This thesis is a study of the shifting philosophical trends in the works of Samuel Beckett, Donald Barthelme, and Kurt Vonnegut as representations of a greater shift from modernism to postmodernism. I have chosen to explore Beckett’s plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Barthelme’s short stories “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” “The New Music,” and “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegal,” and Vonnegut’s book *Timequake* to see how each author seeks to find a new hope in the face of a collapsed causal system. This work is an examination of the form and content of each author’s work as it pertains to their own philosophical standing and in relation to the other two authors’ works. I argue that each author finds a different hope for humanity depending on their place among the philosophical trends during their time.
Beckett, Barthelme, and Vonnegut: Finding Hope in Meaninglessness

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Alex M. Britten, Author
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This thesis is dedicated to my loving husband, Casey, who maintains a positive outlook on life no matter how gloomy it may seem.
BECKETT, BARTHÉLME, AND VONNEGUT: FINDING HOPE IN MEANINGLESSNESS

Alex Britten
1. Introduction

Samuel Beckett, Donald Barthelme, and Kurt Vonnegut all confront the possibility of an objectively meaningless humanity. The idea of an objectively meaningless humanity or *meaninglessness*--as it will be referred to in this paper--is a multilayered concept that embraces the “highly probabilistic and uncertain nature of our knowledge of the causal role in society” (Kern 302). Meaninglessness resulted from a series of historical philosophical trends, best summarized by Stephen Kern, including “the death of the author (in addition to the death of God); skepticism about objectivity, progress, and grand historical narratives; the conflation of the real and the fake;…deconstruction, dispersal, and indeterminism; [and] the end of certainty…are historically distinctive elements of the modernist and postmodernist world that shattered Victorian notions about authority, morality, and causality” (303). These philosophical trends can be seen in the works of Beckett, Barthelme, and Vonnegut as representations of a greater movement that was happening in Europe and the U.S. from the 1950’s to the present: a transition from modernism to postmodernism and from structuralism to post-structuralism. Their works reveal influences to varying degrees by Lacan and Kristeva, Kant and Lyotard, Kierkegaard, Burke, and Derrida, as well as by Nietzschean and French existentialism. Beckett, Barthelme, and Vonnegut all question the next step for humanity in the face of meaninglessness. The collapsed causal system is paralyzing for Beckett, liberating for Barthelme, and necessary for free will for Vonnegut. The evolution of thought throughout the works of these three authors reflects the changing philosophical trends throughout the post-World War II generations.
The nothingness in Beckett’s plays is meant to capture what Lacan refers to as the “real,” which is pre-linguistic and “beyond the symbolic,” and which is the undifferentiated nature of our reality (Evans 162). Additionally, Beckett's plays strive to achieve nothingness as a medium towards Kant's sublime. The sublime is a consciousness of human awareness. Beckett argues that the collapse of causality underscores humanity’s futility, but that the sublime can offer hope as an intrinsically human experience.

In contrast to Beckett, Barthelme believes that “human beings are complex, dynamic systems that self-activate and interact with their environment to create novelty” and that our ability to create and perform offers a distraction from meaninglessness (302). Barthelme argues that meaninglessness is an opportunity for play and creativity, echoing Derrida’s “free play,” which implies a decentered universe (Barry 91). Through free play, Barthelme hopes to reach Burke’s “delight” which is the wonder of the human spirit.

Vonnegut also sees meaninglessness as an opportunity, but unlike Barthelme he feels that creativity is not enough. For Vonnegut, meaninglessness is a call to take responsibility for our own existence and to create causality within a social context. He adopts Kristeva’s “object-relations humanism” which focuses the social and material aspect of humanity rather than the philosophical (Birns 143).

Beckett, Barthelme, and Vonnegut draw different conclusions from the collapse of causality, partially due to their place in history, but all three authors strive to offer hope in the light of meaninglessness.
2. **Overview**

Samuel Beckett was one of the prominent writers in the 1940’s and 1950’s heading the transition from modernism to postmodernism; his work was rooted in many modernist and structuralist theories and techniques. Beckett adopts the minimalist and reflexive nature of modernist writing, and the concept of the real ties his work to the structuralist belief that there is an undifferentiated reality underneath our fragmented symbolic structures. He rejects objectivity by moving away from conventional narratives, omniscient narrators, and closed endings and towards the abstract (Barry 83). Beckett however denies a crucial aspect of modernism which is that there is any value in creating subjective meaning. He believes that to create subjective meaning is to comfort oneself with performance instead of accepting the real. Amelia Jones writes that “as Nietzsche and other Modernists have recognized…the performativity of the subject characterize[es] the shift from a Modernist to a Postmodernist episteme” (112). Beckett holds onto the hope that by stripping away all performance and limiting symbols we can find the real in nothingness. Beckett’s nothingness is a space free of artifice or distraction; it is meant to reproduce Lacan’s real in order to bring his audience to the traumatic realization of the sublime. Kant’s sublime is a result of this realization and of our trying to harmonize the symbolic and the real. It is, says Lyotard, “a pleasure that comes from pain.” It occurs “when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept…the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept” (Lyotard 43-46). The sublime is the ever-present now which “seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel” but can never be demonstrated (Lyotard 249). Beckett hopes that by experiencing the
sublime, the audience will gain a greater sense of human-awareness and connectedness in their futility. Rose Pfeffer writes, “We detect Nietzsche’s tragic spirit in [Beckett’s] plays…in [Beckett’s attempt] to come to terms with the absurdity of human existence, and in [his effort] to preserve human dignity in the face of a reality that seems paradoxical and senseless” (65). The “tragic view” in Beckett’s plays springs from Nietzsche’s “admirable pessimism of the strong” in which the strong have come to terms with their futility (Solomon and Higgins 125). Beckett strives to present a space in which his audience can experience the real untouched by false causality and alienating symbols. In this space he presents a spectrum of emotions, from the lightest feeling of laughter to the darkest despair, to acknowledge the pleasure out of pain of the sublime. The sublime derives from the traumatic experience of being able to conceptualize the real and its implications of meaninglessness, but being unable to imagine it because the real is pre-linguistic and therefore pre-symbolic. Beckett's plays reveal the stagnating effects of a collapsed causal system, but “the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening,” so they also offer human empowerment in our great capacity for conceptualization (Lyotard 251). His plays act as conduits for his audience to experience the real and to accept their futility, but Beckett’s ultimate goal is to bond us through the shared experience of the sublime.

