

Kurt Vonnegut's Fantasy Strategy in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*

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[Key words] Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Postmodern American Novel,
World War II, Postmodern Humanism, Cognitive Dissonance

1. Introduction

When Jerome Klinkowitz appraises Kurt Vonnegut's works, he aptly appreciates his expert usage of the literary forms of pulp fiction to deal with serious literary themes: "What made Kurt Vonnegut so appealing in 1966 was his brilliance at surviving and even flourishing at the margins — at making that marginality the substance of his work and the essence of his vision" (4). This talent is also well utilized in his fifth novel published in 1965, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*.

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut employed such fantasy elements as Eliot Rosewater's extravagant wealth and philanthropy. The amount of money concerned here is too stupendous to be realistic for most readers but because money is one of the typical realistic subjects, there are critics who emphasize its subjective role in the book as Leonard Mustazza does:

... the story is perhaps less about people than it is about attitudes toward money — attitudes that are reflected in two kinds of myth, ... the myth of the American utopia ... and Christian views of money. (50)

However, it is clearly announced that Eliot's philanthropy originates in his war experience, indicating that the money includes much more than the problems suggested by money itself. To appreciate this book accurately, therefore, it is necessary to analyze how Vonnegut relates the theme of wars to the theme of money as well as how he uses fantasy elements to deal with them.

Accordingly, this essay will first focus on the relation between money and wars, and then analyze the literary strategies Vonnegut uses to convey his thought within its fantasy framework, in order to evaluate this book from the point of view of postmodern humanism at the end.

2. Fantasies to Decrease "Cognitive Dissonance"

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater opens with the sentence, "A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people" (1). The story in fact develops around Eliot's tremendous amount of money and with people who are more or less related to it. Peter J. Reed, another critic who takes particular note of

money, therefore, points out that the subject of money is even more important than the subject of wars, quoting Vonnegut's 1973 *Playboy* interview:

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater takes as its subject the impact of money, of economic policy and personal greed, upon the individual and upon the character of American society. In doing so, it may indeed be closer to the mainstream of Vonnegut's work than the great Dresden novel it precedes, for the social injustice of economic systems has been a persistent theme throughout his fiction. (109)

Like Reed, John Tomedi draws some facts from Vonnegut's life during the Great Depression and recognizes that the uselessness of people in Rosewater County stems from his own experience of the Depression:

As an architect, Vonnegut's father did not lose his job to automation, but his eleven years without a commission during the Great Depression ushered in a lack of purpose. This lack of dignity stemming from feelings of economic uselessness is extant again and again in Vonnegut's fiction. (49)

Reed, Tomedi, and Mustazza quoted in "Introduction", all make some valid points in their analyses. Nevertheless, this book does not seem to aim to describe money and its social and economic circumstances for their own sake. It is partly because Eliot's money is too easily earned and is too large an amount to become realistic for the general reader. His philanthropy is also too eccentric to be plausible. Such extravagances make this book a fantasy in spite of the realistic monetary affairs which it depicts. Likewise, because Eliot's eccentric conduct with money is ascribed to his war experiences and because Eliot is a well educated and intelligent man, the subject of money in this book should represent not only a more generalized theme about people and American society than a matter of money itself, but also a problem sophisticated and complicated enough to drive even one of the most excellent men into such an absurd situation as Eliot's in Rosewater County.

According to Eliot's father, Senator Lister Rosewater, Eliot first had a nervous breakdown in the war. There he led a platoon from his company as a captain and bravely assaulted a building supposedly occupied by S.S. troops only to find that he killed two old men and a boy who had engaged in extinguishing a fire there. Then "he calmly lay down in front of a moving truck" (84) and "they found out Eliot was still, so rigid that they might have carried him by his hair and his heels" (84).

It is apparent that Eliot's physical rigidity symbolizes his aporia. He acted bravely and brilliantly in good faith but his excellent deeds only attained such an inappropriate, even a dreadful massacre of the innocent volunteer firemen who were also there only out of good intentions. Here is revealed a cruel reality which destroys even man's best will and act. Eliot wanted to die and fell into the physical rigidity because he could not accept such an overwhelming reality which negated human values. His aporia therefore originated in his trust in men.

