INDETERMINATE MANTRAS
FINDING AUTONOMY IN SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE AND A CLOCKWORD ORANGE

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It is easy to interpret Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* as cynical and pessimistic novels. The profusion of graphic images involving death, gang violence, and war make it difficult to walk away from either text with a hopeful outlook for the future of mankind. Thus, many literary critics label Vonnegut and Burgess as fatalists who argue for an acceptance of deterministic forces that eventually cause humans harm and suffering. However, other critics, such as Liu Hong, Wayne McGinnis, Todd Davis, and Kenneth Womack, all contend that at the end of the day Vonnegut and Burgess offer an opinion of humanity that is hopeful and encouraging. To these critics, the authors ultimately argue that the individual has the ability to determine their own fate in a horrific and often hurtful world. The standard debate concerning these two revolutionary authors has thus been one between a message of either hope or disparagement. It is a debate that has long been discussed among literary critics and continues to be an ever-changing discussion.

My contention is that both Vonnegut and Burgess each create a body of work that offers the reader hope, empowerment, and an optimistic outlook of a future that is better than their present, or rather the present setting of their characters. Thus, I agree with critics like McGinnis, who calls *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut's "most hopeful novel to date" (McGinnis 121), or Davis and Womack, who find that *A Clockwork Orange's* protagonist ultimately finds a hopeful and optimistic conclusion in embarking "…upon a lifetime of familial commitment and human renewal." (Davis, Womack 34). However, the way in which both Vonnegut and Burgess present these towering moral statements is paradoxical to the ultimate message itself. In other words, the author's strongly contend that autonomy is the essence of the humanity, yet they rob their readers of any agency by using language as a manipulative tool. More specifically, the authors use specific repetitive phrases, or what I will define as mantras, to guide and manipulate the reader's interpretation of the novel. The authors therefore create a seemingly inconsistent reading experience in which they produce a message completely contradictory to their authorial technique in order to force the reader into thinking like the sociopaths and unlikely protagonists they write about. This manipulation over the reader mitigates the horrors they discuss in detail, illustrates that all humans are frighteningly close to being sociopaths, and finally, emphasizes the

proposal that choice and free will define humanity by awakening the reader to their own self-autonomy.

Slaughterhouse-Five and *A Clockwork Orange* are vastly different in their settings, plots, characterizations, and authorial tones. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a fictional account of the bombing of Dresden in WWII, a massacre Vonnegut himself survived. The story follows Billy Pilgrim, an American POW, as he is captured and detained in the cellar in a slaughterhouse during the infamous raid. Billy, like Vonnegut, survives the massacre that kills over 135,000 German civilians - more than are killed when the US drops bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the war, Billy becomes an optometrist and travels to an alien planet called Tralfamadore. However, none of these events happen sequentially. Throughout the novel, Billy becomes "unstuck in time" and as he uncontrollably time travels in and out of moments in his life, Vonnegut creates a cyclical and disjointed plot line. Burgess contrastingly uses a linear plotline to construct *A Clockwork Orange*. The novel follows Alex, a teenager living in the near-future England, through his life of "ultra-violence". Once he is sentenced to prison for murder, Alex undergoes a behavior-modification treatment called The Ludovico Technique, which essentially makes him nauseous at the very thought of violence, thus stripping him of free will.

However different these plotlines may be, the authors of these novels both argue for a critically similar message – that is that the essence of humanity is defined by one's autonomy, or the ability to choose for oneself. For example, in *Slaughterhouse-Five,* Billy Pilgrim converses with the Tralfamadorians about deterministic philosophy and the universe. In this conversation one alien says to Billy, "If I hadn't spent so much time studying Earthlings, I wouldn't have any idea what was meant by 'free will'. I've visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will." (Vonnegut 86). This alien reveals that not only does his species believe in deterministic forces, but that human beings alone, out of all the beings in the universe, are the only ones to believe in free will. Through the alien's characterization, Vonnegut points out how the belief in free will is a distinctly human characteristic. The Tralfamadorian is an alien and thus intrinsically embodies the role of "the other" by nature, and thus his objection to anti-deterministic notions marks free will as a distinctly human characteristic.