Donald Barthelme was writing at the height of the postmodern movement in the 1960’s and 1970’s. His work exemplifies postmodernist notions, the “disappearance of the real,” and the “endless free play” licensed by Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (Barry 91, 66). Barthelme takes on the role of scriptor, compiling the old in new ways to push his readers to ask questions and explore, even if the conclusion is always the same
(Birns 38). His writing reflects a shift from Kant towards Lyotard, and from Lacan to Kristeva as he takes his place in the height of post-modernism. As a postmodern author, Barthelme acknowledges his debt to the modernist movement, actively referring to Beckett’s writing: “Beckett, I suppose, made it possible for me to write” (The Art of Fiction). Beckett laid the foundation of futility that lent itself to Barthelme’s free play. Where Beckett harnesses meaninglessness through negation, Barthelme appropriates meaninglessness through creation and inclusion. Pfeffer writes that the tragic view which Beckett emulates is “close to the temper of [Barthelme’s] age, in which man has become fully and consciously problematic to himself. [Nietzsche’s] philosophy is meaningful for the age of anxiety because it is based upon a reality that does not exclude absurdity and despair.” Pfeffer continues that artists like Barthelme “do not regard absurdity and pessimism as ends in themselves, but as a realistic foundation upon which to build a new faith in life and man. Their call to revolt is a call to create” (66). Barthelme starts from Beckett’s foundation of human futility and the lack of causality, but instead of striving to represent the real, he strives to represent a decentered, post-structuralist universe void of absolutes or transcendental signifieds like the real (Carroll 397). Barthelme's work spotlights the human capacity for distraction and more importantly, creation. He celebrates the human imagination and finds refuge in it, providing quirky distractions from the seriousness of Beckett’s conceptualization. Where Beckett’s sublime lives in the now, Barthelme’s free play “is the disruption of presence” and lives in movement (Derrida 294). There is only futility in the symbolic for Beckett, so Barthelme delights in the semiotic instead. His word-play and irony live in Kristeva’s semiotic sphere “which refers to the idea of ‘signs’ or linguistic markers that admit their own indelible status as
representations,” and which allows Barthelme to acknowledge the decentered universe without directly referring to it (Birns 141). Barthelme's stories are fast-paced and deliberately shallow, but there is a disparity between the feeling and the content. Beckett shows meaningfulness through silence and paradox. Barthelme implies it through irony. Barthelme celebrates the surface of things to distract from, but ultimately to reveal, the uncertainty that lies underneath them. Barthelme's stories not only tout distraction as a way to deal with the lack of causality, they actually act as distractions. His writing has the “urgent and euphoric” tone and “flamboyant and self-consciously showy” style common to post-structuralists (Barry 63). His stories are grounded in details that offer concreteness to his readers. He collects details with a desperation that reinforces the weight of the meaningless behind the details. Barthelme sees the lack of causality as an opportunity for surprise and wonder in the unexpected. This liberation from structuralism and the real offer a relief which Edmund Burke describes as “delight” and Barthelme refers to as “wonder.” This delight is a product of a postmodern rendering of Kant’s sublime by Francois Lyotard to refer to the trauma of conceptualizing a decentered universe rather than the real. Lyotard writes, “the sublime feeling: a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any ‘it happens’, strikes it with ‘astonishment’…The soul is thus dumb, immobilized, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight” (Lyotard 251). Barthelme senses this delight, which he calls “wonder,” and strives to attain it through his unpredictable, playful writing. Barthelme offers a leniency that Beckett does not and that is time for play. His short stories encourage his readers to feel the wonder of the unexpected through distraction and creation.
Like Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut adopts a more Kristevan view of humanity, “an open, pluralist, constructive vision of a society in which individuals [are] free to make their destinies yet reside in unavoidable contingency with respect to the wills and desires of others” (Birns 143). Although Vonnegut began his work in the high-postmodern era, his writing reflects a shift towards the science-based theories that arose in the early twenty-first century in the “wake of deconstruction” (Birns 312). Vonnegut’s “humanism put him at odds with the increasingly postmodernist and poststructuralist fraternity throughout the 1970’s and 80’s,” and especially in his later novels, Vonnegut addresses a more material generation, one that has moved away from the philosophical trends of modernism and postmodernism and into a more humanist realm (Simmons xi). Todd F. Davis writes, “What makes Vonnegut different from many other postmodernists is his refusal to accept complete relativism. He empathetically asserts a single rule for the comforting lies we must tell: ‘Ye shall respect one another,’” which counters the notion that there are no rules or absolutes (320). Vonnegut accepts the post-structuralists’ decentered universe, but refuses to accept that it makes human life any less valuable. Instead of making the lack of causality more palatable through distraction, Vonnegut suggests that we create our own causality through community. He supports Kierkegaard’s argument for “subjective thinkers” who take responsibility for and are actively aware of their existence (Earnshaw 167). For Vonnegut, the collapse of causality affirms human autonomy. Vonnegut does not try to use paradox to get at the real or at wonder, because Beckett and Barthelme have already accomplished that. Vonnegut believes that hope lies not in some ineffable feeling, but in reinforcing human dignity through community. Vonnegut writes to instill in the reader the sense of innocence and happiness that comes
with connecting with other people. Vonnegut reaches back to more traditional social values of family and meaningful work, but grounds them in a new secular humanism. He hopes to increase the morality of humanity through art and imitation, adhering to Kant’s “looking towards the ‘ought’ as opposed to the ‘is’” (Birns 149). Vonnegut invests in compassion the way Charles Darwin invested in sympathy as the key to morality and therefore crucial for a thriving human community (Carroll 367). Even though Vonnegut’s writing is similar to Barthelme’s in its quick pacing, straightforward dialogue, and playful tone, Vonnegut also utilizes conventional writing techniques like first-person narrative and moral-driven stories. Vonnegut is not bound to allegory like the other two, but he still opens his text to the reader by playing with time, refraining from didactic writing, and keeping a neutral tone. Vonnegut’s meaning of life exists between humans, not in the mind. He focuses on the authenticity of his stories, to provide a genuine human connection through his work, and to teach his readers how to be compassionate members of society by representing such compassion in his work. He offers hope in the “transcendental power” of humans to make their own meaning through community (Simmons 129).

Beckett, Barthelme, and Vonnegut all present works that provide interactive experiences for their audience. They reject traditional literary techniques to a large extent in order to emulate the collapse of causality. Their works do not offer a message, they enact messages, working as interactive tools to allow their audience to insert themselves in the works and hopefully take away a sense of being human. Their writing represents the philosophical trends of their time, but they are all grappling with the same question: What hope do we have in the face of meaninglessness? Beckett finds hope in accessing
the real and experiencing the sublime; Barthelme finds it in distraction and creativity, and Vonnegut in community. One thing these authors seem to agree upon is the marvel of the human spirit - the drive to keep going in spite of meaninglessness.

3. Philosophies

The writing styles of Beckett, Barthelme, and Vonnegut reinforce their world views by enacting them formally. Beckett’s work is the most minimalist of the three and he is most directly grounded in modernist philosophy. Barthelme’s and Vonnegut’s works are more playful and random, implying the loss of a fixed center. Barthelme uses back-and-forth dialogue similar to Beckett’s, but with a faster pace. Though, as with Beckett, there is still no progress in Barthelme’s world, there is at least movement, reflecting Barthelme's investment in delight and free play. Vonnegut’s style is closer to traditional narrative than the other two. His work includes more connection between scenes through recognizable transitions and includes human themes and morals, which are overtly absent in Beckett’s and Barthelme's works. This indicates Vonnegut’s object-relations view in contrast to the others’ more meditative views. Examining the style and form of each author reveals the philosophies in their work.

3.1 Samuel Beckett

Beckett’s plays are almost entirely allegorical. His characters tend to be representations of ideas. For example, in Waiting for Godot, Didi, the hopeful and dependent, interacts with Gogo, the forlorn and settled, in ways that reflect the two sides of the human mind. The interactions between Beckett’s characters reveal the paradoxes of
our singular existence rather than showing material human interactions. Beckett attempts
to produce the deeper feelings of the human psyche, the raw feelings of joy and despair,
to encourage self-reflection in his audience that will lead to the sublime. His plays are
conduits through which his audience can glimpse the real and accept the futility of their
symbolic reality. The symbolic stage is a Lacanean concept which refers to our transition,
as infants, from an undifferentiated being to a fragmented being due to our adoption of
language and symbols to refer to the real (Evans 162). The symbolic removes us from
and fragments the real.

