

KURT VONNEGUT' S DUAL ROOTS

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ABSTRACT

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) was one of the most acclaimed and influential American novelists of the twentieth century. His literary corpus achieved universal prominence with the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the year 1969 and from that date hundreds of scientific papers have been dedicated to him. Vonnegut was also one of the most popular writers of the period and his works won widespread recognition. This paper analyzes Vonnegut's complex roots, linked both to Germany and the USA, delving into the author's quest for authenticity and exposing how this conditioned his whole literary production.

KEYWORDS: American Postmodernism, Kurt Vonnegut, German-American relations.

RESUMEN

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) es uno de los novelistas norteamericanos más aclamados e influyentes del siglo veinte. Desde que en el año 1969 se publicó *Slaughterhouse-Five*, han aparecido cientos de textos científicos sobre un autor que consiguió ser apreciado por lectores de los más diversos ámbitos sociales. El presente artículo analiza las complejas raíces del novelista, que se vinculan tanto con Alemania como con los EEUU. Para llevar a cabo este objetivo, estudiaremos en profundidad la compleja búsqueda de unas raíces auténticas que el autor lleva a cabo a lo largo de su vida así como el impacto que esta búsqueda tiene en su corpus literario.

PALABRAS CLAVE: postmodernismo norteamericano, Kurt Vonnegut, relaciones germano-estadounidenses.

In *A Man Without a Country* Kurt Vonnegut summarized an idea that is central both to his understanding of the world and to his literary corpus, "a husband, a wife and some kids is not a family. It's a terribly vulnerable survival unit" (48). In order to fight the loneliness and sense of fragility that this situation created, the author tried to be part of an artificial extended family. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the two territories he explored when searching for roots: his German ancestry and the American society in which he was nurtured.



Robert Merrill suggests that the first biographical detail that must be taken into account when dealing with Vonnegut's novels is his German heritage,¹ "We should review Vonnegut's curious status as a German American" (73). Kevin Alexander Boon points out that Vonnegut's ancestry conditions the way he deals with life and literature:

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

Dennis Stanton Smith shares Boon's opinion on how influential Vonnegut's German roots are: "The Vonnegut's, a family of German descents, held beliefs on pacifism and atheism, beliefs that figure prominently in Vonnegut's works" (5). I consider that these scholars' observations are very important, since they explain one of the most problematic points in Vonnegut's career: the author could be considered as an experimental author from a technical point of view, but nevertheless he is much more concerned with conveying a moral message (we could even speak of a didactic aim) that is not very often found in some of the most prominent writers of the period, such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme or Thomas Pynchon. In this sense, Bill Gholson explains that, "the fact that his characters raise moral questions indicates a belief that moral decisions are possible, making Vonnegut one of the few 'postmodern' writers maintaining hope in an age when the concept of a coherent identity is in question" (140). In *Like Shaking Hands with God*, the author explains his Horatian understanding of literature and does not hesitate to state the following: "your book should have political consequences" (1999, 21).²

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

¹ As David Goldsmith explains, Vonnegut's very surname links him with Germany in an almost geographical manner, since the name Vonnegut comes from the German river Vonne (VIII).

² I am well aware that the debate of whether postmodernism shows a certain tendency towards a belletristic literature that might expose some of its writers to amorality is extremely complex. In the present paper I'm merely transmitting Vonnegut's personal conclusion, "I think it can be tremendously refreshing if a creator of literature has something on his mind other than the history of literature so far. Literature should not disappear up its own asshole, so to speak" (Hayman 185). It is also important to mention that some scholars, such as Leslie Fiedler of Jerome Klinkowitz, share the author's judgment.



As I have defended above, Kurt Vonnegut was convinced that his social and political concerns derived from his German ancestry. Nevertheless, and regardless of how influential his German roots might be, the author's connection with the land and culture of his ancestors must be considered as an extremely problematic one. The dominant mood toward Germany in the US during the author's infancy was not very positive. As Stanley Schatt explains, the author perceived this situation and became concerned with it from an early time: "As a German, he was very sensitive about the growing anti-German sentiment on campus [...]" (Schatt 15).

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

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

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

In the autobiographical introduction to *Mother Night*, Vonnegut refers to his German origins in two different manners: On the one hand the writer tells an anecdote that explains how the Vonnegut family decided to detach themselves from their German roots, or at least to give more prominence to their recent American ones. In this case, Vonnegut remembers "some laughs about my aunt, too, who married a *German* German..." (vii). The second reference to Germany that can be found in this introduction attests that Vonnegut considers that even though he has German origins the fact of having been born in the US deprives him of belonging to Germany in a direct and meaningful manner. Therefore, he did not have any connection with the Nazi regimen: "If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi, bopping Jews and Gypsies, and Poles around, laving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides" (viii).