Burgess also addresses this notion that free will and autonomy are distinct characteristics that distinguish humans from machines, animals, and other beings. In the beginning of the novel, Alex asserts his free will by leading a life of violence and impiety. His actions are drastically immoral, but they are his own individual choices, and while he makes such choices he is happy and at peace with his human nature. Eventually, the government-exposes Alex to its "Ludovico Technique", which causes him to associate violence with intense nausea. Listening to his beloved classical music also makes Alex fall into nausea. Once released from prison, Alex cannot revert back to his two favorite activities, violence and

listening to classical music, because he will become irrevocably nauseous when simply thinking about them. In short, he looses free will and thus looses all essence of humanity and purpose in his life. Alex becomes so distraught over his loss of individual choice that he considers suicide. Sardonically, he cannot follow through with these violent suicidal thoughts because he becomes severely ill at the thought of it. In short, Alex's suicidal thoughts prove that a life without free will is not a life worth living. In a quote from Burgess's own account of the novel, Burgess claims,

> "The state has succeeded in its primary aim: to deny Alex's free moral choice, which, to the state, means choice of evil. But it has added an unforeseen punishment: the gates of heaven are closed to the boy, since music is a figure of celestial bliss. The state has committed a double sin: it has destroyed a human being, since humanity is defined by freedom or moral choice, it has also destroyed an angel (Ray, 1981)."

Essentially, Burgess argues that a human being is legitimized only when they can choose between good and moral acts. Which moral road they choose is of little relevance, but rather it is the fact that they make their own choices that makes them distinctly human. Without this choice, Burgess implies that humans will become like the Alex of Part II– an empty and despondent droid going through the motions of life.

Not only do Vonnegut and Burgess make similar arguments in their very different novels, but in order to convey this notion of autonomy as the essence of humanity the authors also use a similar linguistic device: a repetitive mantra. To analyze how these mantras function as manipulative tools through their indeterminate nature, it is important to first distinguish the definition of a mantra and explore their presence within the novels.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a mantra is a constantly or monotonously repeated phrase or sentence, or a characteristic formula or refrain (mantra, *Oxford English Dictionary)*. In all three novels, the authors use a specific phrase over and over again purposefully and tactfully to introduce a theme, image, or even chapter. Burgess continuously asks at the beginning of each chapter, "What's it going to be then, eh?" which functions as a question for both Alex and the reader. It is a question that asks the reader to choose between good and evil, while reminding the reader of the sacredness of individual moral choice. Vonnegut repeats the phrase "So it goes", which on its own seems like a hopeless admission of defeat to deterministic forces, or rather it seems to imply that bad things happen that we cannot control. Vonnegut uses this phrase repeatedly, actually 106 times, to announce death within the novel. Because of their monotonously repeated appearances, I define these phrases as mantras. Their constant repetition becomes something of a beat or pulsation that palpitates our reading of the novels. For Vonnegut, the army drafts Billy into WWII and he sees everyone around him die. "So

it goes". The Germans kill 135,000 people in the bombing at Dresden. "So it goes". For Burgess, Alex implements havoc as a violent teenager; he rapes, steals, commits murder, and then asks the reader: "What's it going to be then, eh?" The state arrests him and forces him to undergo a violent, experimental treatment, and then he asks the reader: "What's it going to be then, eh?" He has to choose between ending his life or living in inescapable misery, and then he asks the reader: "What's it going to be then, eh?" These horrific events are thus presented to the reader in a syncopated style over the course of each novel. We accept horrific images and events, one right after the other, and even come to expect them because we come to expect the mantra's appearance. Like one may anticipate a rhythmic beat after hearing it repeated within a song, the syncopated beat of the mantra allows us to anticipate or pass over the coming gruesome images within the novels.

