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FREE WILL, THE UNIVERSE OF ACCIDENTS, IRONY, CHRONO-SYNCLASTIC  
INFUNDIBULUMISM, AND NIHILISM IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *THE SIRENS OF TITAN*

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ABSTRACT

Many of Kurt Vonnegut's works have been classified as science fiction, postmodern and satire. Vonnegut uses these genres to highlight the absurdities of human life. Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* is a novel that explores the issues of free will, fate, or fortune, time, and purpose of human life in a futuristic setting. It revolves around characters who are deprived of free will and manipulated for trifle and absurd reasons. Many critics have approached the novel in relation to a postmodern setting that usually maintains a chaotic, absurd, and irrational universe. This paper, however, will deal with themes that oppose sentiments of progress, evolution and transcendence. The aim of this paper is to investigate the forces that govern the universe of *The Sirens of Titan*. In particular, this paper will investigate the topics of free will, or the lack thereof, accidents, irony, chrono-synclastic infundibulumism, and nihilism.

Key Words: free will, accidents, irony, chrono-synclastic-infundibulum, nihilism

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I. Introduction

Most "science fiction is rooted in the belief that through thinking human beings can indeed save the planet and the species" and that "progress is not only possible but probable through science" (Morse 293). Dealing with themes common to most science fiction, Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* "explores the question of purpose in a futuristic setting" (May 35). This novel, however, contests many presumptions upon which many science fiction foregrounds. Josh Simpson writes that by "[us]ing irony, satire, and black humor . . . Vonnegut forces his readers to consider what it means to be human in a chaotic, often absurd, and irrational universe (262). In fact, many scholars would agree that *The Sirens of Titan* is "Vonnegut's most flamboyant novel, with its entire universe at the mercy of the outrageous fortune" (Wolfe 968). Seconding G. K. Wolfe's idea, Lynn Buck notes that the world of Vonnegut is a "mixture of hilarity and futility, [and] illusion" (181).

While many critics have discussed *The Sirens of Titans* in association with the tenets of postmodernism typically defined by an attitude of relativism, skepticism, and irony rejecting the notion of universal truths, these critics ignore the ways in which many of the the novel's themes are in direct opposition to core transhumanist beliefs: the belief in the "evolution of human-created technology" (Kurzweil 7) and the

creation of a world that transcends “human biology” (Kurzweil 9) and limitations. Debunking such progressive and evolutionary beliefs, *The Sirens of Titan* is replete with “empty heroics, low comedy and pointless death” (Vonnegut 2). More particularly, I argue that novel employ themes of free will, accidents (or fortunes), time, irony, and nihilism subverting transhumanists ideas of progress, evolution and transcendence.

## II. Free Will, and the Universe of Accidents

As many scholars have pointed out *The Sirens of Titan* deals with the topics of free will and lack of agency. In the novel, for instance, “[i]n spite of their desperate attempt to avoid it, both Malachi Constant and Beatrice Rumfoord eventually find themselves aboard the spacecraft named ‘The Whale,’ en route to Titan” (Nelson 553). It is through these characters that readers see the intertwined relationship between free will and the lack of agency. Readers obviously recognize Constant’s and Beatrice’s acting on the idea of free will.

Upon hearing from Rumfoord of prophecies concerning themselves—that Constant would consummate with Beatrice, have a child named Chrono and live in Titan—Constant and Beatrice deliberately make life-choices that would render Rumfoord’s prophecies obsolete. For instance, offended by Rumfoord who claimed that know Constant’s past, present and future and to “make himself unworthy of any destiny—incapable of any mission—far to travel” (Vonnegut 58), Constant intentionally a hosted a party that lasted for 56 days and sold off all his corporations (including Magnum Opus Inc., which manufactured and owned the space ship, *The Whale*). This would, through Constant’s calculation, inevitably not only make himself unhealthy for any travel but also inhibit the only space ship in the entire solar system incapable of space travel. In other words, to “destroy every connection between himself and the only known means of getting to” (Vonnegut 44) space, Constant “had sold out all his holdings in Galactic Spacecraft, the corporation that had custody of the great rocket ship called *The Whale*.” Furthermore, he “had taken to writing Beatrice Rumfoord offensive letters in order to keep her away—in order to make himself absolutely and permanently intolerable to her” (Vonnegut 44-5). Constant became confident that his fate lied in his own hands not in some ridicules predictions made by Rumfoord who became a “wave phenomenon extending all the way from the Sun to Betelgeuse” (Vonnegut 15-6) and whose physical existence only appeared for a short period of time on earth.