Explaining the method behind his allegorical approach to his plays, Beckett once
wrote, “Allegory implies a threefold intellectual operation: the construction of a message
of general significance, the preparation of a fabulous form, and an exercise of
considerable technical difficulty in uniting the two, an operation totally beyond the reach
of the primitive mind,” (Disjecta 26). Beckett's “message of general significance” is his
message that causality has collapsed. The "fabulous form" must unite the message and
the structure so that the form becomes a further representation of the message itself.
Beckett does this in his plays by stripping his plays of all unnecessary performance, of
plot and drama. His form is as stark and serious as his content, each reinforcing the other
to create a space of nothingness in which the real can exist. For example, the stage setting
for Act I of Waiting for Godot simply states: “A country road. A tree. Evening,” and for
Act II it is almost comically stark: “Next day. Same time. Same place.” (1). The place for
allegory is "totally beyond the reach of the primitive mind," meaning that uniting the
message of meaninglessness in a form that will carry the message is a philosophical
process. The primitive mind is intrinsically tied to the body and earth, while Beckett’s
plays speak to the mind. Beckett's nothingness cannot be expressed through materiality or linguistic symbols; it is a reproduction of Lacan’s real, “the unattainable substance around which every signifying network is constituted,” around which Beckett forms his plays (Waugh 285). The real is pure only as a feeling. In practice it is not so clean.

In experimenting with various forms that would illuminate the uncertain nature of reality, Beckett finds that balancing the needs of the audience and the clarity of his message is difficult. Beckett writes, “Must we wring the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of that pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogymongers?” He is frustrated with the technical difficulties of creating a piece that represents something indefinable (19).

Beckett struggles to facilitate human awareness unobstructed by performance within the confines of a play that is itself a human performance. The only way to eradicate performance is with further performance. Beckett presents his self-contradiction as reductio ad absurdum, emphasizing that even he is not free from the inescapability of performance (Friedman 107). He writes that "the first condition of any [piece of art] is an accredited theme," but "in self-perception there is no theme," acknowledging the paradox of his efforts (71). If art is founded on a human theme, but self-perception (or human awareness) has no theme, then art begins to dehumanize the human experience simply by presenting it. Beckett's solution to the paradox is to remove the conventions of the readerly text: plot, direction, and drama, so that there is no theme in the presentation, no safety net in the expected "on which the convention has for so long taken its ease" (71). Beckett's plays offer no comfort in the familiarity of convention. Subverting convention is a technique used by structuralists to “question[] our way of structuring and
categorizing reality, and prompt[...] us to break free of habitual modes of perception or categorization,…that we can thereby attain a more reliable view of things” (Barry 65). Beckett’s plays work to unsettle the audience and to shake them from their conventions, so that they become aware of the symbolic structure of which they are a part. This is the human awareness Beckett presses upon his audience, to know their futility and in the trauma of knowing, to feel the real.

Beckett writes that even setting in art is dehumanizing because it offers a world that is completely symbolic into which the audience can project themselves and thus lose their sense of self-awareness. Setting is “where the self is happily obliterated or else so improved and enlarged that it can be mistaken for the décor,” arguing that if the self is either so negated or so abstracted by art that one cannot even discern it from the background, then what is left but only the background (71)? This dilemma reflects the tension in Lacan’s imaginary stage in which our life “cannot, experientially, be adequate to [our] idealized image in the mirror,” leading to a self-idealization that can never be fulfilled (Birns 141). The setting is an idealized reflection of our fragmented reality which is unattainable, yet still offers hope in the symbolic. Beckett’s aim is to offer hope in accepting the real, so he rids his plays of setting as well so his form better represents his message.

Often, Beckett’s plays have no setting, no discernible time or place. His plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* exist under a few spotlights that fade to black on the edges, as though they exist in a pocket of the unconscious. The spotlight in the darkness is the hope in meaninglessness. It is the sublime. When there is no theme and no refuge in place, the work becomes a presentation of the real. The nothingness on the stage
becomes the setting and content of Beckett's work, which is all the more pure when his characters fall silent and still and his audience can become aware of the real. Shane Weller writes that “the nothing remains in Beckett’s works an object of contemplation, intimation, desire or fear, rather than of immediate experience” (37). Beckett's nothingness does not act on the audience but is rather experienced by the audience as a traumatic moment of realization of their futility. His plays do not dictate his philosophy, but instead create a space in which the audience can experience the essence of his philosophy: the wholeness of the real and its incompatibility with their symbolic state.

Beckett writes that in art, “the danger is in the neatness of identifications,” and that those who attempt to link the unidentifiable to an identity are guilty of fragmenting it, of “hoisting the real unjustifiably clear of its dimensional limits, temporalizing that which is extratemporal” (9). Again this refers back to Lacan’s imaginary stage in which the subject and its reflection- the image- are incongruous so the subject must ultimately identify with the image to ease the tension. Lacan calls this identification alienation, because “the subject is split from himself” (Evans 9). In Krapp's Last Tape, this alienation is palpable because Krapp has fragmented his life into a series of tape recordings, denying his undifferentiated nature and identifying with the symbolic. What Beckett sets out to do is to somehow harness the extratemporal without limiting it. Beckett believes that identifying what cannot truly be identified is unjustifiable because it does not do justice to the human experience. The real, according to Beckett, is so multidimensional that it cannot exist under one or many identifications. It can only exist outside of them, for example, in the blackness and silence of his plays.
Like Lacan, Beckett believes that identification leads to alienation because of its fragmenting effects, but that it is an inevitable result of our symbolic state, “that isolation is a necessary element in the human condition” (Gay, 452). An identity implies one distinct from others. When Beckett’s characters are physically together, they are most often alone in their thoughts. This can be seen in much of the dialogue between his characters in *Waiting for Godot* in which they take turns speaking, but rarely respond to one another. The loneliness that Beckett’s characters express reveals an innate need for connection, which is severed by the symbolic. This need reaches beyond Lacan’s theory and into Kristeva’s object-relations theory in which, along with the subject-image split of Lacan’s imaginary stage, we also developed a mother-child bond that secured a lifelong need for interpersonal relationships (Birns 143). For Beckett, loneliness might be a symptom of the symbolic state of humanity and a desire to reach Nietzsche’s primal unity which derived from Lacan’s real and is “without individual (or individuatatable) parts” (Solomon and Higgins 110). Beckett believes that by accepting our futility and experiencing the real, humanity will be able to reach a kind of primal unity. The alienation of Beckett’s characters is a product of the symbolic which keeps them divided. To reach a primal unity, Beckett’s characters must experience each other as undifferentiated beings, not as individuals. Beckett hopes to accomplish a sort of primal unity in his audience through the shared experience of the sublime.