The autobiographical elements Vonnegut includes in the introduction are certainly interesting, but the most prominent examples of the author's German



roots take place in the fictional section of the book. From the very first line of the narrative, the protagonist of *Mother Night* points out how problematic his roots are: “I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination” (3). Howard W. Campbell claims to be “nationless by inclination,” but nevertheless he seems to be a German by inclination: “Campbell was proud of himself as a writer in German, indifferent to his skill in English” (x). This character complains that New York is not Heaven at all but rather, “It was Hell for me— or not Hell, something worse than Hell” (15). It is not surprising that Campbell considers New York as Hell, since even if he is an American citizen “by birth” he decided long time ago to live in Germany as a true German citizen: “My father and mother left Germany in 1939, when war came. My wife and I stayed on” (18). Besides the family pressure and the threats of WWII, Campbell decides to stay in Germany, and even he serves the allies as a spy he keeps considering that “Germany is the most misunderstood country in the world” (64). In any case, his family does not share his ideas on how misunderstood Germany is, or his pretended loyalty to the Nazi cause, and Campbell’s decision to stay in Germany and support the Nazi Regime (even though he was an American spy and not a real Nazi) causes his parents a great trauma: “My father and mother died. Some say they died of broken hearts... They did not disinherit me, though they must have been bitterly tempted to do so” (32). By the end of the narrative, Campbell is completely obsessed with his own roots and the role he played while he was pretending to be a Nazi; unable to deal with his own internal dilemma, he commits suicide. Interestingly enough he does not hang himself for crimes against humanity. On the contrary, as this character explains: “I think that tonight is the night I will hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself” (175).

As we see, the question of belonging to Germany, of being a German, is central in *Mother Night* as well as in Vonnegut’s life. Coincidences do not end here, since character and author seem to share the same fate: it is never fully possible for the writer to be rooted to Germany as a real German and Campbell’s problem is exactly the same one. The same applies to Vonnegut and Campbell’s family’s attitudes toward Germany. The novelist claims to be proud of his German roots, even if those roots were in fact not very prominent and he is far from being a German; and Campbell is also proud of being a German, even he is “an American by birth.” In both cases, too, this impossibility of becoming rooted within Germany or a German tradition is a source of anxiety and trauma to both the author and the character.

Becoming rooted to Germany becomes a terrible source of anxiety to the protagonist of a novel that includes a biographical introduction in which Vonnegut stated: “This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don’t think it’s a marvelous moral, I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be” (vii). Nevertheless, the message is quite ambiguous, since if we are really what we pretend to be, Campbell is undoubtedly a German citizen, but a genuine Nazi too. This explanation seems to be supported by Vonnegut himself, who explained in an interview, “Howard W. Campbell was an authentically bad man” (Reilly 222); but this explanation is also extremely unsatisfactory, since as Vonnegut has also expressed in many other interviews, “I’ve never written a story with



a villain” (Shenker 22). Thus, the character of Howard W. Campbell becomes an extremely problematic one since his roots can only be understood in terms of a virtually insolvable Schrödinger paradox or in an equally complex Heideggerian *sous rature*.

Vonnegut’s German roots re-appear from the very title of his masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). The complete title of the novel, which pays homage to the pre-nineteen century tradition of long and far-fetched titles, includes a broad summary of the main themes of the novel³ in which the Indianapolis author makes clear that the novel was written by “Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. a fourth generation German-American [...]” Nevertheless, the novel in which this fourth generation German-American author deals with his complex German roots in a more direct and interesting manner is *Deadeye Dick* (1982). The protagonist of this novel, Rudy Waltz, is in many ways an alter ego of Vonnegut and the author makes this point clear from the autobiographical preface to the novel: “The crime he committed in childhood is all the bad things I have done” (10). Even this character is not a German but an American citizen, and even though he never gets to visit Germany or to speak German at all, Germany becomes a key aspect in his life. When Rudy’s father was a young man he was sent to Vienna to be treated for a sexual illness and to study art. During this period he fell in love both with Austria and Germany. His fascination with the Germanic culture became intensified when he met a young Austrian painter: Adolf Hitler. Ruddy’s father helped Hitler, who was extremely poor at the moment, and they almost immediately became friends. Once again, Rudy’s Germanic roots are quite complex from a moral point of view (“Think of that: My father could have strangled the worst monster of the century, or simply let him starve or freeze to death. But became his bosom buddy instead” 17). His father’s relation with Hitler will change Rudy’s life in a crucial manner: “I sometimes think that I would have had a very different sort of soul if I had grown up in an ordinary little American house [...]” (19). So, when Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany he invites Rudy’s family to visit him and spend some time in Germany as the Führer’s guests. The whole family accepts the invitation and goes to Germany, excepting Rudy, who was only two years old at that point. When Rudy’s relatives return from Germany six months later their love and admiration of Germany and Hitler have been intensified:

According to Mother, he (Father) had undergone a profound spiritual change in Germany. He had a new sense of purpose in life [...]. He would become a teacher and political activist. He would become a spokesman in America for

³ The unabridged title of the novel is the following one: “Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children’s Crusade. A duty-Dance with Death. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. A Fourth-Generation German-American now Living in Easy Circumstances on Cape Cod (And Smoking Too Much), Who, as an American Infantry Scout *Hors de Combat*, as a Prisoner of War, Witnessed the Fire-Bombing of Dresden, Germany, “The Florence of the Elbe,” a Long Time Ago, and Survived to Tell the Tale. This is a Novel Somewhat in the Telegraphic Schizophrenic Manner of Tales of the Planet Trafalmore, Where the Flying Saucers Come From. Peace.”



the new social order which was being born in Germany, but which in time would be the salvation of the world. (36)

Thus, Rudy's life starts to be affected by Germany in a crucial way: "I myself am in one picture of the paper. It is of our entire family in the street, in front of the studio, looking up at the Nazi flag" (35). Rudy's family came back from Germany, and flew the Nazi flag, in 1934, a time in which "flying a Nazi flag in Midland City was no more offensive than flying a Greek or Irish or Confederate flag, or whatever" (35). As a matter of fact, before the US entered World War II there was certain sympathy towards the Nazi movement in Indianapolis, as Vonnegut explained in his introduction to *Mother Night*:

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

In any case, as soon as the US entered World War II against the Nazi regime and its allies, the situation changed, and Rudy's family's sympathies with Hitler and his regime became certainly problematic: "Somewhere in there the Nazi flag fell down. Father stopped travelling [...] Father wouldn't even leave the home or talk on the telephone, or look at his mail for three months or so" (38). Once World War II had ended the neighbors didn't forget (or excuse) Rudy's family's "Nazi" past. So, Rudy was raised in an environment in which the Germanic tradition was praised as the highest cultural and historical manifestation in the world, but at a certain point he was suddenly and completely deprived of this source of influence: "The subject of Hitler and the new order in Germany seemed to make people angrier with each passing day, so he (Father) had better find something else to talk about" (44). Besides his family reluctance to go back to their "German" past, the neighbors kept insisting on blaming them and Rudy was often attacked by other local boys in the following terms: "Ey, Nazi" (89), even Rudy did never get to visit Germany or know Hitler... or even understand the Nazi question very well since he was just a two year old boy when his father became such a pro-German activist. The references to Germany, German characters or characters that are somehow related to a Germanic past are very frequent in the rest of Vonnegut's corpus as well, but it should be noted that in his most recent novels the author deals with his German origins in an increasingly more indirect and subtle way, to the extent that as Robert Merrill points out, "In *Bluebeard* Vonnegut's Germanic heritage is so transformed it becomes Armenian!" (81).

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



So far, I have expressed that Vonnegut's parents decided not to provide their son with a German education and tried to educate him following truly American ideals and beliefs. In the case of Vonnegut the notion of America (and consequently of being American) must necessarily be linked with the historical period of the Great Depression and post-depression years. During the past fifty years the writer has been identified as a science fiction writer, a black humorist and a satirist. Consequently, trying to pigeon-hole his literature has been one of the greatest concerns of the critics. Vonnegut himself has always rejected all these labels, arguing the following: "I'm part of the generation of 1922 and that's it. We have a large number of writers—myself, James Jones, Joe Heller, Norman Mailer—who were all born in 1922" (Abádi-Nagy 33). As this quotation shows, Vonnegut has always wanted to call attention upon the Great Depression years. As Jerome Klinkowitz explains, the Great Depression had a negative effect on the family economy, but nevertheless it helped Vonnegut to understand life in a more egalitarian manner, so for Vonnegut these years were not traumatic at all: "(the Great Depression) forced Kurt into a more egalitarian life-style which he now credits as one of his greatest childhood treasures" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 1). This scholar also makes clear how important the Great Depression was for Vonnegut: "Although the firebombing of Dresden is usually considered the most traumatic event in Vonnegut's life, both as a writer and as a person, he himself considers the Great Depression to have been a far more difficult ordeal for the country as a whole" (1, 31) and William Rodney Allen, scholar and close friend of Vonnegut, shares Klinkowitz's opinion (xiii).

