

AP Literature and Composition

Author Study-Final Paper

Final Exam

Keep in Mind: Your final Author Study Paper is your final exam grade and counts 2/11ths of your overall grade (each quarter and the final counts twice; your midterm counts once). You are expected to **revise your previous work** based on the final assignment and the feedback you received on your previous author study papers.

All papers must be submitted in paper form in class by the due date and submitted to turnitin.com.

Research-

Review information from the start of the project to see what you already have. Then, dig deeper into the author's life, the historical time period and the literary time period during which he or she lived and wrote. Extract information you find relevant to your study of his or her novels. Sources should come from the school databases (Gale, Bloom's, JSTOR, etc.) and be cited appropriately. Quality matters more than quantity. The information should be rich, interesting, relevant, and enhance your author study. The information may come from one or more sources as long as it meets the criteria described in this section.

Revise-

Thesis

Your thesis must be revised to reflect your reading of both books and your research. Your focus (ideally) will remain the same but you must now take the two works into consideration to present an examination of the author's use of one element of style in the books you have read for your author study.

Content

Your content should be revised by addressing one or more of the following:

- Incorporating the biographical and/or historical/literary context into your discussion in a relevant way.
- Adding additional examples to provide a closer analysis of your selected books
- Clarifying weak spots in your analysis as needed; in some cases, you may need to cut them if you find yourself unable to clarify (just be sure to replace with new evidence if that is the case)
- Strengthening connections to illustrate how the element of style connects to the meaning of the work overall.
- In terms of new parts of your essay, you need: a new introduction; additional body paragraphs which discuss and reflect on your observations of the author's use of the style element in both works; additional body paragraphs for the research information; and a new conclusion
- Pay attention to individual feedback your received on *your* paper; also keep in mind that the first paper is slightly curved as your first paper

In total, papers should be 10-15 pages plus the Works Cited Page.

Language

Address any issues with unclear or awkward word choice, sentence structure, etc.

Form

- Fix and strengthen transitions between topics.
- Revise placement of examples as needed for stronger overall organization to increase the persuasiveness of your paper.
- Select placement of historical /biographical information based on relevance to your content.
- Correct errors with MLA errors and revise your Works Cited page (two books plus additional research sources) and parenthetical references. (Note: Because you are now dealing with two titles by the same author, you must use the author's name, title (or a shortened version of it) and page number.)

SAMPLE: (Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* 85)

AP Literature
Final Exam- Author Study Paper

Score Values: 9-8=100-91	7-6=90-80	5=79-76	4-3=75-70	2-1=69-60
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	9-8	7-6	5	4-3	2-1
Research	-offers a persuasive and insightful connection of the literary, historical and/or biographical background	-offers a reasonable connection to the literary, historical and/or biographical background	-offers a plausible connection to the literary, historical and/or biographical background	-offers a partial connection with very basic information	-offers little to no information that shows evidence of research
Argument	-offers a persuasive and insightful analysis of the assigned task and literature through the lens of a strong thesis	-offers a reasonable analysis of the assigned task and literature, but less convincing and insightful than upper level essays; thesis is clear and appropriate	-offers a plausible reading of the assigned task and literature, but weaknesses in argument need to be addressed and/or thesis needs some revision	-offers a partial analysis that is unconvincing and/or fails to unify the discussion of the books in a clear thesis	-offers a very limited analysis with persistent misreadings of the text or an unclear reading of the text; no appropriate focus for the assigned task
Revisions-Development	-develops ideas clearly and fully , making effective use of feedback to clarify and sharpen the discussion of examples	-develops ideas clearly and consistently , with sufficient attention to feedback in order to strengthen content	-adequately addresses some points of revision to strengthen some points of the argument but more consistent attention to feedback needed	-shows an attempt to use feedback and comments but overall improvement still needed to make effective changes	-shows little to no attempt to utilize feedback or comments for successful revision; overall, more effort
Analysis	- insightful and in-depth analysis of the two books which successfully unifies the author study in terms of style	- clearly sustained and thoughtful analysis with sufficient observations about how the style element contributes to the author's craft	- analysis needs more elaboration at multiple points in the essay; connection between the author's use of the style element and how that contributes to meaning is somewhat underdeveloped	overall primarily summary with very limited analysis and/or analysis fails to provide a clear, unified examination of the style element	- overall primarily summary with very limited analysis
Organization	- clear and effective organization with clear transitions	-clear and effective organization overall with some transitions needing improvement between paragraphs or within them	-overall organization needs improvement and/or unclear transitions significantly detract from argument	- lacks appropriate focus , at times becoming repetitive or unclear	- organization lacks clarity ; essays that are especially incompetent or incoherent are scored a 1
Language	- stylistically sophisticated , using language that is precise and engaging with a notable sense of voice and awareness of audience	- fluent and original , with evident awareness of audience and purpose	- fluent and original, but fails to address important revisions	- appropriate language for the task, but revisions not addressed to make the paper more fluent	-uses language that is imprecise or unsuitable for the audience or purpose
MLA Format and Incorporating Quotes	-follows MLA format with essentially no errors and incorporates quotes seamlessly .	-follows MLA format with minor errors and incorporates quotes effectively	-follows MLA format with minor errors and incorporates quotes effectively ; the placement of some quotes may be awkward or lack appropriate introduction	-follows MLA format with errors and shows difficulty incorporating quotes effectively	-follows MLA format with errors and does not demonstrate sufficient understanding of MLA format

