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“Now It Can Be Told”: Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* and Adolescent Readers

My close friend recommended Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* to me when I was in eighth grade. I plowed through the text in two or three days. I remember thinking, “Why don’t we read books like *this* in school?” The only assigned text I remember reading in eighth grade is Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. I did not specifically relate to *Twelfth Night,* but I remember being amused by the cross-dressing and the complicated love situations resulting from it. Obviously, my class read more than one book that year, but no others made a significant impression. Throughout high school, I eagerly began each newly-assigned book, hoping to find that spark I felt from *Breakfast of* Champions, but my teachers notoriously assigned unmemorable books, which I obviously cannot name, along with a few dreadfully painful reads that I do unfortunately recall, and some standout gems that I will always love. I now understand that those “dreadfully painful” novels, like Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms,* are entertaining to some (I actually enjoy Hemingway now and think my adult brain should give *Farewell* another go). I also understand that these texts both engage with and reflect upon the period in which they were written. I suppose my high school teachers wanted me to realize that those novels held historical and social significance and thought I would learn something about myself through analyzing the characters and their motivations. Unfortunately, Puritan infidelity and public shame, or a bleak World War I love affair culminating in stillbirth and the death of the mother did not mesh with what was important to my adolescent mind—I wanted authors who wrote with the language and vocabulary I used, narrators who made me feel like we were having a conversation, and characters who felt as uncomfortable in and confused by society as I did. The standout gems, like *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, offered characters who shared my defiance and my unease within society. Holden Caufield is fed up with

the phonies; Huck rebels against being "civilized" and forms a taboo interracial friendship with Jim, an escaped slave.

Like these protagonists, I, too, was fed up and already rebelling against a society that, the more I understood about it, the more it made increasingly less sense. Why did certain people in America succeed and others fail? Why, in this country, was so much importance placed upon monetary wealth and having "things"? When I began reading *Breakfast of Champions,* I noticed that the narrator is also disillusioned by America's preoccupation with materialism, image and advertising. *Breakfast of Champions* echoed my confusion and frustration with society. After consulting secondary education and literacy scholarship in research for this project, I discovered that the books that resonated with me in high school are appropriately classified as "young adult literature," a genre to which adolescents notoriously connect because of its themes. Though *Breakfast of Champions* is not considered young adult literature, I believe it possesses enough characteristics of said genre to attract adolescent readers.

Young adult literature, according to Lois Stover, specifically addresses "the problems and issues of adolescence" (118), and, according to Jeffrey Wilhelm, the genre speaks to students' lives (23). These books provide adolescents readers with strategies for navigating through life and, as such, can motivate students more than works traditionally presented in literature survey classes (Stover 118). Young adult literature typically is written specifically for and about adolescents, often attempting to answer the core question of adolescence: "Who am I?" (Stover 119; see also Nilsen and Donelson 26). In addition to addressing matters relevant to identity, young adult literature also "deals with themes and issues that mirror the concerns of the society out of which it is produced; [and] it does so in ways that help readers understand the complexities and shades of gray involved in dealing with these issues" (Stover 119-20). Books

also fall into this category when they feature protagonists who "are involved in activities with which young people identify" (Nilsen and Donelson 26), such as defining relationships and deciding the value of monetary wealth in contrast to personal fulfillment.

*Breakfast of Champions* not only explores the complexities of American culture and values but also juxtaposes grounding one's life in consumerism with eschewing the pull of materialism in pursuit of personal goals. This juxtaposition is most obvious in the novel's central characters, Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover. As an aspiring teenage writer, I found the character of Kilgore Trout, a science-fiction writer who works a day job and has his work published mostly in pornographic magazines, to be an inspiration. It may seem strange that a lonely old man who lives with his pet bird and has gained only minimal recognition would inspire a teenage girl, but I appreciated Trout's eccentric and brilliant imagination. He calls mirrors leaks, and pretends that they are "holes between two universes" (19). If only mirrors held that kind of power. I relished the idea of disappearing into another universe. I also relished the idea of having anyone other than my friends read my writing. The novel tells us that Trout eventually becomes successful and wins a Nobel Prize, which gave me hope that if I worked at what I loved and lived simply, I would achieve great things.

Great is subjective, but Dwayne Hoover, a "fabulously well-to-do" (13) car dealership owner, who is constantly in the public eye, would typically be considered "great" to the collective American mind. Hoover is the near opposite of Trout, who has "doodly-squat" (13). It seems that Hoover is living "the American Dream." He lives in what the narrator calls a dream house in the most desirable residential area of Midland City, the "Asshole of the Universe" (7). If the universe is an organism, then setting the novel in its asshole places the characters and their activities where waste is excreted. To further the metaphor, the entire United States would be the

buttocks, and the novel does indeed make the country the butt of its satirical jokes. The narrator describes "The Star Spangled Banner" as "gibberish sprinkled with question marks" (8) and "pure balderdash, like so much else [Americans] were expected to take seriously" (7). By extension, Hoover's ostensible success is also laughable. Though Hoover has money, relative power and popularity, his life is falling apart. He is slowly going mad and sent over the brink by reading and taking literally one of Trout's novels, *Now It Can Be Told*. In Trout's novel, the Creator of the Universe tells the reader that everyone else is a robot: "Dear sir, poor sir, brave sir…You are an experiment by the Creator of the Universe. You are the only creature in the entire universe who has free will. You are the only one who has to figure out what to do next—and *why*. Everybody else is a robot, a machine" (259). Hoover goes on a rampage, hurting people and destroying things, because he thinks no one else feels anything.