Numerous critics have attempted to define these mantras, or what they refer to as repetitive phrases. Most critics of *Slaughterhouse Five* regard it as a lamentation of death. McGinnis for example finds that the mantra is presented "…ritualistically throughout the novel whenever any death, no matter how trivial, is mentioned…" (McGinnis 116). He contends that the most important function of "So it goes" is that it offers a cyclical quality to the novel both in form and content (McGinnis 116). Scott MacFarlane in his essay "*Slaughterhouse-Five (1969):* So it Goes" notes that over the course of the novel, "…the phrase begins to mount like a death toll." (MacFarlane 148). Liu Hong in his essay "The Perplexing Choice in Existence Predicament: An Existential Interpretation of Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange"*, notes that the novel's question is "…an offer for Alex to make his own choices." (Hong 30). Thus, the mantras associations with death and suffering, or with free will and choice, are clear. The mantras are also specifically structured in terms of their appearances in the novel and in terms of the rhythm they offer the novels as a whole. However, these mantras are not fixed in meaning. In fact, they are indeterminate. While each mantra may have a significant association, these associations can only be definitive to a certain extent; at their core, they are purposefully vague and unfixed in meaning.

An example of the mantra's indeterminacy appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five* after Billy's daughter's wedding when Vonnegut writes:

> Billy Pilgrim padded downstairs on his blue and ivory feet. He went into the kitchen, where the moonlight called his attention to a half bottle of champagne on the kitchen table, all that was left from the reception in the tent. Somebody had stoppered it again. "Drink me," it seemed to say. So Billy uncorked it with his thumbs. It didn't make a pop. The champagne was dead. So it goes. (Vonnegut 73)

It is in this passage that the reader begins to see Vonnegut's language not as a fixed meaning of death and grief, but rather as an indeterminate apparatus that offers us guidance. Up to this point

in the text, the reader has come to associate the mantra "So it goes" with death, dying, and tragedy. For example, in the opening chapter to the novel, Vonnegut writes Billy's trip with his fellow optometrists saying, "The plane crashed on top of Sugarbush Mountain, in Vermont. Everybody was killed but Billy. So it goes. When Billy was recuperating in a hospital in Vermont, his wife died accidentally of carbon monoxide poisoning. So it goes." (Vonnegut 25) Later on in the novel, Vonnegut writes about the German's candles and soaps that "…were made from the fat of rendered Jews and Gypsies and fairies and communists, and other enemies of the State. So it goes." (Vonnegut 96). These are just two examples of disaster and death preceding the mantra. Yet, in the passage above, the mantra and the "dead" champagne bottle are connected, which in comparison to the heavy subject matter of the novel, hardly even qualifies as an unfortunate incident. Still, Vonnegut uses the same tone and structure for this passage that he does in all the other passages about tragedy. Therefore, we recognize the bottle's lack of carbonation like we recognize the many deaths throughout the novel – with a regrettable, but passive acceptance. Ultimately, this moment speaks to the indeterminacy of Vonnegut's language in that the mantra now acts as a placeholder. The mantra's contingency with tragic death is shattered, and the vagueness of Vonnegut's language is illuminated. While there is poignancy in Vonnegut's association of the mantra with death, it does not have a fixed meaning. If it can be coupled with a flat bottle of alcohol as well as the death of thousands, then the mantra is destabilized as a fixed meaning.

