resembles the works in American colloquial-style tradition that can be traced back to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*⁸. American colloquial-style, Schatt claims, emphasizes shorter sentences, removal of references to the historical and cultural past, and use of repetition. For instance, the repetitive use of "and so on" in *Breakfast of Champions* links it more closely to American colloquial style. The most frequently repeated phrase in *Huckleberry Finn* is "bv-and-by".

The real protagonist in *Breakfast of Champions* is Vonnegut himself. Exclude the Hoover and Trout subplots and the novel is left with a series of confessions about Vonnegut himself. Throughout the novel Vonnegut seems to reveal his own problems, and according to Schatt Vonnegut discovers a possible solution, and then publicly declares that he is abandoning the old way he used to write for a non-fictional style stripped of all symbols, metaphors and similes⁹. In fact the new style which Vonnegut is now an advocate illustrates the above-mentioned characteristics of the New Art: self-expression in immediacy and sensation blended with stylistic nuances, that is, more or less *Breakfast of Champions*.

A final matter for exploring is why Vonnegut portrayed himself while crying and stuck it in the very end of his book. It may be for lost values in America, as much as it can be a lament upon his old age. Yet it may be an expression of irony at the face value of present conditions in his country.

The second novel to be analyzed is *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* which Vonnegut published in 1978. It is the story of a millionaire who suddenly develops a social conscience, abandons New York and establishes the Rosewater Foundation

7 Ibid., pp. 14-15.

8 Schatt, p. 103.

9 Ibid., p. 105.

in Rosewater, Indiana, where he attempts to give an unlimited amount of love and a limited amount of money to anyone who will come to his door. This experience drives Eliot insane and causes him to spend a year in a rest home. On his return to Rosewater County, Eliot wills all his money to the fiftyseven children whose mothers have claimed that Eliot fathered them. He is innocent of such charges; yet instead of being angry, he asks that his newly claimed children be fruitful and multiply.

Eliot Rosewater, due to his social consciousness is an altruist¹⁰. Stanley Schatt links the name "Eliot" to T.S. Eliot and his depiction of modern life as a spiritual wasteland devoid of any love but lust. Eliot believes that he has to give lots of love to the citizens of Rosewater County and that no one will help him. The reason behind all these altruistic drives is possibly his causing the death of his mother as well as three unarmed firemen during World War II.

Eliot tends to be unselfish in his love, however his "Domesday" book where he keeps his transactions with his clients to record their spiritual and financial debts to him contradicts his ought-to-be altruism. Moreover, among several other hints, his secret looks at his book suggest that he is mentally ill as well.

In *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* money is deliberately used as a symbol. Meanwhile, it has provided Vonnegut with a perfect weapon to attack the Protestant ethic that presumes the wealthy are God's chosen people and that the poor are guilty of sin or natural depravity. In America behind every foundation there is a corporation which is usually dedicated, as the Rosewater Corporation is, "to prudence and profit, to balance sheets". Such organizations have created a class system and therefore money is distributed unequally. Thus the gab between rich and poor is ever destined to widen.

Vonnegut seems to attack the American dream, too. The basic flaw in the American dream is that the Founding Fathers "had not made it the law of the Utopia that wealth of each citizen should be limited"¹¹. As a result of this overview, the American dream "turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went bang in the noonday sun"¹².

The novel ends in a surprising note. Fully aware that if he owns children, they will automatically inherit his money and it will not go to Fred Rosewater, Eliot writes a check to Fred Rosewater for a hundred-thousand dollars, smiles a "Madonna's smile", and claims as his own children the fifty-seven children whose mothers have claimed Eliot is the father. Vonnegut's view of man and society is represented in Eliot's individual solution to the problem. The society, which is incapable of effecting social reforms, urges man to seek a separate peace. However salvation is not easily obtained. Strife endangers mental health or causes schizophrenia for Eliot Rosewater. Such a loss of contact with reality from being in an unpleasant society involves further retreat into a more comforting illusory world. Definitely Vonnegut

10 Ibid. p. 70.

11 Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (London: Triad/Panther Books, 1978), p. 15.

12 Ibid. p. 16.

does not advocate such escapism. He merely wants to present the ills of his society and persuade its members to "participate" in a crusade of reformation.

In the final evaluation of both novels it can be added that *Breakfast of Champions* gives out a 'danger alarm' to those who have some sense of responsibility. The life of its author sets a model for the course of action that Americans must pursue if they desire to prevent the American dream from becoming a nightmare. On the other hand *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* is significant due to its socialistic concerns. Equilibrium in wealth distribution and deletion of the class system are prerequisites for an ideal society.

As for Vonnegut himself, he is a humanist and hates war. He is concerned with ecology and human happiness. He is overwhelmed with question of free-will and meaning of life and love. He believes that both war and pollution is obscene. He is worried about life on earth. Moreover he feels that the space program is useless. He views all the efforts America made to reach the moon as a deliberate attempt to avoid the far more difficult problems on and of earth. "Earth is such a pretty blue and pink and white pearl in the pictures NASA sent me. It looks so clean. You cannot see all the hungry, angry earthlings there — and the smoke and the sewage and trash and sophisticated weaponry."¹³ As an artist who courageously reflects his free-will Vonnegut deserves to be appreciated. His works are modern examples of self-expression and anti-intellectualism. His style collaborates his personal confessions with Pop Art. Most of all he knows how to direct public attention through well-studied symbols. He is cool, tactful and persuasive which is a demonstration of his artistic skills. Both of the novels are good records of the American society in the fashion of the New Art, and they will remain to be.

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13 Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Biafra: A People Betrayed," *McCalls*, Apr. 1970, xcvi, p. 135.