Toward the end of the book when Eliot freezes again, he suffers from the same mental conflict. Just before then, Eliot's father visits him to tell him that Norman Mushari, a crooked lawyer, is plotting to disinherit him on the ground that he is crazy. Eliot does not show any interest in this and his father attributes his indifference to his deep-rooted antagonism toward his father and reproaches him, "How do you *hate* me so?" (228). "Eliot was flabbergasted" (228) and asks his father back, "Hate you? Father — I don't hate you. I don't hate anybody" (228). Eliot is simply too naïve to accept anybody's malicious scheme. Actually he seems completely free from the ugly side of reality, including hatred. Yet his attitudes are too idealistic to be accepted by his realistic father, who scorns him: "You certainly loved me, didn't you? Loved me so much you smashed up every hope or ideal I ever had" (228). This is the time when "Eliot covered his ears" (228) and "froze as stiff as any corpse" (229). While trying to be immaculate, he is too weak to face the fact that whatever good intentions may guide his actions, the results of his deeds may not turn out to be so good as they are intended to be.

When Eliot has lost control of his mind, he is attacked by the illusion of Indianapolis consumed by a firestorm. His illusion unmistakably overlaps with Vonnegut's own war experience dealt with more closely in his next book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As Eliot himself did not experience the Dresden air raids, this overlapping suggests that Eliot is baffled by the monetary reality he experiences in the same way as Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim are by the Dresden bombing in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The way in which Eliot becomes absorbed into the fantasy-like philanthropy in order to compensate for his horrible experience in the war can thus be ascribed to the same cause as the way in which, being "[f]aced with the sheer horror of life, epitomized by World War II and especially the fire-bombing of Dresden, Billy 'escapes' to Tralfamadore" (Merrill and Scholl 145).

As for Billy's belief in SF fantasies such as time travel, the planet Tralfamadore and the Tralfamadorians' fourth dimensional ideas and his abduction by them, incidentally, I have already analyzed it in my 2011 thesis, "Kurt Vonnegut's Psychological Strategies in *Slaughterhouse-Five*," in terms of Leon Festinger's theory of "cognitive dissonance." Festinger is one of the eminent cognitive psychologists and theorizes that people are driven into a psychologically uncomfortable situation — "cognitive dissonance" — when they can neither understand why some things have to occur nor accept those facts. He further explains: "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance" (3), so that when they cannot accept the reality, "persons frequently have cognitive elements which deviate markedly from reality" (11). For example, the SF fantasy of the Tralfamadorian four-dimensional view allows him to believe "that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 211) so that it can "reduce the cognitive dissonance" caused by the total disaster in Dresden as well as his beloved wife's sudden death in an utterly

absurd situation.

Like Billy's SF fantasies, Eliot's money fantasies play the role of "reducing his cognitive dissonance." After killing volunteer firemen in spite of himself, Eliot uses his colossal fortune to help even the most despised people in Rosewater County with fantastically philanthropic spirits. Eliot tries to establish a place where any kind of people are treasured as people just as volunteer firemen "rush to the rescue of any human being, and count not the cost" (266). Such a place is nothing but a Utopia as his psychoanalyst realizes. Still he needs it desperately because, as long as he can believe that such altruism can exist, he can oppose any tragic reality which impairs human values and "reduce the cognitive dissonance" caused by his war experience.

After all, both Billy and Eliot are weak and their belief in their fantasies can be easily criticized as their escapism. Nevertheless, Vonnegut seems to depict their escapism more affirmatively when Eliot talks to Billy in the mental hospital in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (101). This is exactly what Satoru Kikuchi, another cognitive psychologist, notes. In his book, *The Psychology of "Making Oneself Believe,"* Kikuchi observes that "positive illusion plays the role of a favorable remedy for one's depression" (203). He claims that it is important to divert one's mind from reality when it is unbearable and that we should "keep our heart hot and our mind cool" (204) in order to live wisely. Vonnegut's fantasy frameworks in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, furnish good examples of this when they coolly present the chaotic and harsh world we have to live in and at the same time, humorously and warmheartedly demonstrate "wonderful new lies" to make full use of our life.

3. Contradictory Views in the Fantasy Framework

Eliot's and Billy's sophisticated fantasies function as "wonderful new lies" not only in order for them to accept their reality. They are also a part of Vonnegut's work in the fantasy framework, with which Vonnegut entertains the reader enough for him to keep reading while presenting Vonnegut's cynical realism without becoming nihilistic and his most romantic moral hope without becoming banal at all.