Vonnegut actually explains in *Palm Sunday*, a collection of unpublished essays and short stories, that "So it goes" was, "… a clumsy way of saying…'death and suffering can't matter as much as I think they do. Since they are so common, my taking them so seriously must mean that I am insane. I must try to be saner." (Palm Sunday 296). Here Vonnegut actually confesses that through the use of the mantra he attempts to desensitize death and suffering. In his words, to do so is to actually be "saner". In his essay "Breaking the Silence", Donald E. Morris analyzes Vonnegut's explanation and argues that Vonnegut uses "So it goes" as a "…phrase to deal with commonplace death and suffering on a horrific scale." (Morse 87). I disagree with Morris' application of Vonnegut's words, for while Vonnegut clearly wanted to desensitize death and suffering, the mantra puts *large-scale* death and suffering on a *small* scale, not the other way around. Vonnegut writes about the 135,000 who die in Dresden, the 5,000,000 Allied lives who die to defeat Nazism, the 71, 379 who died in Hiroshima. These are not "commonplace" deaths as Morse notes; they are tragic, large-scale calamities that Vonnegut wants to consider without serious thought. However, it is only through the mantra's indeterminacy that we are able to brush them off liberally.

Without the connection to of the mantra to the dead champagne bottle and other insignificant "deaths", such as the "dead animal fat" that oils a cart (Vonnegut 157), then the mantra in *Slaughterhouse-Five* would be contingent upon large-scale death and massacres. If this were the case, the mantra would be an all-encompassing signifier of moments where we should grieve, mourn, or even cry out for the fragility of humanity. At the very least, the reader would read, "So it goes", and know that something awful and heartrending has just taken place. As Mac-Farlane says, it would be a "death toll" that readers not only recognize, but also take the time to stop, listen to, and understand the meaning of. But this doesn't happen, in fact, as Vonnegut's quote reveals, Vonnegut intends for us to ignore these massacres in order to be "saner". "So it goes" becomes a passive, almost dormant, phrase that does not demand our grief or respect, but rather it makes us pass over the subject matter it alludes to. Through this indeterminacy, we recognize a bottle's lack of carbonation in the same way we recognize the death of heroic soldiers, innocent civilians, and even Martin Luther King, Jr. Thus, the mantra is specifically unfixed in meaning because Vonnegut is forcing his reader to become numb to death and suffering.

Burgess's mantra offers some symmetry to the novel, but is still indeterminate. Burgess opens Part I, II, and III of the novel by asking "What's it going to be then, eh?" In Part I, the question is authentic because Alex is able to answer it for himself. He makes his own choices and individually decides the answer to this question, though usually the answer is acts of violence and a path of immorality. For example, Burgess opens the novel with the mantra "What's it going to be then, eh?" and in the next few pages, Alex takes drugs with his fellow "droogies", or friends, and then proceeds to walk out into the street and brutally torment an old man walking home. Alex describes this moment saying, "Pete held his rookers and Georgie sort of hooked his rot wide open form him and Dim yanked out his false zoobies, upper and lower. He threw these down on the pavement and then I treated them to the old bootcrush…" (Burgess 7). Translated from Nadsat, Alex articulates in this passage that the boys toyed with the old man, ripped out his false teeth, threw them on the ground, and beat him. However, Burgess prefaces this violent scene with the mantra: "What's it going to be then, eh?" In doing so, Burgess portrays that Alex has a choice between these wicked acts and a life that is more morally sound. Alex chooses the immoral option, but the fact that he can make this decision for himself makes him human. Thus, the mantra at this point insinuates freedom of choice. As the critic Robbie B. H. Goh says"…the novel makes a statement about the individual's struggle (with varying degrees of sincerity and effectiveness) for authenticity under dystopian conditions of social control." (Goh 24). Goh, like other critics, finds that Burgess conveys this argument through Alex, the sardonic and atypical protagonist, and his unique Russian-like language called "Nadsat". Goh argues that Burgess "…makes language and its relationship to experience the primary political arena, and therefore the novel emphasizes the texuality of

politics, its manifestation as power over the social praxis of the individual, and its creation of a dilemma of legality and individuality" (Goh 265). Goh affirms that this question becomes fixedly associated with the dilemma between social control and individuality, or autonomy. However, this unified meaning is deconstructed in Part II of the novel.