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AP Literature and Composition

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*Satire, Parody, and Dark Humor as Methods of Criticizing Powerful Institutions in
Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle and Breakfast of Champions*

Kurt Vonnegut is known primarily for the satire and the dark humor that characterizes his novels. In his book *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut aims his satire at the state of American society in the 1960s, when the book was published. America in this time period was forever changed by the Industrial Revolution and two World Wars, and Vonnegut certainly did not see the changes as positive. He skewers the ubiquity of violence and materialism, the disrespect for the past and for the environment, and the general lack of purpose or meaning. In *Cat's Cradle*, a central theme is the human tendency to try to find absolute truth or a higher meaning in life. While Vonnegut acknowledges the ubiquity of this behavior, he suggests that it is not worthwhile because it will never be successful. He uses satire to point out the flaws in human nature, chief among them the endless search for meaning, and mocks institutions such as science and religion that attempt to provide people with incomplete or useless answers. These are weighty and often dark topics, but they are approached through satire and black humor, which both makes the arguments more interesting but also changes their tone. Even though Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* is saying that life is meaningless, his tone is humorous,

not bleak or nihilistic, suggesting that life doesn't need meaning to be worth living. The America that he creates in *Breakfast of Champions* is ridiculous and absurd, but it is similar enough to the America that we know that we cannot laugh at it without a certain degree of reflection. Vonnegut uses satire to force the reader to take a second look at the world and society around them, and to realize that reality and absurdity really are not very different at all. He also addresses weighty issues, like death, violence, and humanity's flaws, with a comic irreverence that puts them in a new and unexpected perspective. And while the books are humorous, the humor has a dark undercurrent, because the reader realizes that it is grounded in truth: the black humor and satire is used in *Breakfast of Champions* and *Cat's Cradle* to parody and condemn modern American society, religion, and science.

The events in his life that planted the seeds of Vonnegut's outlook, that of cynicism tempered by humor, are clear. Vonnegut was born into a wealthy family in Indiana, but one that fell on hard times during the depression, so he understood the economic and social plight of the average Midwesterner. His books frequently refer back to the Midwest: *Breakfast of Champions* is set in the city of Midlands City, Indiana. This portrayal of the run-down manufacturing city marred by population is clearly one shaped by Vonnegut's time in similar places during his childhood. He attended Cornell before enlisting in the army in 1942. During training, he got a pass to go home for Mother's Day, only to find his mother had committed suicide the night before with an intentional overdose of sleeping pills. (Kurt Vonnegut, *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*) This bleak irony, along with his experiences during the war, surely contributed to his often cynical and dark view of mankind and of the world in general. As a soldier in Germany,

he was captured and held as a prisoner of war in the city of Dresden, a cultural capital that was totally destroyed by the Allies in a firebombing while Vonnegut was held there. 130,000 civilians died in the bombing, which occurred so close to the end of the war that the prevailing view, and certainly the one that Vonnegut held, was that it was entirely unnecessary. The irony of being bombed by his own country fighting a war that was already essentially over was certainly not lost on Vonnegut, and it undoubtedly contributed to his signature gallows humor. He witnessed firsthand the unbelievable carnage caused by war, which both formed the basis for his pacifist views. Dresden, and the knowledge that the government that he was fighting for could inflict such suffering on civilians, certainly was the cause of much of his distrust of authority. The influence of this experience is evident not only in *Slaughterhouse V*, which deals directly with the firebombing, but also works like *Cat's Cradle* and *Breakfast of Champions*, which skewer powerful institutions like the church and the American government. At the same time, while the subject matter of his works is dark, the tone is not, because Vonnegut approaches these subjects with scathing wit and cynical humor. Post-war, Vonnegut worked in public relations for General Electric, during a period of rapid technological advances that were quickly changing the lives of ordinary people. This subject, influenced undoubtedly by his work with GE, forms a basis for many of his novels. In both *Cat's Cradle* and *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut mocks the naivety of embracing the technological revolution of which he was previously a paid proponent. (Kurt Vonnegut, *Newsmakers*)