Vonnegut's cynical view of the world is, for example, well observed in Eliot's lamentation about American society where the rich and the strong become richer and stronger while the poor and the weak can never catch a break. Its governing rule is quite opposite to the one in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the weakest character, Billy, survives in the best way in any incident. These opposite rules have, however, one common characteristic — that is, under those rules, people are too helpless to control their lives in a reasonable and meaningful way. This characteristic of American society can be fatally drastic like Eliot's personal war experience but it seems to be more ridiculed than despaired over when Eliot laments that "a

handful of rapacious citizens come to control all that was worth controlling in America" (9) so that "the American dream turned belly up, turned green" (9). This is because Vonnegut uses a fantasy framework for his work and its general humorous tone appropriately curbs the harshness of reality enough to prevent Eliot's comment and Vonnegut's realistic view presented through it from becoming nihilistic.

2BRO2B, a book written by Eliot's favorite SF writer, Kilgore Trout, similarly illustrates Vonnegut's cynical view of the world. Recalling Vonnegut's own first novel, *Player's Piano*, it presents "a perfectly hideous society," (21) where almost all work is done by machines so that men cannot help but wonder, "What in hell are people *for*?" (22). Here again human meaninglessness and uselessness are underscored but because they are presented in the form of an SF fantasy, even its intimation of Hamlet's serious question, "to be or not to be," arouses a bitter-sweet smile to give the reader a break.

Contrary to the manner in which he restrains his cynical view of the world with the fantasy framework, Vonnegut slickly adds his realistic view to his openly idealistic romanticism to keep a balance. As Kevin Alexander Boon observes, "Vonnegut fills his writing with pithy witticisms" ("What to Do When a Pool-Pah is Your Zah-Mah-Ki-Bo," x) very often. His moral and humanistic attitudes in them are so plain and direct that James Lundquist attributes them to Vonnegut's Mid-West background and regards him as "a homesick-writer" (4) while Kathryn Hume ascribes them to "his German-American heritage" (206). They might be easily regarded not only as old-fashioned but also as didactic and boring, but Vonnegut always undermines his romantic moralism by himself to make even the most banal aphorism a pleasing humanistic phrase with some irony.

For example, when Eliot decides to practice the best humanistic deeds in the least humanistic place, Rosewater County, he openly declares, "I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and unattractive" (44) and reveals his noble gentility and a lofty aim in life. Moreover, his beautiful and loving wife, Sylvia, declares that "Eliot is right to do what he's doing" (68) and supports his romantic deeds. However, Sylvia falls into a nervous breakdown. And by diagnosing her as having a unique condition called "samaritrophia" (52) and characterizing it as "only a disease, and a violent one, too, when it attacks those exceedingly rare individuals who reach biological maturity still loving and wanting to help their fellow men" (54), Vonnegut discloses that he is fully aware of the limitations of Eliot's highly praised and honorable-looking philanthropy.

Kilgore Trout's brilliant explanations are also treated in the same kind of double concepts. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Trout appears as an SF writer who is equipped with Vonnegut's own humanistic imagination, and rationalizes Eliot's deeds in Rosewater County in Eliot's favor: "Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see" (269). Trout thus supplies moral messages that Vonnegut wants to convey through Eliot's unusual behavior. Yet

Vonnegut does not forget to add that Trout as an SF writer could be “an ultimately dishonest man, a press agent” (267), lest the reader should take Trout’s appreciation on Eliot’s deeds at face value.

In this way, Vonnegut intertwines cynical realism and idealistic morality in an innovative fantasy framework with a good sense of humor. Moreover, when he does so, he succeeds in presenting something more important than just the juxtaposition of his cynicism and romanticism. This must be what McGinnis recognized as something “beyond the fatalism” (113) in his criticism on *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

The poignancy and force of *Slaughterhouse-Five* derive largely from an attitude about art and life that Vonnegut apparently shares with Louis-Ferdinand Celine, whom he quotes in the first chapter as saying two things: “No art is possible without a dance with death” and “the truth is death.” Taking his cue from Celine, Vonnegut calls his novel A DUTY-DANCE WITH DEATH on the title page. Ultimately, however, *Slaughterhouse-Five* goes beyond the fatalism implied in Celine’s statements by stressing survival through the use of the imagination. (113)

4. Postmodern Humanism in the Fantasy Framework

What Vonnegut intends beyond the description of his cynical view of the world and his romantic morality may be probed in the two scenes where the book’s title, “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater,” is used.

In the first of them, Diana Moon Glampers, a resident of Rosewater County, uses the phrase to thank Eliot: “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” (79). Diana must genuinely appreciate Eliot’s effort at “treasuring people as people” (266) but her gratitude is practically meaningless because she has never learned from her experience to live in a better way and evidently never will.