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

As a matter of fact, Vonnegut's mother was never able to overcome the trauma produced by the Great Depression, and on Mother's Day, 1944, she decided to take her own life by consuming a fatal overdose of sleeping pills. Vonnegut's novels show many references to mothers who are distant, crazy and there are also some extremely important references to mothers killing themselves with sleeping pills. In this sense, Klinkowitz thinks that this fact is especially evident in the novel *Deadeye Dick*: "had *Deadeye Dick* been provided with a prologue as full as those in the novels that preceded it, Kurt Vonnegut might well have retold the story of his mother's death" (2, 125).

Unlike his mother, Vonnegut's father did not resent this lack of social status or by the economic situation of the family (that was not that bad after all, especially if we compare it with the situation of most of American middle class families of the period), but was certainly affected by the Great Depression, as Vonnegut explains in





his autobiographical prologue to *Jailbird*: “So I have to say that my father, when I got to know him, when I myself was something like an adult, was a good man in full retreat from life [...]. So an air of defeat has always been a companion of mine” (10). This “air of defeat” certainly seems to permeate the whole of Vonnegut’s corpus but it is especially evident in *Galápagos*, a novel in which a human-induced apocalypse dooms humanity to de-evolution... a phenomenon that, in Vonnegut’s opinion is not a bad thing at all, since as we are explained in *A Man Without a Country*: “Evolution can go to hell, as far as I am concerned. What a mistake we are” (9).

As I advanced above, Vonnegut’s father’s reasons for retreating from life were quite different from his wife’s. In his case, the Great Depression deprived him of what was most valuable to him: not his social status or his properties, but his job. As Thomas F. Marvin explains, Kurt Vonnegut senior was one of Indiana’s most prominent architects,⁴ but “the Great Depression of the 1930s put a halt to building, and Kurt, Sr., had no work from 1920 to 1940” (2). Without any project to carry on, Vonnegut’s father felt he was completely useless, becoming a “dreamy artist” (Reilly 227), just as Rudy’s father is a dreamy artist in *Deadeye Dick*.⁵

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

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

⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, Sr.’s most important buildings can still be visited at Indianapolis, and they include a theater and the Indiana Headquarters of the Indiana Telephone Company.

⁵ The resemblances between the protagonist’s father and Vonnegut’s own father are certainly remarkable: both are ashamed of their German past, both are failed artists (or artists with interrupted careers), both are gun collectors, both are absent parents and both insist on the fact that their sons shouldn’t have anything to do with the arts.

aspects of this novel (*Slapstick*), it is its psychological dimension that constitutes the story's complexity and special poignancy" (66). In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* Kurt Vonnegut deals with this theme of isolation in the following way: Eliot Rosewater is an extremely wealthy American citizen who has inherited a huge fortune as well as the direction of an ancient foundation inaugurated by his ancestors, *The Rosewater Foundation*. Traditionally this foundation had been a way of evading (or at least cutting down) taxes, but Eliot Rosewater decides he is going to direct his foundation in a way that's beneficial to poor people and not only to the Rosewater family. At the beginning of the narrative Eliot is drinking far too much, he has no descendants and his marriage is collapsing. Thus, Eliot abandons New York and begins a journey through the US that's really a spiritual quest, almost a *Bildungsroman*. Anyway, his journey and quest prove unsuccessful till he arrives to Rosewater County, a small town in Indiana from where his family (and fortune) originated. Once in this community, Eliot's search can be considered over, and his spiritual quest fulfilled: "I *am* home. I know now that this has always been home [...]" (41).

The protagonist's main purpose in Rosewater County will be that of helping Rosewater people: "I am going to care about *these* people" (n.p.). Eliot considers Rosewater people need him, as a paternal-like figure, to care about them because they live in a state of absolute loneliness and isolation; so he will play the role of the father in this community. Nevertheless, and besides his noble intentions, his goals are extremely difficult to reach. On the one hand Eliot's own family is even more disturbed than before, since his wife cannot cope with Eliot's obsessive piety and is finally diagnosed "Samaritrophobia [...] hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself" (48) and, finally, abandons him. If his own family is not able to become a part of the bigger family Eliot is trying to form, Rosewater people aren't either. Rosewater citizens do really admire Eliot and in a way he is beloved, but as a "monarch" (46) not as a father. So, Eliot's foundation, besides his motto "HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?" (57), is not very successful in fighting the isolation he has so cleverly identified.