Beckett recognizes language as a differential system that must be abandoned in order to reach the undifferentiated realm of the real. Language further isolates Beckett’s characters through differential meaning. Beckett uses negation, rather than description, to reproduce the real. He uses silences to touch upon the wholeness of being human without
corrupting it with language. Shane Weller writes that in Beckett’s work, “Beckett proposes a literature of the unword that, through labour of negation on the language veil, would disclose the reality that lies beyond language. The precise nature of this reality [...] being that it is precisely the nothing,” explaining that Beckett's use of silence to present the real also reveals the emptiness of our symbolic system (43). Beckett writes, “and ever more my own language appears to me like a veil that one must tear apart in order to get to the things (or the nothingness) lying behind it,” to show that the real is a state or condition that one can achieve "through the puncturing or rendering of the language veil" (Weller 43).

With the use of pauses and silences, Beckett methodically creates a negative space into which the audience may insert themselves. By investing in the play, the audience is actively participating in Beckett's process of negation. Beckett's plays facilitate this process and lead the audience into a state of nothingness, which mimics the real. Beckett’s plays “will of course ‘present’ something, though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation….it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain,” so that the tension of the sublime comes out of the presentation of the real (Lyotard 44). It is in this negative state, away from performance and distraction, that Beckett believes the audience can fully accept the collapse of causality and achieve awareness in the sublime. Lacan believed that “the real is ‘the impossible’ because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way,” but that “it is this character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolization which lends the real its essentially traumatic quality” that can be defined as the sublime (Evans 163). Beckett's plays work
as an interactive tool for people to become aware of their futility, but also to engage in the real as a collective whole. His plays offer hope by orchestrating a collective traumatic experience that reveals the real, implies our futility, yet bonds us in the sublime.

The structure of Beckett's plays, in which there is no climax, no progress, and no difference between the beginning of the play and the end, reveals the false presumptions of progress and time in a world without causality. In *Waiting for Godot*, his characters reference time passing, but it is not seen on stage, highlighting the stagnation brought on by a collapsed causal system. Also in *Godot*, Beckett creates an ever-present among his characters that attempts to elongate the periods of the sublime in the now which disarms thought “through a state of privation” and thereby attempting to negate even the audience’s thoughts (Lyotard 245). Beckett writes, “And now here am I, with my handful of abstractions, most notably: a mountain, the coincidence of contraries, the inevitability of cyclic evolution, a system of Poetics, and the prospect of self-extension in the world” (19). These are abstractions that can be obtained in art and in the mind, but cannot be overcome individually. Beckett views humanity on a grand scale, no individual can create meaning, yet collectively we represent the undifferentiated real, and are closer to a primal unity. Beckett writes, “Humanity is divine, but no man is divine” (22). Beckett views humans as all part of the same circle. Humanity as a whole is what matters to Beckett, as "the prospect of self-extension." Humanity is valuable because it signifies an undifferentiated connection, but our individual pursuits are futile and fragmented. Unlike Vonnegut, who believes that humanity can attain agency from its connectedness as a community, Beckett believes that humanity’s wholeness is only important because it reflects an undifferentiated real- it does not offer any power, only comfort. The circularity
of plot and setting in Beckett’s plays, especially *Waiting for Godot*, emphasizes the lack of progress in our symbolic state and the stagnation from the collapse of causality, but it also blurs the lines between symbolic binaries.

The "coincidence of contraries" in Beckett's work speaks to the blurred boundaries between beginning and end, life and death, happiness and sorrow. They are all one. For Beckett, the undifferentiated nature of the real also applies to our emotions, which are innately outside of the symbolic. Therefore, all human emotions are part of a larger realm of being. Joy and despair are opposites on the same spectrum of human feeling, and when they exist simultaneously they create a feeling of the sublime. In an explanation of coincidental contraries, Beckett writes:

> The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent. Minimal heat equals minimal cold. Consequently transmutations are circular. The principle (minimum) of one contrary takes its movement from the principle (maximum) of one another. Therefore not only do the minima coincide with the minima, the maxima with the maxima, but the minima with the maxima in the succession of transmutations. Maximal speed is a state of rest. The maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical: in principle, corruption is generation. (21)

Here, Beckett argues that the existence of one side of a spectrum, say happiness, assumes the existence of the other side, unhappiness. Because they are part of the same spectrum, they are one and the same. In this vein, Beckett writes, “nothing is funnier than unhappiness,” (Smith 1). Also in this vein, human awareness necessitates nothingness-the sublime necessitates the real.

One of the major places one can see the coincidence of contraries play out is in the relationship between life and death as presented in Beckett's work. Beckett encourages his audience to face their mortality to create a tension in which his audience
may be able to conceptualize their mortality, but not imagine it, pushing them towards the sublime. Philip Tew and Stephen Barfield write that “Beckett’s work is unusually possessed by the drive not for eternal life, but for the oblivion of death and…a dread of living, Beckett’s work seems just as determined to never grasp death as an exact finitude or boundary […] He] uses death to measure by means of time and to recognize that this fails to demarcate a life” (2). Although death is ever-present in his plays, it is not finite, it exists in the ever-present. Just as there cannot be a justifiable distinction between humans, there also cannot be a distinction between life and death. The light and dark in Waiting for Godot highlights his characters’ ability to move in and out of death fluidly. Beckett believes that every moment in life is correlated with death. Beckett presents life as a series of deaths: “Beckett’s characters…never properly died, just as much as they never properly lived… liminally located between life and death,” his characters experience a series of events that begin and end without discernible beginnings and endings until they eventually die without any discernible shift from life (Tew and Barfield 2).

There is no beginning or end, only a circular movement that negates progress and forward motion. In Waiting for Godot, Acts II begins in the same place where Act I began. Beckett’s cyclic evolution is reflective of Foucault’s postmodern concept of “circular causality” in which linearity cannot exist because we are unable to access a clear cause and effect system (Kern 302). There is no opportunity for improvement or creation. Beckett’s time does not correlate with movement or progress as it does in traditional narratives. There is no passage of time in his plays, only the acknowledgment that time has passed. As Peter Fifield points out, Beckett's plays are effective in
“rupturing the constitutive narratives of self through damage to the very conception of time. The severely memory impaired subject[s in his plays] may consequently be both bereft of past and unable to imagine a future” (131). Beckett’s characters in *Waiting for Godot* are cut off from their past or future selves, emphasizing an inability to improve or progress. They are fragmented. Beckett has effectively stripped them of their narrative. They are without context and without time. Beckett’s *Godot* characters have no connection to who they once were or whatever experience they may have had. They have nothing to build on and nothing to strive for, “without past (or future), [Beckett's characters are] stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment,” there is no opportunity to progress, but there is an opportunity to access the sublime (Fifield 131).

Beckett’s characters are unenlightened and depressed. This portrayal is not a call to become these characters. If anything, it is a warning. Peter Fifield writes, “In many of [Beckett’s] fictions, voices speak and bodies move, but we are told that this somehow is not really ‘it,’...‘real life is absent. We are not in the world,’ we are in Beckett's world, one that is entirely cerebral” (128). Death in Beckett's world is not physical death. It is the stagnation of the mind, the loss of awareness. There is a sense that these characters should have done something differently, should have gone down the path of love, but it is never overtly stated. Beckett is jolting his audience out of the ease of convention, to give them something unexpected, to force them to look outside of the symbolic. Patricia Waugh writes that the real “manifests itself in the unexpected: a disrupting event that breaks through the wall of semblance,” if time passing does not validate a life, then the audience might have to look for a different sort of validation (284). For Beckett, that validation is in awareness of the real; it is in the sublime.
Beckett believes that there is human empowerment in achieving the sublime. Eric Tonning writes that Beckett’s work "may actually be said to be fueled by a kind of titanic intellectual hubris: for to reject the creation of a world involving any misery as being just not worth it is to assume a position from which one can overrule the divine point of view” (120). Where Tonning sees hubris, Beckett sees power. Rejecting the symbolic and facing the real, reinforces our power of reason. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett underscores the futility of traditional and religious structures in the face of reason. It does not seem that Beckett is rejecting the world because of its misery, but instead is facing its miseries head on. There is, however, a rejection of the miseries that the symbolic provokes.