The ironic contradiction of the phrase is more apparent in the other scene. There, Eliot’s distant relative, “poor Fred, the insurance man” (144) explains that his greatest satisfaction occurs when a bereaved widow comes with her children to thank him for selling her husband his insurance and says, “I don’t know how the children and I can ever thank you enough for what you’ve done. God bless you, Mr. Rosewater” (146). When Fred declares, “I like insurance. I like *helping* people” (152), his insurance looks similar to Eliot’s philanthropic deeds in Rosewater County. Yet the fact remains that in order to receive the benefit of his insurance, one has to lose one’s close and probably dearest person who supports one’s life. What is worse, if those who buy Fred’s insurance are poor enough to appreciate insurance money when they are in need, they are also so poor that they “could think of little else but suicide whenever premium time rolled around” (145).

Though morality and reality are included in these two scenes, Vonnegut does not seem to focus on the cruelty of reality or the humanistic necessity of virtuous behavior there. He rather seems to enjoy

deconstructing a benedictional phrase to issue an ironical laugh as well as to emphasize uncertainty and instability, just as he does in the title page of the book, where the title's primary benedictional meaning is immediately denied by the following subtitle, "Or Pearls before Swine."

Bill Gholson must have realized these kinds of attitudes of Vonnegut in his writing when he stresses the importance of Vonnegut's writing process more than the contents:

Vonnegut's fiction questions the possibility of developing discourses of morality and identity in the face of contingency: How is it possible to speak morality or identity once one accepts that there is no Truth or metadiscourses to access outside of human-made languages and contexts? (135)

In the postmodern milieu, nothing is definite or solid. Things are judged only relatively and situations are always flexible and unstable. Under its influence, Vonnegut will not try to establish something definite but to remain, as Todd F. Davis recognizes, in "a pragmatic move toward a postmodern 'wholeness' that emphasizes the fluid, mutable meaning of human existence" (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 27). Davis explains this condition at greater length in his earlier essay:

Vonnegut intentionally neglects to offer a static ethical position. Rather, he gives Hassan a provisional answer — a position beyond binary opposition — bringing hope for a postmodern humanism that is negotiated on an operational essentialism... . ("Apocalyptic Grumbling" 151)

Vonnegut's social reality and humanistic morality may be ascribed to modernism but his way of handling them is definitely postmodern. As is observed at the beginning of this essay, his postmodernity is clearly observed in his flexible usage of marginal styles for the serious literary themes but what makes his writing more postmodern is the fantastic deconstruction of his own writing with a fantasy framework. And this deconstruction brings out important results beyond the description of his cynical view of the world or his humanistic morality.

Eliot is, for example, presented as one of the most intelligent and refined men but he also behaves like a stupid clown in following a fairyland over the rainbow. Through this unusual fantasy combination of his contradictory characters, Vonnegut dramatizes the persistent efforts to realize humanistic morality in the face of the cruel reality.

Likewise, the closing paragraph of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* exemplifies an effectual deconstruction. There, a sly lawyer, Norman Mushari, and his pawn, Fred Rosewater, try to claim that Eliot is crazy so that they can acquire the whole wealth of the Rosewater Foundation in his place. Eliot then dodges their attack by accepting any child in Rosewater County who is claimed as his own child, as his heir.

"Let their names be Rosewater from this moment on. And tell them that their father loves them, no matter what they may turn out to be. And tell them —" Eliot fell silent, raised his tennis racket as though it were a magic wand.

“And tell them,” he began again, “to be fruitful and multiply.” (275)

Eliot’s fantastic generosity defeats Mushari’s greedy scheme. It looks like a happy ending suitable to a fantasy. Nevertheless, instead of a magic wand, what he has is a tennis racket, a rich man’s sport equipment. It hints that his act is after all a rich man’s sport. And it actually is because his good intention overlooks the selfish deeds of the people in Rosewater County who claim that their children are Eliot’s. As his philanthropy was unable to establish a real Utopia in Rosewater County, so was his fantastic generosity unable to bring a real solution to greedy America, leaving an eternal question of how to negotiate humanistic morality and cruel reality.

