

Vonnegut Reinvented

McInnis, Gilbert. *Kurt Vonnegut, Myth and Science in the Postmodern World*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020. 184 pages. ISBN 978-1-4331-7435-3. Hb. CAD 42.08.

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<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2021/27/2/15>

Fascination with the novels of American author, Kurt Vonnegut, has burgeoned since the 1970s. Vonnegut's books—many of which have been adapted to screen—have sold millions of copies and have long been a staple of university literature courses. Scholarly interest in his work has been intense, culminating in such volumes as Marc Leed's *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia* (1996) and Peter Freese's well-liked *The Clown of Armageddon, the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* (2009). Now Gilbert McInnis, Assistant Professor at the University College of the North, Canada, has penned a monograph of a unique approach. *Kurt Vonnegut, Myth and Science in the Postmodern World* analyzes five of Vonnegut's novels focusing on evolutionary biology and particle physics, while applying the theoretical framework of myth criticism referencing Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and Yezzer Meletinsky in his interpretation.

Myth and Science is divided into ten chapters, each comprising an essay discussing one of Vonnegut's novels from social science or hard science aspects. Based on the novels, McInnis presents a handful of unique ideas, such as the proposition that general relativity and evolution are related, or that myths have a crucial function in bringing order into chaos, similarly to Vonnegut's *chrono-synclastic infundibulum*—a moment in which all the different kinds of truths fit together and one is absolutely right about everything; in other words, a popular depiction of Einstein's general relativity. Although Einstein's name returns in the titles of three of the chapters, natural sciences are employed in order to examine the human condition. In fact, what makes McInnis's book an enthralling study is the author's remarkable talent in bringing unconventional concepts, such as “evolutionary mythology” or “cosmological connection,” into

common parlance. *Myth and Science*, with its attempt to understand Vonnegut's lifelong quest for "the meaning of it all"—to borrow the title of Richard Feynman's collection of talks on the relationship of science and society—accomplishes an enormous task: inserting science, which operates primarily via the language of mathematics, in the context of literature is no small feat. Thus, it is particularly efficacious how McInnis introduces the field of evolutionary biology in his first chapter before delving into a detailed study of Vonnegut's novels in which evolution and particle physics, two apparently unrelated fields of inquiry, are discussed in relation to Vonnegut's oeuvre, hinting at the overarching effect of science on life. *Galapagos* (chapters two and three), *Mother Night* (chapters seven and eight), and *Breakfast of Champions* (chapter nine) are examined primarily in the light of two aforementioned fields; additionally, "evolutionary mythology," a term introduced by McInnis, is employed in analyzing *Sirens of Titan* (chapters four and five) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (chapter six).

Each chapter adopts a systematic approach as McInnis embarks upon understanding the impact of science and technology on society, as it is envisioned by Vonnegut. In McInnis's own words: "[the study] seeks to explain how Vonnegut's stories utilize Darwin's cosmogony" (1). McInnis focuses on how societies and, within them, individuals are affected by the evil of social Darwinism, though Darwin himself had not commented on the social implications of his theories describing biological systems. Vonnegut's characters elucidate the riddle of life and in turn *Myth and Science* sheds light on the connection between science and society and the possible creation of a modern mythology in the form of science. McInnis argues that indeed Vonnegut chose the genre of science fiction due to its prompt applicability to critique society. Furthermore, he adds that Vonnegut "portrays Darwin's notion of natural selection as [one] having cosmological implications" (66). The presumed connection between natural science and social science entertained in this book is especially intriguing and probably needs more research in the future.

For readers already familiar with McInnis's Vonnegut scholarship from his 2011 *Evolutionary Mythology in the Writings of Kurt Vonnegut: Darwin, Vonnegut, and the Construction of an American Culture*, and his essay "Evolutionary Mythology in the Writings of Kurt Vonnegut" (also the closing chapter for this book) in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views, Kurt Vonnegut* (2008), it comes as no surprise that he has a keen interest in the biology and physics of Vonnegut's prose and the pattern in which social constructs may manifest similarly to those arising in the natural sciences. McInnis's treatment of "evolutionary mythology" employs elements of myth criticism with substantial conviction, hence this part of the book (chapters seven to ten) makes for a beguiling, albeit unusual argument, building on concepts introduced by Northrop Frye but taking them in the direction of science. I am especially impressed by McInnis's exploration of mythmaking, along with the unearthing of the totalitarian ideologies imbedded in the world of *Mother Night* (chapters seven and eight). The analysis of Anthropocene mythology and how ideology can be a substitute for the God-size hole in the modern age is a reminder of how and why social evolution presented its new crutches for humanity. Evolutionary biology is employed to validate a universe governed by pure chance in *Galapagos*, and as we witness devolution unfold, chance becomes the new deity, reasons McInnis. Randomness in *Galapagos* and *Mother Night* operates in such a manner that "the awe of nothingness" becomes the driving force behind the actions of Vonnegut's characters (171).

McInnis argues in chapter ten, titled "Evolutionary Mythology in the Writings of Kurt Vonnegut," that in the universe "natural selection operates according to the force of chance [and it] is portrayed as a materialistic alternative to the mysterious role of God" (170). It is especially compelling how McInnis draws a parallel between biological evolution and what he terms as "cosmic selection." In *Sirens* particularly, cosmology is interwoven with the mythology of the fictional world of the story (105). In order to come up with the *chronosynclastic infundibulum*, Vonnegut incorporated his understanding of Einstein's theory of

special relativity. Myths in any age naturally fit with contemporary knowledge, and in an age of science and technology, the old heroes have to go. McInnis argues that science can take over the place of myths. Myths are replaced, God is discarded, and as a result, his supposed creations are not special anymore but become random gears in the system. This suggestion is corroborated by the totalitarian mind in *Mother Night*, which is governed by chance in a probabilistic universe. Only one question remains to be pondered: How can one find meaning in an ad hoc and monochromatic world devoid of the individual that assumes himself as special?

McInnis extrapolates that Darwin's theory of evolution has long-term effects on society, which are largely unintended by the scientist himself. He reasons that in both *Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, evolutionary science warrants a social Darwinist morality according to which Unk and Billy, the respective protagonists, act. The social implications of "evolutionary mythology" are no less than the loss of God superseded by the social Darwinist order, which serves a mythological function replacing the hero archetype. But will "evolutionary mythology" replace God entirely? Can archetypes and a sense of connectedness be achieved through evolutionary mythology alone? If yes, to what extent is this more than a mere swap of the old myths for a set of new ones?

In chapters four, five, and six, McInnis handles popular ideas about problems in theoretical physics in a whimsical manner. It is worth noting, however, that while his reasoning makes perfect sense within the fictional universe created by Vonnegut, the domain of particle physics as a field of science is yet entirely another matter. Our only wish is to one day create a unified field theory in physics with the ease with which McInnis connects the dots in Vonnegut's writings. Since three of the chapters feature references to both Newtonian and quantum physics, it should be pointed out that although several well-known physicists are referenced, the philosophical relativism and the "relativistic myth" in *Sirens* are not the same concepts as relativity in physics. Albeit the actual language of physics is mathematics,

fortunately here we are in the realm of myth making and there is no pressure on us to abide by the laws of physics.

Gilbert McInnis's unique approach puts the reader at the intersection of philosophy and popular and social science, offering an informative reference book for students interested in Vonnegut's novels. His application of myth criticism in his exploration of the chosen texts results in a fresh new take on the underlying principles governing the universe according to Vonnegut. McInnis masterfully handles abstruse topics leaving both scholars and fans keen to go back and reread his classics.

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