By the same token, Beatrice, took similar steps to sabotage Rumfoord’s plans (or rather prophesies). She “had liquidated her diversified portfolio of securities, and had the proceeds into shares of Galactic Spacecraft, intending thereby to get a leather-lunged voice in whatever was done with *The Whale*” (Vonnegut 44). Moreover, she had planned to “live in modest comfort for the rest of her days” (Vonnegut 91) by selling off her husband’s (Rumfoord’s) estate and charging the public with five dollars for Rumfoord’s materialization. As she watched the ceremonies of the launching of the space craft on her TV set, Beatrice “had proved that she was mistress of her own fate, could say no whenever she pleased—and make it stick. She had proved that her husband’s omniscient bullying was all a bluff” (Vonnegut 91). She had thought that there is no way that she would be onboard the space ship to Mars or Titan since the the space ship was about to be launched two thousand miles away from her current location. Not only as a spiteful response to Constant’s offensive letters but also as a direct denial towards Rumfoord’s prophetic words, she also had “bought a capsule of cyanide” as it was her “intention to swallow it if ever she had to share so much as the same time zone with Malachi Constant” (Vonnegut 45).

*The Sirens of Titan*, additionally, deals with the absence of free will (or accidents) as characters in the novel are “caught like bugs in amber” (Nelson 553 ). For instance, Constant and Beatrice realize that their lives and the life-choices that they made makes no real difference in the end: the forces that govern the universe is a series of freakish accidents or a God who is indifferent to his creations. As Kathryn Hume notes “[c]hance accidents, unforeseeable consequences of minor actions, frequent reversals and wild, unmotivated swings of fortune are always part of a Vonnegut novel” (223). This idea, as a matter of fact, permeates throughout the entire novel as Constant reiterates the creed—“I WAS A VICTIM OF A SERIES OF ACCIDENT, AS ARE WE ALL” (Vonnegut 233)—of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent that Rumfoord founded. According to views of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, God “doesn’t care what happens to you. He didn’t go to any trouble to get you here safe and sound, any more than He would go to the trouble to kill you” (Vonnegut 230).

Just as the creed of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, a series of accidental events lead Constant's whole life giving proof to God's indifference. Here's an anti-climatic description of Constant's and Beatrice's accidental reunion that displays the absolute futility of God's divine providence and human agency. It was not Constant's (free) will nor Beatrice's doing that have brought them together once again. Their reunion was, in fact, the result of a series of unfortunate accidents. It happened that Constant enlisted in the Army of Mars, that he became proud and lustful to force himself upon a helpless woman, that Beatrice was abducted on a space ship to Mars, that the woman Constant took advantage of in the dark statesroom was Beatrice. When Rumfoord told Constant that the woman whom Constant had wronged was no other than Beatrice who had been kidnapped by Martian agents earlier. It is at this moment that Constant realizes that "he was not only a victim of outrages fortune, but one of outrages fortune's cruelest agents as well" (Vonnegut 163). According to the theology of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, fortunes or accidents "is the way the wind swirls and the dust settles eons after God has passed by" (Vonnegut 257). As a matter of fact, *The Sirens of Titan* is abounded with this sort of accidental events that serves to negate the idea of free will.

### III. The Church of Irony

Extending the theme of accidents or the universe of indifference, Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* deals with irony: situations particularly concerning power. As Tony Tanner notes, the novel is "about people being used" at an "inter-galactic scale permissible in science fiction" (298). Indeed, the novel describes ironic situations where free will implodes when it clashes with the universe of accidents. On a microscopic level, we see this being played out in the Martian suicide episode where Vonnegut "satirizes the Martians and their military regimentation as they plan their unsuccessful attack on earth" (Greiner 39). Despise Constant's endeavors to sabotage Rumfoord's prophecy about Constant's own future, Unk (Constant's name in Mars) find himself enlisted in the Army of Mars recruited earlier by Martian agents. It was Rumfoord who founded the Army of Mars by kidnapping and brainwashing thousands of people on earth to make them compliant Martian soldiers. While the Army of Mars had possessed the most advanced space ships in the entire solar system and had fought the war with steadfast dedication and self-sacrifice, they, nevertheless, lost the war because of a small glitch in the radio-controller that caused the soldiers to loose contact with their commanders, thus causing the troops to become sluggish. In an ironic way, the war was lost, and of course, the mastermind behind the Martian suicide was Rumfoord. It was Rumfoord's plan, from the beginning, to have Constant survive the war because he was "preserving him for a major part in a pageant . . . for this new religion" (Vonnegut 179)—the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Indeed, *The Sirens of Titan* "treat such matters with a mixture of causal comedy and disturbing irony" (Blackford 36).