In *Cat's Cradle* the framework in which Vonnegut most directly conveys his barbs at authority and playfully fatalistic view is through Bokomonism, a self-consciously

ridiculous and satirical take on religion, and its founder, the “holy man” Bokonon. In a sense, the views exposed by Bokonon are Vonnegut’s own. At the center of the religion is the idea that mankind is always searching for a higher truth, but will never find it. The *Book of Bokonon*, the holy text of the religion, pretends to offer truths, but prefaces them with a disclaimer, which is the first line of the text: “Don’t be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but *foma*! (*Cat’s Cradle* 174)” In the language of the imaginary nation of San Lorenzo, where much of the novel takes place, *foma* means lies. Paradoxically, what the reader comes to see as the sole source of truth in the novel is the religion that bluntly states that it is founded on lies. Many of the lessons of the novel are presented as humorous excerpts from the *Book of Bokonon*. For example, the creation story of Bokononism is that when God made man, man asked what the purpose of everything, and got the response “Everything must have a purpose? Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this.” (*Cat’s Cradle* 174) Still, despite its inherent paradoxes, and in contrast to most of the characters in the novel, the followers of Bokonon seem to be content with their lives, showing the reader that Vonnegut believes their worldview to be the ideal.

While a religion is therefore held up as a good way of looking at the world, Bokononism is so different from any real religions that it serves as a way of mocking religions like Christianity. Bokonon, and by extension Vonnegut, looks at efforts to find truth and certainty through organized religion as foolish. One example of this is a story that Bokonon tells of a religious woman that he met in Rhode Island. He describes how she “claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly... She believed God liked people in sailboats much better than He liked people in motorboats. She could not bear to look at a worm. When she saw a worm, she screamed. She was a fool, and so am

I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing (*Cat's Cradle* 7).” This is a classic example of Vonnegut using humor to both advance his point and soften the blow of a controversial viewpoint. While he is on one hand making fun of one woman and her overinflated sense of importance, he is also pointing that while she is a fool, so is everyone else who thinks they understand God, or the world as a whole. While the woman is a caricature, the reader realizes that her flaw, in her confidence about right and wrong and the meaning of everything, is a flaw that is shared by much of humankind. It is also clearly a criticism of religions, because the purpose of religion (with the exception of Bokononism) is to try to understand God and the meaning of the universe. Vonnegut takes a much different view of the path to happiness, exemplified by the last rites of the Bokononist religion. In the last rites, the dying person declared how God made man out of mud, and “I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around. Lucky me, lucky mud... Now mud lies down again and goes back to sleep. What memories for mud to have! What interesting other kinds of sitting-up mud I met! I loved everything I saw! (*Cat's Cradle* 146-147)” This acceptance of death on Vonnegut’s part could be a reaction to all the death that he faced in his life, including his mother’s suicide and the war. The seriousness of religion is also derided: nothing in Bokononism is serious. One of the Books of Bokonon describes what is referred to as “pool-pah,” which is translated by Bokonon alternatively as “the wrath of god” and “shit storm,” in a classic example of Vonnegut’s use of humor to both parody the solemnity of institutions like religion, and make a commentary about the state of the world: in Bokononist views, everything is the “pool-pah.”

Religion is not the only target of ridicule, however. Science also serves as a way of providing people with answers, and, therefore, is mocked as well. At one point the main character of the book, John, has a conversation with a bartender and a prostitute about how they read something about how science discovered the secret of life, but none of them can remember what exactly it was, before the bartender recalls that it was “something about protein (*Cat’s Cradle* 20).” The humor of the situation-- that something as significant as the “secret of life” could be brought up in passing in conversation at a bar, and forgotten-- proves that this discovery does not provide any true meaning or comfort to any of the characters. It is implied that something as impersonal as protein, or science in general, can never hope to answer complex questions about the meaning or purpose of life, because those questions are unanswerable. It is seen as foolish to aspire to derive meaning about people and life from anything, especially from a science experiment. The focus of the scenes involving science in the novel is the man who invented the atomic bomb, and this serves as an important backdrop for considering the merits of scientific research. When the director of the lab where the bomb was developed states his view that “the more truth we have to work with, the richer we become,” (*Cat’s Cradle* 31) John points out that that statement would make a Bokononist laugh, and the reader has to agree. This perspective on science and technology is clearly influenced by Vonnegut’s time at GE, during which he realized how hollow the “progress” that he was trying to sell truly was. In another part of the story, we are given the views of the people of San Lorenzo on scientific progress. They don’t find it at all important or impressive, with one exception: they are fascinated by the electric guitar. Interestingly, this means that to the islanders the only benefit of scientific progress is that it helps them create

music. That's not to suggest that Vonnegut views music (or anything else) as transcendent, but it does bring enjoyment, which to him is the best that anyone can hope for.