Beckett sees symbolic misery as futile, but he does not reject the world because there is misery in it. Instead, Beckett reasons that if there is misery, there is also an equal amount of joy. Russel Smith writes, “Many of Beckett’s characters are implacably committed to a solipsistic withdrawal from the world and any other human beings who happen to inhabit it. When they do enter relation with each other, the result- even in the throes of lovemaking- is often gratuitous cruelty and meaningless suffering. And perhaps worst of all, from an ethical point of view, this suffering and cruelty is the occasion, not for pity or tragic pathos, but for laughter” (1). Somehow, in recognizing the cruelty and misery in Beckett's plays, we are apt to find the humor in it. What Beckett's plays give us is not just an unadulterated sense of being human in the pain and pleasure of the sublime, but a sense of power and unity by being human. He connects us through our humanity. There may not be a distinct message or morality in Beckett's work, but there is an offer of hope in our human awareness.
The ultimate goal of Beckett's nothingness is to be able to recognize the real beneath the symbolic. He nudges his audience out of their comfort zone by ridding his plays of conventional narrative. By uniting form and content, Beckett creates a negative space in which his audience can experience the real and reach the sublime. He temporarily strips them of identity and performance, so that they can share in and contribute to the wholeness of human awareness that makes humanity divine.

3.2 Donald Barthelme

If Beckett finds empowerment in our ability to conceptualize, Barthelme finds empowerment in our imagination. Barthelme's work highly propulsive, with fast-paced dialogue, quick wit, and fragmented action. Instead of "puncturing the veil of language" to get past the symbolic as Beckett does, Barthelme patches language together so that is colorful and sharp, then nullifies it all through irony. Barthelme hopes that in making the symbolic palpable, by turning the veil into a product, he can re-appropriate it as semiotic in which there are only signs to refer to more signs, and use it to reveal the superficial nature of the decentered universe. The function of Barthelme's stories is to provide a refuge in fast dialogue and endless details from Beckett's self-awareness. But all the while, Barthelme does not mean what he says. More than Beckett, Barthelme relies on the lack of causality to relay his message, to give his readers freedom to create and explore. Barthelme starts at meaninglessness, but realizes that creativity and wonder still have a place in the human experience, even if it is futile and even if it is just performance. For Barthelme, futility and performance are all there is. He believes in a decentered universe in which there are no transcendental truths.
Barthelme strives to create something new out of what Beckett left behind. Barthelme’s goal is to access a postmodern concept that is a function of Kant’s sublime, but that underscores the uncertainty of our reality. This concept is called “delight” which founder Edmund Burke defined as a feeling of relief that occurs when the weight of our futility and our meaninglessness is “suspended, kept at bay, held back” by our creativity and play (Lyotard 251). Lyotard writes that “this suspense, this lessening of a threat or a danger, provokes a kind of pleasure that is certainly not that of a positive satisfaction, but is, rather, that of relief. This is still a privation, but it is a privation at one remove: the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life” in other words, this postmodern delight returns creativity and play back to humanity after it was stripped away by modernism (251).

Barthelme once wrote, “Beckett's art is reductionary in that, like a painter, he throws ideas away. The things he throws away are…character, social fact, plot, gossip. What is retained as the irreducible minimum is the intent of the artist, in Beckett’s case a search for the meanings to be gleaned from all possible combinations of all words in all languages” (9). In fact, this reflects Barthelme's own approach to writing. Barthelme finds delight not by throwing ideas away, but by questioning them, challenging every idea against the test of irony to find which ideas retain their essences, what wonder remains. Beckett starts with performance as the symbolic and digs down to discover the real. Barthelme removes the real then, from a disillusioned state, works his way back up to reclaim the symbolic as semiotic. In “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” Barthelme acknowledges his goal to appropriate our semiotic state -the “nothing”- by accessing everything that is not nothing through our imagination, such as: “Nothing is not a
nightshirt or a ninnyhammer, ninety-two, or Nineveh. It is not a small jungle in which, near a river, a stone table has been covered in fruit” (239). By empowering the person over performance, Barthelme is able to use performance at his will. Performance becomes a tool rather than a driver.

By appropriating performance as semiotic, Barthelme is able to play with the trivial in his stories without being harnessed by it. His stories have an open conception of narrative. Instead of the traditional "if...then," Barthelme's stories ask "What if?" (Leitch 91). Barthelme combines ordinary words, characters, and situations to see what results from the combination. He writes short stories to avoid the predictability of narrative. In “The New Music,” Barthelme acknowledges the stifling effects that traditional and modernist structures have had on the new generation’s creativity, acknowledging that these structures must be rejected in order for free play to ensue. Tracy Daugherty writes that Barthelme believed that “more than short stories, novels tend toward formula…or, at least, toward habitual structures, steady rhythm, and foreshadowing to keep the reader engaged till the end. The trouble is, habit lacks magic. It cheapens the values of images and words. It’s the sudden eruption, the improvised melody or phrase, that tickles our imaginations, and adds wonder to the world” (295). This wonder is the delight that Barthelme strives toward.

Barthelme patches language together, aware of its connotations, in hopes that “a new reality would be created out of elements which would retain their original identity-which would have to retain that identity, in fact, for the collage effect to happen” (Klinkowitz, Donald Barthelme 7). Barthelme writes, “One of the beautiful things about words is that you can put words together which in isolation mean nothing, or mean only
what the dictionary says they mean, and you can put them together and you get extraordinary effects.” This montage of words is one of the ways Barthelme attempts to create delight in his work without describing it outright (214). In “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” he meshes generally separate structures- philosophy, narratives, lists of actions and nouns, feelings- in anticipation of creating something new. He follows the language in hopes of finding something outside of convention created by the scraps of convention, something unexpected. In this way, Barthelme is reclaiming the modernist collage, which strove to signify the real from broken traditional structures, as a postmodernist device to portray a loss of a fixed center. The material details stay on the surface, but as Barthelme's stories unfold and the lighthearted pieces start to add up, “you get from the casual to the fundamental issue,” and the final picture is a rather dark one (Barthelme 217). Barthelme is constructing a decentered universe, where not only is there no causality, but there are no absolutes, no certainty. His stories place free play and meaningfulness of the same plane, arguing that the questioning and the searching carry just as much weight as the final conclusion.