In Part II, when the government robs Alex of his free will, he can no longer answer the mantra for himself. While in prison, the prison chaplain, or "charlie" in Nadsat, asks Alex and other prisoners "What's it going to be then, eh? Is it going to be in and out and in and out of institutions like this, though more in than out for most of you, or are you going to attend to the Divine Word and realize the punishments that await the unrepentant sinner in the next world, as well as in this?" (Burgess 77). This question, which up till this point has been distinctly associated with Alex's self-autonomy, is now destabilized in mockery. In her essay entitled *Linguistics, Mechanics, and Metaphysics: A Clockwork Orange*, Esther Petix confirms this idea in saying, "…here the chaplain asserts that good acts are moral-less if they are not done through free will, and thus the central thematic and structural interrogative of the novel comes through" (Petix, 88). Though the chaplain asks the prisoners to choose their course of action, they are completely incapable of doing so because the State is in control of their actions by incarceration and by way of the Ludovico Technique. Therefore, as Burgess's mantra becomes unfixed it goes from being Alex's choice of free will to being the state's way of controlling Alex. It does not refer singularly to Alex's autonomy, but rather is unfixed in association and meaning. By Part III, when Alex is at his lowest low, the mantra as a question is an empty one.

Thus, through vague and variable denotations, Vonnegut and Burgess's mantras are indeterminate and overall desensitize us to death and suffering. However, these undetermined mantras do not just mitigate man's horrors in the twentieth-century. They also tacitly function to manipulate the reader into thinking psychopathic thoughts, thoughts worthy of the author's anti-heroic protagonists.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess uses a combination of the mantras and Alex's made up-teenage language called "Nadsat" in order to manipulate the reader into thinking like a sociopath. The language harbors skillful puns, incorporates Russian vocabulary, and allows the reader to smoothly and unnervingly read through the novel's grotesque and offensive subject manner. At first, the vocabulary of Nadsat is incomprehensible, confusing, and unfamiliar to a reader. However, as the dust jacket of the Heinemann edition of *A Clockwork Orange* says, "…it will take the render no more than fifteen pages to master and revel in the expressive language of Nadsat." (Evans 406). At first the reader struggles and fights his or her way through the Nadsat vocabulary of droogies, devotchkas, Bog, heavenmetal, jeeznies, and zoobies. In her essay, Esther Petix suggests that in Nadsat one can find "the cadence of a

metronome and the ticking-tocking ramifications of humanity without its essence" and that Nadsat structures a "tempo" for the novel (Petix 126). Petix is right to allude to Nadsat in such musical terms. Rather quickly, and almost without knowing it, the reader comes to subtly, almost fluidly understand Alex's vocabulary. In the same way one may listen to a song and later hum it without even realizing they are doing so, so too does the reader speak Nadsat in their reading of the novel and later come to understand its meaning without a specific moment of discovery.

The mantra plays a significant role in this almost musical learning experience, for it offers some structure and familiarity amongst the confusing psychopathic jargon. The mantra "What's it going to be then, eh?" does not use specific Nadsat diction, yet it appears repeatedly throughout Alex's narration in which he speaks the language. Thus, the reader anticipates the appearance of the mantra as one of the few moments that Alex explicitly uses English. It stands out and becomes a noticeable beat amongst the cadence of Nadsat. Just as "So it goes" palpitates the reader through *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an anticipated beat, so too then does "What's it going to be then, eh?" palpitate a reading of *A Clockwork Orange.* The more times we read, "What's it going to be then, eh?" the closer we are to understanding Alex's psychopathic thoughts. Thus, through the use of Nadsat and the mantra, Burgess tricks, manipulates, and deceives the reader into understanding the language of a sociopath.