In the end, however, Vonnegut does not lay the blame for the folly of trying to understand the universe on the shoulders of either science or religion. It is considered a fault of human nature, and the fundamental arrogance, curiosity, and self-destructive nature of mankind. Bokonon, and by extension Vonnegut, summarizes his views of humanity in the fourteenth *Book of Bokonon*, entitled "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?" (*Cat's Cradle* 162). The book is only one word long: "Nothing." Given that the novel ends with the end of the world as the result of human stupidity, this seems to be an accurate assessment. In Vonnegut's opinion, humans are by nature troubled creatures because we naturally desire what we cannot hope to find: a reason or purpose for life. A rhyme in the Book of Bokonon sums up the situation: "Tiger got to hunt, bird got to fly; Man got to sit and wonder, 'Why, why, why?' Tiger got to sleep, bird got to land, Man got to tell himself he understand. (*Cat's Cradle* 121)" Vonnegut is humorously suggesting that while the quest for meaning is a fundamentally human impulse, it can only be avoided through self-delusion.

Breakfast of Champions focus's on another flawed aspect of human nature—the materialism and greed that was and still is characteristic of the culture of the United States. To highlight the lunacy of this way of thinking, he humorously simplifies it to its most fundamental components. As with many of Vonnegut's satirical themes, it is introduced in the form of a short story by the main character, the science fiction writer

Kilgore Trout. Trout, like many of Vonnegut's other characters, including the protagonist of *Cat's Cradle* (like Vonnegut a Cornell-educated writer), is clearly autobiographical to some degree. In Trout's story, the Hawaiian Islands are purchased by a small group of people, who now own all of the land. This obviously creates problems for the remaining millions of residents, because "the law of gravity required that they stick somewhere on the surface" but the issue is solved when the government gives a huge helium balloon to each of the non-land owners, so "with the help of the balloons, Hawaiians could go on inhabiting the islands without always sticking to things other people owned (*Breakfast of Champions* 74)." Obviously the premise of the story is absurd, but Vonnegut uses that extreme example to point out to the reader how silly it is for anyone to be able to "own" a piece of the world. The use of Trout's stories is a repeated tool throughout the novel, because it allows Vonnegut to create fictional worlds that are inherently nonsensical, but which provide insight into the real world by not being as different from it as they first appear.

Another instance in which dark humor is used to condemn the greed of American society is in an intentionally oversimplified summary of the history of the United States, and the current state of the world. Vonnegut describes how the country was founded by European settlers, or, as he calls them, "sea pirates." He explains the colonization of the Americas thusly: "The chief weapon of the sea pirates was their capacity to astonish. Nobody else could believe, until it was much too late, how heartless and greedy they were (*Breakfast of Champions* 12)." In the next sentence, he points out that now America, the country that the sea pirates founded, at this point had become "by far the richest and most powerful county on the planet. It had most of the food and minerals and

machinery, and it disciplined other countries by threatening to shoot big rockets at them (*Breakfast of Champions* 12).” It is a childish interpretation of the world, but it is not far from the truth, and Vonnegut plays with that to highlight his point about the flawed nature of American society. Rather than trying to create a complex argument about complex topics such as materialism and capitalism, he simplifies to a comically basic level, often catching the reader off-guard (as in the case of referring to European explorers as “sea pirates”) and forcing him or her to think about why or why not his simplistic representation is accurate. All of American consumerist society is thus encapsulated in the some of the simplest of sentences: “Everybody in America was supposed to grab whatever he could and hold onto it. Some Americans were very good at grabbing and holding, were fabulously well-to-do. Others couldn’t get their hands on doodley-squat (*Breakfast of Champions* 13).” While the reader can smile at the humor inherent in such a simplification, it is an effective means of conveying Vonnegut’s message about greed and consumerism because it is so simple, and because it changes the perspective of the reader by presenting the subject in a new and humorous light. And the childish diction serves to suggest to the reader that the situation is both simplistic and childish.