Beckett, speaking of another author, once said something highly applicable to Barthelme's writing: “Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read- or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. [It] is not about something; it is that something itself […] which is for ever rising to the surface of the form and becoming the form itself.” (27). Barthelme’s form and content blur to form a collage of semiotics. Barthelme once said, “I think that the effort is to reach a realm of meaning that is not quite sayable. You stay away from what can be said and you try to reach what can’t quite
be said. Yet it is nevertheless meaningful,” referring to the feeling of wonder that comes from the unexpected (214). Barthelme writes that this feeling “is very difficult to talk about. It’s not quite nonverbal, but that comes fairly close,” and the only way to get at the feeling, then, is through irony and through a structure of verbal play rather than verbal meaning (214). Barthelme adopts Kristeva’s semiotic theory in which the symbolic no longer represents a fixed center so that all that is left are signs. He attempts to build a new structure with the rubble of the old, to create the nonverbal delight through a collage of remembered meanings, in order to impart a feeling of optimism and of playfulness to his readers, because “writing should be playful you know,” he says (216).

In reference to Barthelme’s fragmented style, Alan Wilde writes, “Barthelme’s more open form allows with greater frequency for the congruence of the aesthetic and the experiential. To a degree at least, structure becomes a window not a frame” (114). While Beckett's form and content work together to create a message of the sublime, Barthelme's form becomes the content. Barthelme's form is the message. Jerome Klinkowitz writes that Barthelme's success “is within the realm of language itself and not just what language refers to," because this creates a new way of thinking (Donald Barthelme 7). Barthelme surpasses the veil of language by using language in a way it is not traditionally used, reinforcing Kristeva’s semiotics. Barthelme's work gives language a new meaning, or a sense of meaning, by adjusting how the reader interacts with it. Instead of the words telling the story, the words mirror an ineffable feeling of wonder.

Barthelme's shortened sentences and lack of punctuation can be considered statements in themselves, much more than the statements made by his characters, which are slanted and subjective. In “The New Music,” there is a lack of the conventional
narrative or plot devices which generally pull the reader into the text. Instead, Barthelme seems to be intentionally keeping the reader outside of the story so there attention is “directed to the page and the action of language upon it” as in the following exchange: “-We said we weren’t going to do Daddy./ -I forgot./ -Old Momma./ -Well, it’s not easy, conducting mysteries. It’s not easy, making the corn grow./ -Asparagus too.” (343, Klinkowitz, Donald Barthelme 7). The characters distinctly avoid the deeper instability implied by “Daddy,” steering their conversation towards more trivial subjects. The information and meaning in Barthelme’s stories are constantly undermined or contradicted, “which encourages the reader to find enjoyment in the easy play of signs rather than searching for what they signify,” because, as we know from Derrida’s free play, there are no transcendental signifieds (Klinkowitz, Donald Barthelme 7).

The decentered universe implies an inescapable meaninglessness in which there are no absolutes from which to find comfort. Instead of mourning the loss of meaning, Barthelme plays in the new post-structuralist world, presenting choppy, on-the-surface writing that is always moving but has no direction. Jerome Klinkowitz writes, "from spoofs of Modernist themes to unflappable rhythms and interminable lists, his surprisingly new methods are all dedicated to this flattery and enjoyment of the surface" (Donald Barthelme 7). The readers interact with the form rather than content, and the form keeps them on the surface. When Barthelme does expose a meaningful theme, almost immediately he undermines it, putting responsibility on the reader to decipher the message of meaninglessness beneath the play. This arrangement reflects Barthelme's view that our lives are full of performance and distraction, and that we can and should
enjoy it. Under our constructions are only more constructions, and under those is our meaninglessness.

Barthelme adopts an intellectual distance similar to Beckett’s, not by stripping everything down, but by negating everything through irony. While Beckett refuses to include anything but the real in his work, Barthelme includes everything, especially the trivial, and then twists it with irony, stripping it of its meaning by stripping it of its seriousness. This process is most notable in “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” in which Barthelme acknowledges his intention to include everything. Jeffery Nealon writes, “We can see only so far, and, as a consequence, we can know only so much. Past that limit, there is wonder—a wonder that drives, preserves, and regulates knowledge,” and it is this wonder, the delight, that Barthelme encourages through his work by offering the possibility of surprise in a world that Beckett left all figured out (131). Beckett tries to create a series of present moments in which the sublime can exist while Barthelme tries to disrupt those moments in order for free play to exist. Barthelme’s stories are ever in motion in order to free up the opportunity for the unexpected. He keeps his structure open and his content neutral to provide an endless platform for his readers to ask questions, to push their limits, and to reach a moment of delight. Barthelme and Beckett both agree that there is something special about the human spirit, but Beckett holds the structuralist belief that it can be attained as a transcendental signified, while Barthelme believes that it is not a fixed state, but rather an ineffable feeling of delight that can only come with the free play allowed by a decentered universe. He writes in “Nothing: A Preliminary Account”: “How joyous a notion that, try as we may, we cannot do other than fail and fail absolutely and that task will remain always before us, like a meaning for our
lives” (242). Barthelme believes that delight may be the closest semblance of meaning as humanity can hope to achieve in the face of meaninglessness.

In his playful approach, Barthelme’s delight offers a relief to Beckett’s nothingness. Barthelme seems to realize the starkness of Beckett’s vision and in his work acknowledges that a distraction from meaninglessness could be just as valid a refuge, just as human a need, as being aware of it. In his playful, ironic writing, Barthelme offers a practical application of Beckett’s self awareness: to delight in its creative process.

According to Klinkowitz, a "depth of meaning" for Barthelme is less important than "to establish how there is abundantly interesting action on the surface, and that here indeed is where the business of being human takes place,” meaning that Barthelme's aim is to downplay the seriousness of poststructuralism’s implications and to show that there are other aspects of humanity that can be enjoyed in spite of its meaninglessness (Donald Barthelme 28). Klinkowitz adds that Barthelme pays "fresh attention to systems of meanings rather than to meanings themselves, which are surely less interesting and less fun,” in other words, Barthelme plays with the ideas of meaning rather than resigning himself to a void of meaning (Donald Barthelme 29). Although Barthelme plays with these systems on the surface, there is an ominous feeling that this is not all he intends to impart to his readers. Barthelme celebrates creative thinking and clever new arrangements of old systems, but he never loses sight of the collapse of causality. In “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegal” Barthelme acknowledges the limits of his irony, hinting at new philosophical trend away from abstract play and towards humanism. For all of Barthelme's play, it is still just performance, and he acknowledges it as such.
By creating an ironic other-meaning in his stories, Barthelme’s distraction from meaninglessness ultimately reveals it. Barthelme allows the reader to simultaneously enjoy the distractions of “unflappable rhythms and interminable lists” and yet dread its lurking implications underneath his irony. The decentered universe that allows his free play is the same that sentences us to futility. “‘By bypassing a subject in writing, you are able to present it in a much stronger way than if you confronted it directly,’ [Barthelme] once said, ‘there are some things that have to be done by backing into them…indirection is a way of presenting the thing that somehow works more strongly’” and this approach can be seen in all of his stories (Daugherty 128). Barthelme's open form allows joy and despair to exist in the same moment. Barthelme acknowledges meaninglessness by hinting at it. Even though we can only see the playfulness on the outside, there is a sense that the inside is hollow, a sense confirmed by his irony.