The greatest example of how Burgess achieves this duping manipulation is in Part I when Alex and his droogies pillage the home of an old man, beat him up, and rape his wife. In this scene, Burgess writes:

> "So he did the strong-man on the devotchka, who was still creech creech creeching away in very horrorshow four-in-a-bar, locking her rookers from the back, while I ripped away at this and that and the other, the others going haw haw haw still, and real good horrorshow groodies they were that then exhi - bited their pink glazzies, O my brothers, while I untrussed and got ready for the plunge." (Burgess 23)

At this point in the novel, it is possible that a first-time reader does not yet understand the language of Nadsat. For example, they might not know "devotchka" to mean "girl", "horrorshow" to mean "good", or "rookers" to mean hands. Therefore, this passage is difficult, if not near impossible, to decipher. However when translated, these words describe Alex tying up the woman by her hands, undressing her, and preparing to brutally rape her. This horrific scene is even more spine-chilling and terrifying when the reader understands Alex's excitement and delight in this act. Thus, Burgess is forcing the reader to process, take in, and digest violent and appalling images. However, the brilliance of Burgess is that he does not force these images down his reader's throat, but rather slyly offers them to the reader as if disguised as a drink that they willingly imbibe. By doing so the reader thinks as Alex would think, says

what Alex says, and experiences violent and awful thoughts without having any control over them. Burgess therefore literally robs his reader of autonomy. They do not have the freedom to choose whether they see these images or not. They are not afforded the choice between learning the language of a sociopath or holding on to their own conventional speech. The reader is instead manipulated to take in images of rape, violence, and brutality and thus robbed of their agency.

Vonnegut's protagonist is not a sociopath or sadist, like Burgess's, yet he is clearly abnormal. He does not act wickedly like Alex, or even encourage wicked acts. In fact, William Rodney Allen goes so far as to call Billy Pilgrim "the new Christ", for he preaches that humans have eternal life and accepts mortality because he knows that death is not the end (Allen 8-9). Contrary to Allen's claims, Billy's passivity to violence, death, and suffering is often disturbing. We are not so off put by his action as Alex's, but still his silence and passivity to horrific images draws our attention. For example, Billy is captured by the Germans and transported to Dresden in a boxcar where for ten days they stay there, practically stacked one on top of the other like bricks. While in transit, Billy's fellow soldiers must eat, drink, and excrete through ventilators. Billy witnesses his fellow soldier Ronald Weary die of gangrene. Billy hears a hobo exclaim, "This isn't so bad, I've seen worse." before he too dies. "So it goes", Vonnegut writes. Vonnegut describes how the rest of the soldiers exited the boxcar: "And the liquid began to flow. Gobs of it built up in the doorway, plopped to the ground." (Vonnegut 81). Billy witnesses all of these gruesome and horrible scenes and he reacts with silence. He passively does as he is told and moves on. "So it goes", Vonnegut says at the end of the passage. Thus, where Burgess makes his readers think like a sociopath, Vonnegut manipulates his readers into chinking as passively as Billy. In reading the entirety of the novel, the reader is accepting these images just as Billy does. The mantra's indeterminacy desensitizes and calms our understanding of these events. The image of soldiers starving in a boxcar, dying of gangrene, deserves just as much reflection and grief as the dead champagne bottle, or the dead animal fat used to oil a cart. We cannot mourn the former image because the mantra undermines its sadness. Essentially, this manipulation causes the reader to trudge through the novel, passing over death and suffering. It is almost as if the reader becomes like Billy in the Indian file bobbing "up-and-down, up-and-down", being pulled through the novel in a passive fashion, chapter to chapter, horror to horror, without taking a stand.

Furthermore, Vonnegut also manipulates his readers in that he asks the reader to believe in the unbelievable. As mentioned before, Billy travels in and out of time, from Earth to Tralfamadore. He is completely certain that Tralfamadore is a real planet, even though he never mentioned it till after his head trauma in the plane crash. When Billy's daughter asks him why he had never mentioned it before