When Hoover takes literally Trout's words in the novel *Now It Can Be Told*, the reader is forced to evaluate Hoover's actions morally. If Hoover were the only feeling creature, would that excuse physically abusing others? If Trout did not mean to say that we could harm others at will because they won't feel anything, then what did he mean? David W. Moore and James W. Cunningham suggest that asking, in a classroom, "'If you are not responsible for your actions, then who is?' might rouse adolescents to contemplate existential issues about the choices they make. Educators can help clarify the maxim that actions have consequences, so thinking through what one decides to do is crucial" (142). Their argument validates my claim that *Breakfast of Champions* would not only be attractive to adolescents but might also be highly teachable.

Nilsen and Donelson assert that students during adolescence are not only looking egocentrically at themselves but also considering the larger circle of society (40). High school students respond well to books that "raise questions about conformity, social pressures, justice,

and other aspects of human frailties and strengths" (40). Nilsen and Donelson also summarize Lance M. Gentle and Merna M. McMillen's article, "Humor and the Reading Program," which indicates that students age 16 and up appreciate more subtle humor and witticisms than younger readers. At this stage, young adults not only accept but also prefer satire and parody (200). Appropriately, *Breakfast of Champions* is a quintessential satire, and while one does have to account for parents' reactions if their teenagers were assigned a text with explicit language and drawings, one must also contend that black humorist writers like Vonnegut appeal to young adult audiences because "they reject the boundaries between realism and fantasy" and "their writing exhibits . . . 'a nervous, an upbeat tempo, a near hysteria or frenzy'" (141) that appeals to adolescent readers. Nilsen and Donelsen specifically list Vonnegut, along with Ken Kesey and Joseph Heller, as "writer[s] for adults" whose works appeal to adolescents because they "juxtapose humor and pathos for the purpose of creating emotional tension or frustration" (141).

My own adolescent mind was frustrated and emotionally tense. I thought the things my peers valued and what the media promoted as "cool," were ridiculous. I did not understand how someone who lip-synched lyrics someone else had written while gyrating half-naked on stage was considered an artist. The kids I grew up with generally loved it, and that made me feel like I was missing something entirely, like there was something wrong with me. The comments in the Preface to *Breakfast of Champions* expressed my uncomfortable bewilderment better than I ever could: "The things that other people have put into *my* head, at any rate, do not fit together nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out of proportion with life as it really is outside my head" (Vonnegut 5). Critics call the first-person narrator Vonnegut himself, but the Preface is signed "Philboyd Studge." While Vonnegut's opinions color that which he puts forth in *Breakfast of Champions,* the author makes a clear distinction that the

narrator is someone other than himself. In identifying the narrator as someone other than himself, Vonnegut expresses his disillusionment in coping with society. Readers, especially adolescent readers struggling to define themselves as they grow into adulthood, can relate to the author's need to wear a guise in order to navigate a world that often fails to make sense.

In an interview with *Playboy* in 1973, shortly after *Breakfast of Champions* was published, Vonnegut himself said he found it "gruesome and comical that in our culture we have an expectation that a man can always solve his problems. There is an implication that if you just have a little more energy, a little more fight, the problem can always be solved. This is so untrue that it makes me want to cry—or laugh" (91). Appropriately, the reader is not sure whether to cry or laugh at some of the situations in *Breakfast of Champions*. Early in the novel, the narrator is able to convey an air of humor despite the horrifying truth of the "discovery" of America: "The sea pirates were white. The people who were already on the continent when the pirates arrived were copper-colored. When slavery was introduced onto the continent, the slaves were black. Color was everything" (11). Humor in *Breakfast of Champions* serves as a way to deal with the abhorrent, like the slaughter of Native Americans and enslavement of Africans. Some may find it obscene to even chuckle at genocide. It seems the point is not to offend, but rather to draw attention to the reality of the racially and economically motivated injustice prevalent in United States history, an exercise that will encourage adolescent students to critically think about themselves and the world around them.

Given the way that *Breakfast of Champions* both changed my life at such a formative age and continues to affect me in my adulthood, I believe it to be a powerful novel worthy of introduction at the high school level. *Breakfast of Champions* encourages questioning the system and plays with the idea of free thought. How adolescent students choose to exercise their free

will will shape the person they become. Will they choose to accept what is presented to them at face value, or will they dig deeper? If they buy the gyrating lip-syncher's album, will it be because they truly enjoy the sound, or because they need it on their playlist like all their classmates? Vonnegut's biographer, Charles Shields, said in an interview with National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* that when young people read one of Vonnegut's works, "they get the sense that an older person is leveling with them, that someone appreciates the dilemmas that they're feeling" (Shields). Though young adult literature is typically written for an about adolescents, creating a sense of camaraderie with a text is a key feature of popular young adult literature, and adolescents are certainly facing the dilemma of defining who they are and who they will become within American society. I believe that experiencing *Breakfast of Champions* in adolescence, a time when one's mind is extremely curious, questioning and rebellious, can shape an open-minded and inquisitive adult. Though *Breakfast of Champions* is not traditionally considered a young adult literature text, I contend that the novel holds developmental and literary value for adolescent readers.

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