On a macrocosmic level, the novel ironically displays the fact that human civilization was a part of Tralfamadorians' cosmological design. In fact, the Tralfamadorian "manipulation of Earth is a depiction of human history as absurd" (Sigman 24). The following instance reveals the irony of all human efforts. Tralfamadorians are mechanical alien beings built by organic creatures living in a planet that is one hundred and fifty thousand light years away from earth who have sent Salo (a messenger representative sent by the Tralfamadorians to deliver a message across the universe) encouraging messages through earthly monuments. Rumfoord, just before he dies, tells Constant that Stonehenge on England, The Great Wall of China and The Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero were all built to send Salo encouraging messages such as "*Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed*" (Vonnegut 276). Rumfoord tells Constant that the Tralfamadorians are "able to make certain impulses from the Universal Will to Become echo through the vaulted architecture of the Universe . . . as to influence creatures far, far away, and inspire them to serve Tralfamadorian ends" (Vonnegut 277). These ideas are substantiated in the novel by the fact that the replacement piece that required Salo's space ship for space travel was ultimately delivered by, Chrono, Constant's son, who had picked up a "little strip of metal on Mars" (Vonnegut 35) as a good-luck charm. Emphasizing Tralfamadorian's influence on human affairs, Rumfoord notes that "*Everything that every Earthling has every done has warped by creatures . . . to make us deliver a replacement part to a Tralfamadorian messenger who is grounded right here on Titan*" (Vonnegut 302).

#### IV. Chrono-synclastic Infundibulum

The cosmos of *The Sirens of Titan* is full of chrono-synclastic infundibulum. It is a compound word, according to *A Child's Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do*, that combined three different words: "time," "curved towards the same side in all directions" and "funnel" (Vonnegut 9). Chrono-synclastic infundibulum is a phenomena when "all different kinds of truths fit together as nicely as the parts in your Daddy's solar watch" (Vonnegut 9). Contrary to the Western notion of time as being progressive with various branches branching out in all different directions through a series of choices, the idea of time, in *The Sirens of Titan*, seems to be curved towards the center to merge again in the end without a progressive direction, purpose nor meaning. For this reason, in chrono-synclastic infundibulum, all different kinds of events eventually come back full circle. According to Robert L. Nadeau, the best way to understand Rumfoord's "mythical insight" (38) is to consider the universe of *The Sirens of Titan* as "perpetually full" because "energy is never lost but merely transferred" (Nadeau 39). Seconding this idea, Philip M. Rubens argues that, for Vonnegut, "nothing in this world is ever final—no one ever ends—we keep on bouncing back and forth in time, we go on and on ad infinitum" (64).

The three sirens of Titan represents a central feature of chrono-synclastic infundibulum in which a certain past comes back to become a certain future. For example, the picture of three beautiful women that Constant received from Rumfoord before Constant landed on Titan, later known as the three sirens of Titan, in fact, was revealed to be statues made by Salo. What Constants sees in the picture, at this point of the narrative, are three beautiful women seemingly emerged under a shallow sea of corals with seducing looks: "[a]t the bottom of that seeming coral bay were three women—on white, one gold, one brown. They looked up at Constant, begging him to come to them, to make them whole with love" (Vonnegut 33). Constant is told by Rumfoord that he is going to meet up with these women when he reaches Titan in the near future. Constant never fully understands the implications of this fact nor about his future because it never occurred to Constant that all the future life-choices that Constant will make after his meeting with Rumfoord, and coincidental events that will take place thereafter will lead him to meet these three beautiful women. Surprisingly, when Constant lands on Titan with his partner Beatrice, Constant, in the bottom of Rumfoord's palace pool, discovers three women statues. Beautiful as they are, they are revealed to be statues made by Salo of Titanic peat" (Vonnegut 283). By viewing all the actives of the human race with a screen panel of his space ship, Salo, as a hobby, had been sculpting human statues ever since his landing on Titan in 203, 117 BC. Unexpectedly, in a chrono-synclastic infundibulum way, the picture of the sirens have come back full circle to reclaim its authority as a future-present.