the crash, intimating that his head trauma has made him delusional, Billy simply replies, "I didn't think the time was *ripe."* Thus, Billy's encounters with the alien planets as well as his commentary on his experiences all show him to be atypical. Despite the fact that time travel and alien planets are not part of our daily encounters, readers come to accept these moments through the use of the mantra. Billy shifts from Dresden in WWII, to Tralfamadore, to his daughter's wedding, to the hospital, and back to Dresden again. All the while the reader sings, "So it goes" when Vonnegut wants us to. In fact, in one encounter with the Tralfamadorians, Billy learns that "So it goes" is the philosophy of the alien species when it comes to death and dying. As previously discussed, the more the reader says the mantra, the more they accept what Vonnegut offers. This includes accepting Tralfamadore and Billy's travels as fact that is within the context of the novel. Billy is in the war and witnesses death, so it goes. Billy is in Tralfamadore and learns about his own eventual death, so it goes. The reader does not object to this sequence of events, but rather comes to think, "Ah, yes. Alien planets. So it goes." Thus, Vonnegut, like Burgess, forces and manipulates his reader into thinking like his protagonist.

Vonnegut and Burgess's greatest achievement is that they do not ask us to think like a psychopath, ask us to accept death and violence, or ask us to accept the unacceptable; through the repetition of the indeterminate mantras they *force* us to these horrors. While critics may debate between whether Vonnegut or Burgess offers hopeful or pessimistic perspectives on life, many fail to see that throughout the text they themselves are being manipulated into repeating this morbid mantra over and over in their heads. The mantras' meanings, though I have defined them as unfixed in meaning, are actually of little significance. It is the fact that the authors repeatedly make us say them in our heads that should be the focus of our attention, for every time we say them we pacify an event that deserves great mourning and respect. This manipulation is an experience the reader must go through in order to gain an understanding of the novels' larger messages.

When the reader is robbed of this autonomy, they see that it is not so hard to think like the sociopaths and submissive characters the authors write about. Basically, when we are manipulated into thinking immorally and manipulated into thinking psychopathic thoughts we see that it is not so hard or far-fetched to think like a psychopath ourselves. If we can think like they do, can we not act like they do? If we can understand their incoherent slang and thinking, what other similarities lay in store? What really makes us so different from one another? Vonnegut and Burgess offer that the answer is choice.

After having illustrated how the authors pacify moments that deserve mourning and grief, manipulate their readers into thinking psychopathic and submissive thoughts, and overall desensitize our reactions to massacres, rape, and violence, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *A Clockwork Orange* could surely be considered pessimistic novels, and certainly many critics have done so. However, in order to avoid such

an interpretation the reader must simply exercise free will, the essence of humanity and the core message of the novels. In her text *Modernist Literature: Challenging Fictions,* Vicki Mahaffey argues that all too often we are encouraged to read texts passively, for we attribute all the autonomy and authority to the author. Specifically, Mahaffey argues that, "…when we learn to read to passively, deferentially or vicariously, we become less willing to assert our values through action by calmly and reasonably defying other authority figures when they direct us to something at variance with our conscience" (Mahaffey 5). Thus, Mahaffey encourages that we be more active participants in the texts we read. Such action is imperatively necessary in reading *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *A Clockwork Orange.* If we allow Vonnegut and Burgess to manipulate our reading of the texts, then we become docile creatures who are robbed of agency, just like Alex and Billy. Yet, this is opposite of what the novels argue for; by showing us how easily we may be manipulated into losing our free will, the authors awaken us to our own self-autonomy. Unlike the authors' characters, the only larger social force robbing us of free will in the text is the author himself. Thus, we have the ability to actively engage in the reading of the novels, form our own interpretations, and win back the agency the authors stole in the first place. In her text, Mahaffey notes that how we read will affect how we treat one another and affect our ability to allow other people their differences and similarities to us. Thus, in accordance with Mahaffey's statement, if we do not read actively and with autonomy we not only deny the authors' main argument, but we jeopardize the future of humanity and the ability to live coherently with one another. In a manner of speaking, both Burgess and Vonnegut thus force us to answer the question, "What's it going to be then, eh?" We can choose to avoid the fates and experiences of the authors' characters. We can choose between good and evil just as we can choose to interpret Vonnegut and Burgess as either hopeful or disparaging authors. This is what makes us not just informed and active readers, but what makes us distinctly human

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