Another aspect of American society that is satirized is the prevalence of violence. The book was written during the Vietnam War, and not long after the assassination of President Kennedy, and Vonnegut condemns both humankind and Americans in particular for the constant presence of violence in society. His own horrific experiences during the firebombing of Dresden serve to inform his pacifist views, and lend him a good deal of credibility when discussing the atrocity that is war, and violence in general.

His preferred rhetorical device when discussing senseless violence is again the oversimplification of the situation, which serves to highlight its absurdity and amplify the sense of senselessness. On the issue of gun violence, he describes how “Sometimes a wife would get so mad at her husband that she would but a hole in him with a gun. Sometimes a husband would get so mad at his wife that he would put a whole in her. And so on... Sometimes people would put holes in famous people so they could be at least fairly famous too (*Breakfast of Champions* 50).” The matter-of-factness of the statement intentionally jars with the tragedy of what is described, provoking anger from the reader—exactly the response that Vonnegut wanted to elicit. By describing murder so callously, he is mirroring the reaction that the society as a whole has to violence—that it is simply an unfortunate fact of life—and asking his audience to question whether a humane society should view violence that way. He also satirizes the Vietnam War by describing Vietnam as “a country where American was trying to make people stop being communists by dropping things on them from airplanes (*Breakfast of Champions* 88).” The parallel to Dresden is again strong in this reference to air bombings, even if the war is different. And by using that phrasing, Vonnegut makes the whole conflict seem ridiculous, which is precisely the point he is trying to convey.

The backdrop of the novel is Midland City, a dirty town located on the banks of a filthy river, and the degradation of the environment as the result of industrial advances is a central part of the book. The ironically named Sugar Creek is slowly turning to cellophane as a result of pollution, and the bleak portrayal of the state of nature persists throughout the novel. In a scene that takes place in the ruins that are the coal mines of West Virginia, Vonnegut acerbically notes that the “demolition of West Virginia had

taken place within the approval of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the State Government, which drew their power from the people. Here and there an inhabited dwelling still stood (*Breakfast of Champions* 123).” The description is reminiscent of that of a post-apocalyptic world, and that final sentence is unexpected enough to introduce a bit of black humor into the depiction—the reader knows that there are people living in West Virginia, but Vonnegut phrases it as if this is a surprising occurrence. Despite the tongue-in-cheek presentation, it is clear that Vonnegut views the situation as genuinely that grave, which puts the situation in a darker light.

Perhaps the best examples of satire and dark humor as weapons in the lampooning of American society are where Vonnegut leaves the physical effects of that society—wealthy and poverty, violence, pollution—and focuses on the emotional effects that society has on its people. None of the characters in the novel seem to be able to find any purpose to life in the changed world that they inhabit, and their hopelessness is encapsulated in two short anecdotes introduced by the character of Kilgore Trout. The first is what Trout deems would be an appropriate engraving on his tombstone: “Somebody. Sometime to Sometime. He tried (*Breakfast of Champions* 38).” This is an excellent example of the use of black humor to address an important question about life and death. Vonnegut is suggesting that in the society that we live in, the best thing that can be said about a man is that “he tried,” and is inviting his audience to contemplate whether that is worthy epitaph for a man. The other humorous musing on the meaning of life in American society comes from a Kilgore Trout short story. It consists of conversation between two yeast cells. “They were discussion the possible purposes of life as they ate sugar and suffocated in their own excrement. Because of their limited

intelligence, they never guessed that they were making champagne (*Breakfast of Champions* 214).” In this story, the pieces of yeast are a metaphor for the residents of Midlands City, and the country as a whole. As they struggle to find a meaning to life (which will eventually prove beyond their comprehension), they destroy the environment they live in and end up destroying themselves, much in the same way that the inhabitants of Midlands City are doing.

Vonnegut generally uses satire and dark humor to approach a complex issue in a new light. In *Cat's Cradle* the point he argues that the pursuit of an ultimate truth or higher purpose in life is unproductive, because there either is no absolute truth, or if there is it is impossible for us to find it. And in *Breakfast of Champions* the issue is American society, and he is rather scathing in his criticism of it. The humor makes the arguments presented in the novel much more compelling because it convinces the reader to change their perspective by presenting the arguments in an entirely unexpected way. Generally, Vonnegut does this in one of two ways: either by creating an absurd scenario, and then demonstrating how similar it actually is to reality, or by simplifying reality until it is clear how absurd it really is. And while the reader may laugh at the ridiculousness of the imaginary scenarios or oversimplifications, Vonnegut ensures that they are similar enough to the real world to prove his point: that there really is no difference between his obviously absurd situations and reality.

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