#### V. Nihilism, or the Universal Will to Become Nothing

Together with chrono-synclastic infundibulum, the UWTB, or the Universal Will to Become illustrate how nihilistic forces dictate the universe of *The Sirens of Titan*. In the novel, the UWTB is known to be "the most powerful conceivable sources of energy" (Vonnegut 175) in the universe. It a type of energy that "makes universes out of nothingness—that makes nothingness insists on becoming somethingness" (Vonnegut 138). In fact, the Tralfamadorians "were able to make certain impulses from the Universal Will to Become echo through" (Vonnegut 277) the universe as to influence human beings far away. While the UWTB is the most powerful source of energy in the universe making something out of nothing, in the novel, the UWTB is rather reveals the significance of meaninglessness. In other words, the most powerful force governing the universe of the novel is meaninglessness, or nihilism. The repetition of Rumfoord's mantra—"[e]verything that ever was will always be, and everything that ever will be always was" (Vonnegut 292)—strongly suggests the meaninglessness of everything in the universe. If everything that ever has been will always be, and everything that ever will be always has been, then, "nothing can be done to change the drift of human affairs" making the "notion of free will" as a "quaint Earthling illusion" (Merrill and Scholl 67). So, it is worth noting that Vonnegut "forces the reader to consider the true meaning of life" that humans are "inconsequential, trifling, and logocentric" (Sieber 134).

The message that Salo was to carry is an example of the futility of things that are prevalent in the novel. It is revealed that Salo's thousand-year voyage and his endeavors to carry the message amounted to

nothing because both the message and the reason for its secrecy were essentially meaningless. Salo, one of the Tralfamadorians, is a chosen messenger whose job was to “carry a sealed message from One Rim of the Universe to the Other” (Vonnegut 274). Then he was ordered by his fellow Tralfamadorians not “*under any circumstances, to open the message along the way*” (Vonnegut 275). Salo was forced down on Titan waiting for a replacement part that would once again allow intergalactic space travel. When the seal of the message—a message that he carried more than half a million years and was supposed to “carry for eighteen million more years” (Vonnegut 306)—finally breaks open, it is revealed to be a single dot meaning “*Greetings*” (Vonnegut 306) in Tralfamadorian. Upon seeing the message of the message, Salo, in frustration, notes that he have been “used” and “wasted” (Vonnegut 306).

The Tralfamadorian legend further allows readers to acknowledge that the force that governs the universe of *The Sirens of Titan* is essentially nihilistic. This aspect accentuates the nihilistic origin of the Tralfamadorians. According to the Tralfamadorian legend, the Tralfamadorians were made by organic creatures who were obsessed with the idea of meaning and purpose. In order to understand the purpose of their lives, these creatures created intelligent machines (the Tralfamadorians) to serve a low purpose, then made these machines to serve a higher purpose of finding out the meaning of their lives. When the creatures received news of their purposelessness from the Tralfamadorians, they began to kill themselves because they “*hated purposeless things above all else*” (Vonnegut 280). However, when they discovered that they were not even good at this they ordered the Tralfamadorians to slay them. Thus, this story reveals the meaningless of creation.

#### VI. Conclusion

As we have seen, *The Sirens of Titan*, deals with the free will, and more importantly the absence of it as characters in the novel seem to be trapped on a roller coaster ride fixed on a course that cannot be stopped. As it turns out, the force that governs the universe of the novel is a series of accidents not individual free will nor human agency. As a matter of fact, just as the doctrine of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, a series of accidental events lead Constant’s and Beatrice’s future: they ultimately reunite, end up in Titan, and witness the true face of the three sirens of Titan. Extending the theme of accidents, the novel describes ironic situations where free will implodes when it clashes with the universe of accidents. Microscopically, we see irony being played out in the Martian suicide episode, and macrocosmically, the novel displays the ironic fact that human civilization was a part of Tralfamadorians’ cosmological design. Additionally, the three sirens of Titan represents a central feature of chrono-synclastic infundibulum in which the past—the picture of the three sirens—comes back full circle to reclaim its authority as a future-present. Finally, the most powerful force governing the universe of the novel is revealed to be meaninglessness, or nihilism. The UWTB, the message that Salo was to carry, and the Tralfamadorians legend are examples in the novel that epitomizes the futility of things.

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