In any case, this character's actions are not fully fruitless, since he is able to make Diana Moon Glampers feel she was a member of a real family for the first time in her sorrowful life: "(She) was a sixty-eight-year-old virgin who, by almost by anybody's standard, was too dumb to life. No one had ever loved her. There was no reason why anyone should. She was ugly, stupid, and boring" (65). Eliot does not offer Diana any money, or other sort of material help. Since her problems are social and medical, there is not much Eliot can do besides listen to her and make her feel she is important to someone in other words, to make her feel that she is a member of a family. But by helping her in this way, Eliot Rosewater is really helping her more than any of her real relatives has ever helped her, and thus Diana understands how important and beautiful Eliot's aims are: "You gave up everything a man is supposed to want, just to help the little people, and the little people know it. God bless you, Mr. Rosewater" (70). Nevertheless, the affection Rosewater people feel toward Eliot Rosewater and the success with Diana Moon Glampers are not enough to maintain Eliot's project and his utopia begins to fall apart. On the one hand it starts to collapse due to Eliot's father's desire to have his son medically treated, and on the other hand it is his own personal condition that makes his dream unviable:



“He had had one hell of a night, not only with telephone calls, but with people coming in person at all hours, more of half of them drunk” (171).

The situation becomes extreme when a young lawyer, Norman Mushari, decides to take Eliot to Court to prove his sanity (in the hope he is declared legally insane and deprived of the control of the *Rosewater Foundation*, that will be from that point on directed by a far-away relative of Eliot, who is, obviously, Norman’s client). From that moment on, Eliot’s father decides enough has been enough: Eliot must abandon Rosewater County and his failed utopian extended family: “This part of your life is over. It had to end sometime” (179). By this point, Eliot is so disenchanted with his project that “[he] accepted this, or seemed to. He didn’t argue with it, allowed that he had better washed up and get dressed for the trip” (180). As for Rosewater people, they really feel sorry for Eliot’s departure: “Oh, Mr. Rosewater- if you go away and never come back, we’ll die” (184), but they are also conscious of the fact that Eliot’s presence in Rosewater County was not so necessary at all, since when Eliot asks one woman why they think his presence is so necessary, she is not able to formulate a coherent answer: “I don’t know” (185). After this incident Eliot Rosewater finally understands his utopia is over and he must go away, and thus when he is asked whether he wants a one way or a round ticket out of Rosewater County, “Eliot did not hesitate.’ One way, if you please” (200). When he is finally in the bus and leaving Rosewater and his project Diana Moon Glampers tries to stop him for the last time: “You’re my church group! You’re my *everything!* You’re my government. You’re my husband. You’re my friends” (201), but Eliot’s own emotional breakdown and sense of failure are so intense that Diana’s moving words do not make him feel any better at all.

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

Slapstick, or Lonesome no More! (1976) was not well received by the majority of critics, and as Vonnegut explained in a 1997 interview, “all of a sudden, critics wanted me squashed like a bug” (Hayman 184). In the prologue to the novel, the author explains two points that are especially relevant to our study. On the one hand, Vonnegut declares that “this is the closest I will ever come to writing an autobiography” (1) and, on the other hand, he mentions explicitly “my childhood in the Great Depression” (1), and explains that this historical period conditioned the way he understands life in general and literature in particular. Vonnegut explains that one of the reasons why he had such a happy childhood besides the terrible economic situation was that, “when we were children in Indianapolis, Indiana, it appeared that we would always have an extended family of genuine relatives there”



(4). Nevertheless, “by the time the Great Depression and a Second World War was over, it was easy for my brother and my sister and me to wander away from Indianapolis” (5). The reasons why after the Depression and WWII the role of the family is not so important to young Kurt and his brother and sister are various, but especially because of the loss of the German roots I’ve analyzed throughout the essay and because of the high mobility demanded by post-WWII American society.

In *Like Shaking Hands with God* Kurt Vonnegut affirmed the following: “That’s the story of my life, too. I went to a good high school, and everything was noise after that” (77). In this paper I have studied in depth the questions that obsessed the author during this period of his life: trying to come to terms with his complex German roots while he became a true American citizen. The above quoted sentence expresses the author’s own conclusions: no matter how hard he tried, Germany was extremely far both from a physical and an emotional point of view and, unfortunately (or not), Vonnegut’s real heritage and tradition could not be but those of Mark Twain.

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