Barthelme uses irony not only to undermine traditional structures, but to convey a sense that things are not what they appear to be. Barthelme views traditional and modernist structures as limiting the imagination and therefore the delight. In “The New Music” he parodies modernism, but like modernists also underscores the futility of traditional structures. His stories are intended as an interactive tool to gain a new perspective on reality, to encourage the reader to question traditional structures in real life by first questioning the structures in his stories. This way, Barthelme's readers can re-appropriate the symbolic as semiotic and use performance at their leisure instead of being driven by it. In reassessing the old structures, Barthelme’s readers will find something new and unexpected. Alan Wilde writes, “Barthelme's irony seems to be an attempt to reenchant an otherwise wholly disenchanted world—an attempt to restore wonder to the
reader and, in the process, to question the priority of abstract or unitary knowledge” (127). Barthelme uses Beckett's nothingness as a foundation, but he undermines it with irony and tries to find the positive in the performance: the delight.

The hope that Barthelme sees in Beckett's vision is that it inspires new creation. He writes that Beckett's “pessimism is the premise necessary to a marvelous pedantic high-wire performance, the wire itself, supporting a comic turn of endless virtuosity. No one who writes as well as Beckett can be said to be doing anything other than celebrating life” (9). Barthelme hails Beckett as “celebrating life” because Beckett's work encourages people to question reality and to look for truth. Because Barthelme does not believe in a transcendental truth, however, he is less interested in escaping the world that Beckett deemed the symbolic. Alan Wilde writes that Barthelme is “less seriously attracted by an escape into the realm of total otherness than by the temptation to find within the ordinary possibilities…a more dynamic response” (113). He wants to find the wonder in the everyday mundane, not to remove himself from it. If Beckett's works raise questions, then they fuel what Barthelme believes is our reason for living, our imagination.

The “high-wire performance” Barthelme refers to seems to more accurately describe his own writing than Beckett’s. Beckett uses comedy to provide relief from and to reinforce our doomed fate. Beckett’s pessimism balances atop the thin wire of comedy, not the other way around. Barthelme’s work, on the other hand, is a lighthearted high-wire performance, a comedy that teeters on a fine wire over a dark reality. Barthelme's work attempts to uphold a semblance of satisfaction with constructed meaning despite the constant presence of a decentered universe. But a semblance of satisfaction is all that it is.
This can be seen in Barthelme's characters in “The New Music” who seem to be only semblances of humans.

Barthelme's characters in “The New Music” have no substance. They are centrally focused on the trivial and speak in non-sequiturs or in endless details: “-Seeking the ecstatic vision. That would lift people four feet off the floor./ -Six feet./ -Four feet or six feet off the floor. Persephone herself appearing./ -The chanting in the darkened telesterion./ -Persephone herself appearing” (342). His characters are as empty as Barthelme's other constructions such as the action which never moves forward, or the conflicts that have no consequence. There is a warning in Barthelme's work just as there is in Beckett's. Characters that live on the surface are necessarily as shallow as their surroundings. They blend into the details, becoming more signs in a semiotic universe. They lack human essence. They lack awareness. Just like Nietzsche’s Dionysus, “‘the great ambivalent one,’ who denies and destroys, yet affirms and creates,” Barthelme is striving to relish in the free play and creation that a decentered universe allows, without falling into the meaninglessness that it implies (Pfeffer 66). He wants to keep people searching for the delight, but not so far that they find meaninglessness.

In an attempt to distract himself from the dread of meaninglessness, Barthelme often writes in the present tense. This presence is different from the long moments of silence in Beckett’s plays. Instead, it keeps Barthelme’s characters moving and more easily distracted. His characters have no past or future. Without focusing on the future, we cannot see the lonely end that Beckett has written for humanity. Without focusing on the past, there is no history lost and perhaps no history to learn from, there is "no appreciation of what has gone on before; just the instant of surprise" (Klinkowitz, Donald
Barthelme 6). The present provides a platform for play and creativity, for a moment of delight, reinforcing the semiotic nature of his words. Barthelme’s words “refer simply to themselves...placed in the context of unintroduced and unpunctuated dialogue [they] have no reason for existence except their own play” (Klinkowitz, Donald Barthelme 113). His form enacts his philosophy. His adherence to the present keeps his words immediate and close. His words parallel our lives.

Barthelme tends to write of clothing, colors, and dialogue between characters that have no history or plan. When he does write about abstractions such as traditional philosophy, he writes about them ironically. For Barthelme, distraction is so important because meaninglessness is so apparent. He places such urgency on the trivial because to focus on the serious is to face a decentered universe. For Barthelme, the “details, details, details are the open sesame, the magic seeds that unlock doors and resurrect the treasures of the buried life from the tomb of conventional generalizing thoughts and habits” (Locke 52). The details are all that exists in the decentered universe, so Barthelme intends to use them towards creation to contrast the stagnation that our meaninglessness can employ.

Barthelme writes that “Beckett…painstakingly and with the upmost scholarly rigor retraces the rationales of simple operations, achieving comic shocks along the way by allowing language to tell him what he knows” (9). Here, Barthelme sees language as a kind of mystical force that can produce meaning outside of the author’s intention (9). For Barthelme, an original arrangement of language has the power to inspire, to tell us what we know. This is what Barthelme believes is the key to delight: human creativity.

Barthelme believes that there is the potential for creation in allowing art to slip the control of the artist. In reference to his own improvisational music, he writes, “If the
melody is the skeleton of the particular object, then the chord changes are its wardrobe, its changes of clothes. I tend to pay rather more attention to the latter than to the former. All I want is just a trace of skeleton- three bones from which the rest may be reasoned out” (200). Barthelme accepts a decentered universe as the foundation or the skeleton of his own philosophy, but instead of focusing on its implications of meaninglessness, Barthelme focuses on its clothes, the free play. The clothes can change and express individuality while the skeleton remains the same. His philosophy is built on the starkness of Beckett’s self-consciousness, but once self-consciousness is a given, the clothes become more interesting. The clothes are the excitement that supplements the skeleton's monotony. The ability to change and create, and to claim an identity, is a human quality that offers a sense of purpose that Beckett’s nothingness does not.

Barthelme responds to many themes in Beckett’s plays. This section in Waiting for Godot, however, could serve as Beckett’s response to Barthelme. Beckett foresaw the possibility of distraction as hope, a primary aspect of Barthelme’s vision. In Waiting for Godot, Didi and Gogo try to distract themselves from their stagnation, but to no avail. Didi argues (speaking for Beckett) that creating meaning will keep one from recognizing the meaninglessness of life, but Gogo counters that argument by saying “you think all the same,” similar to Barthelme’s stance:

ESTRAGON. You think all the same.
VLADIMIR. No no, impossible.
ESTRAGON. That’s the idea, let’s contradict each other.
VLADIMIR. We’re in no danger of thinking any more.
ESTRAGON. Then what are we complaining about?
VLADIMIR. Thinking is not the worst.
ESTRAGON. Perhaps not. But at least there’s that.
VLADIMIR. That what?
ESTRAGON. That’s the idea, let’s ask each other questions.
VLADIMIR. That much less misery. (71)

Knowledge of life’s meaninglessness does not prevent Gogo from looking for distractions. He suggests various forms of distraction from the nothingness, “let’s contradict each other….let’s ask each other questions,” “let’s abuse each other,” because engaging in distractions, however pointless, lessens the misery (71, 85). This is strikingly similar to the theme of Barthelme’s “Nothing: A Preliminary Account” in which the characters acknowledge that although we always end up with meaninglessness, a distraction from it is worth the effort: “if we cannot finish, we can at least begin…Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)” (241). For Barthelme, movement through distraction is better than stagnation by nothingness. For Beckett, however, distractions offer no refuge.