Incidentally, Robert T. Tally Jr. prefers to remain indecisive as to Vonnegut’s modern or postmodern characteristics:

In my view, Vonnegut’s novels are not exactly modernist or postmodernist. They do not so much represent a bridge between the two aesthetic or cultural forms as they do an unresolved tension between them. (3)

Tally must be conscious that Vonnegut holds both modern humanistic morality and postmodern uncertainty or incredibility in an irreconcilable manner and is more interested in their tension than in reconciling them. However, “an unresolved tension” is a very postmodern attitude because any “bridge” to connect them would become a solid solution for a modernist.

In order to refrain from any solid statement and leave the question of humanistic morality and cruel reality unanswered, Vonnegut utilizes the fantasy framework ingeniously. And by doing so, he faces this problem in his own way. Not only presenting his penetrating postmodern understanding of the world but also announcing the undeniable importance of modern morality whatever fault and limitation it may have, Vonnegut supplies enough moral and realistic materials to consider and the necessity for the reader to face the question of how to negotiate them in his own way. The book is thus open to the reader and to any possible way to tackle this problem. And it is this very openness toward other people and the future that makes *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* really postmodern and humanistic.

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『ローズウォーターさんに神様のお恵みを』における カート・ヴォネガットのファンタジー戦略

新 田 玲 子

【キーワード】 カート・ヴォネガット、『ローズウォーターさんに神様のお恵みを』、ポストモダンアメリカ小説、第二次世界大戦、ポストモダンヒューマニズム、認知的不協和

カート・ヴォネガットの大きな魅力は、通俗的要素で読者を楽しませ、豊かな人間性を提示しながらも、真面目な小説に不可欠な鋭い人間洞察や痛烈な社会批判を提供していることである。代表作『スローターハウス・ファイブ』では、ドレスデン空襲という戦争体験をSFというファンタジー要素を用いて描くことで、この目的を果たしているが、この作品に先立つ1965年に発表された『ローズウォーターさんに神様のお恵みを』でも、アメリカ資本主義というリアリスティックな題材がファンタジー設定で扱われ、同様の効果を挙げている。

ヴォネガットがファンタジーを利用する場面には、認知心理学が「不協和理論」によって説明する心理が作用している。これは、どうしても受け入れがたい、認知的不協和をもたらす事態に遭遇すると、人は「認知的不協和の軽減」のために途方もない「嘘」を受け入れる傾向がある、というものである。たとえば『スローターハウス・ファイブ』では、無辜の犠牲者を大量に出す悲惨なドレスデン空襲に対し、主人公ビリー・ピルグリムは「認知的不協和の軽減」のために、ある時間帯では死んだように見える人も、他の時間帯では生きてると信じさせてくれる、四次元空間を自由に移動できるトラルファマドール星人の存在を信じ込む。一方、『ローズウォーターさんに神様のお恵みを』の主人公エリオット・ローズウォーターは、彼の勇気と善意を無にする戦闘結果による「認知的不協和の軽減」のため、彼が持つすべての財と才能を善行に注ぐ。しかしエリオットの行為は慈善といった現実の枠を超えており、その非現実性により、彼にもたらされた「認知的不協和」の大きさと、その原因となった現実の苛酷な実態が示唆されるのである。

本論ではこうしたファンタジー戦略を分析したうえで、その戦略を編み出したヴォネガットの、中西部的・ドイツ的道德観やヒューマニスティックなロマンティシズム、それらと相矛盾するリアリスティックで皮肉な笑いや揶揄の共存に着目する。たとえば、ビリーの「認知的不協和の軽減」に寄与する四次元的思考を持つ異星人の名が、「別名、致命的な夢 (Or Fatal Dream)」のアナグラム、トラルファマドール (Tralfamadore) であるように、エリオットの「認知的不協和の軽減」のための愛他行為も、徹底して実践されればされるほど、かえって関係者の利己主義や怠慢を助長し、人間が本質的に抱える様々な問題や欠点を暴露する。

しかしこのような相矛盾する視点で互いを否定しつつも、ヴォネガットはそこから暖かい笑い

を引き出し、愚かで弱い人間を突き放すことは決してない。むしろヴォネガットは、主人公たちの弱々しい逃避的姿勢に極端なまでの道徳的・人間的生き様を託し、人が本来あるべき理想を示しつつ、それを否定する現実的視点を供給することで、両者のバランスのうえに常により良い生き方を模索し続ける、不確定で不安定なポストモダンの生き様を描き出す。そして、何らかの特定の結論を提示するのではなく、模索し続ける過程に読者を導くことで、読者ひとりひとりにそれぞれが課せられた模索と結論を委ね、読者と未来に開かれたポストモダンヒューマニストの姿勢を貫いているのである。