This is a view with which Barthelme is unsatisfied. Barthelme writes, “These problems are not dealable with—that’s the root of the matter- yet one has to attempt to deal with them…these problems are beyond us. And yet we deal with them, usually rather poorly” (223). It is not a question of whether or not we will deal with our meaninglessness. Both Beckett and Barthelme have faith in the human spirit, the will to go on; it is simply a question of how. Beckett believes that the answer is in accepting meaninglessness and reaching that traumatic awareness in the sublime. Barthelme, on the other hand, refuses to look at the big picture. Instead, he focuses on the small moments that make up the big picture. What may seem trivial to Beckett is what gives life meaning to Barthelme: the mistakes, the wish to deny death, the material. It is not an option for Barthelme to accept meaninglessness. For Barthelme, to accept meaninglessness is to
lose the wonder. One has to attempt to deal with it. He writes of meaninglessness as a problem that can be solved with distraction:

What is brought on here, what I’m attempting to deal with in a glancing way, is the redefining of the problem in such a way as to make it solvable, which often is a situation in which you are deceiving yourself. But it’s one of those strategies of psychoanalysis, for example. You look at situations in such a way as to make them dealable with or livable with and the real issues leak out, or leak away, are cosmeticized, or ignored, and it does have the virtue of making you able to proceed and live some sort of life. But you’re still ignoring fundamental issues, and it’s that kind of consideration that’s being talked about here…The Project Life is in some sense beyond his abilities. And he’s not going to win this game. If the game is called life, he’s going to lose. We know that, and I expect our denial of death is all about this question. How do we perform when we’re playing a game, when we know we can’t possibly get out alive? (223)

Barthelme argues that performance, no matter how meaningless or ridiculous, is the only way to make the plight of humanity bearable. Barthelme struggles with the limits of performance and in the dialogue in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegal,” he suggests that it is an unsatisfactory solution to meaninglessness, which indicates the beginning of a movement into more material solutions held by Vonnegut. Barthelme believed, however, that although intentionally distracting oneself from our futility is a facade, it is necessary for our going on in the face of meaninglessness.

The goal of Barthelme's writing is to offer refuge from the inevitable and hope in the possibility of creation. He reclaims performance as semiotic to escape the conventional structures of the symbolic that stifle our creativity. Barthelme's short stories allow the reader to deal with meaninglessness in the safe space of a story. In coming to terms with the story, the reader might also come to terms with reality. Barthelme’s playful writing hints at the darker meaning of a decentered universe without directly
acknowledging it. His stories provide a cushion, a separation between the reader and their futility where delight is still possible.

3.3 Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut takes a more practical stance toward meaninglessness than either Beckett or Barthelme. Like Barthelme, Vonnegut believes in a decentered universe, but he does not see it as an excuse for free play. He sees a decentered universe as a confirmation that we need to take responsibility for our own lives. The first line in Vonnegut’s *Deadeye Dick* describes a birth which represents the shift from accepting meaninglessness to the sudden responsibility of humanity to create its own meaning, “To the as yet unborn, to all innocent wisps of undifferentiated nothingness: Watch out for life. I have caught life. I have come down with life. I was a little wisp of undifferentiated nothingness, and then a little peephole opened quite suddenly. Light and sound poured in. Voices began to describe me and my surroundings. Nothing they said could be appealed” (1). This reflects a quote by the existentialist Albert Camus about what follows Nietzsche’s philosophy: “At the end of the tunnel of darkness there is inevitably a light for which we have to fight. All of us, among the ruins, are preparing a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism” (66).

For Vonnegut, getting beyond the limits of nihilism requires movement away from the philosophical and towards the material. This is where Vonnegut’s philosophy does not align with the level landscape of a decentered universe because he believes, against all evidence to the contrary, that humanity is special and that we must be kind to one another to uphold it. In this vein, Todd F. Davis writes, “Vonnegut confesses that this
single rule [to respect one another] for postmodern living is completely based on a leap of faith. The postmodern morality that characterizes his fictional world presupposes that human life is valuable, and it does so with no possible way to sustain this claim. At the center of Vonnegut’s postmodern humanism is the assertion that life is precious” (320).

Vonnegut believes that humans have the ability to create their own causal system by creating a fixed human center from which we can measure progress. Vonnegut supports Kierkegaard’s existentialist proposal for the “subjective thinker” whose responsibility it is to “understand himself in existence” and commit himself to existence “where ‘existence’ is understood to be something that in itself a commitment to ‘exist’ rather than just ‘be’” (Earnshaw 167-8). Vonnegut believes that to make life worth living, we must “exist” before we can help one another to “get through this thing. Whatever it is,” as a community (Timequake 78).

Vonnegut’s stories focus on the importance of humanity and our material existence. Vonnegut writes, “Several ordinary life stories, if told in rapid succession, tend to make life look far more pointless than it really is, probably” (Palm Sunday 135). If someone observes life from a distance like Beckett does, it will “look far more pointless” than it does to the person living it. For Vonnegut as for Barthelme, the solution to meaninglessness lies in details. Vonnegut rejects Beckett’s grand scale approach to observing life but agrees that our self-consciousness is what makes humanity special. Vonnegut may take the value of humanity on a leap of faith and agree that in the grand scheme of things we may not be influential, but he argues that human awareness, for better or worse, gives us agency. Our awareness, however, is pointless if we do not use it to enforce moral behavior. In Timequake, Vonnegut writes short moral parables under the
pseudonym Kilgore Trout. Vonnegut believes that moral behavior is the key to sustaining a community. “Vonnegut sees most people as fundamentally flawed, petty, avaricious, and prone to acts of almost incredible cruelty. Yet, for all that, Vonnegut cannot abandon humanity; he marvels at man’s folly, noting sadly or just curiously man’s absurd perseverance” (Tally 113). This reflects Beckett’s notion of divine humanity. An individual might not be divine, but a community certainly is. Unlike Beckett, however, Vonnegut believes that a community can function to create meaning, not just provide some comfort in our shared futility.

Vonnegut writes with the assumption that cause and effect are either nonexistent or inaccessible, so the question “Why?” is rarely found in his stories. “Why?” implies a deeper meaning or purpose for events that Vonnegut attributes to happenstance in a decentered universe. He used to tell his writing students, “All you can do is tell what happened. You will get thrown out of this course if you are arrogant enough to imagine that you can tell me why it happened. You do not know. You cannot know” (Palm Sunday 172). This justifies the on-the-surface writing of both Vonnegut and Barthelme. Asking “why?” leads to the meaninglessness that Beckett is so eager to face and that Barthelme is so eager to dodge. For Vonnegut, our meaninglessness is past the point. What we have is what is in front of us, in our actions and surroundings. Vonnegut’s community differs from Beckett’s because his is a tangible and functional solution to meaninglessness, whereas Beckett’s is a product of our accepting meaninglessness. Vonnegut’s playful writing is a presentation of what he believes is our saving grace, the possibility of sincerity in the human character.
Jerome Klinkowitz compares the writing styles of Barthelme and Vonnegut: “Like so many of his contemporaries, including Kurt Vonnegut… [Barthelme] writes a short novel composed of many chapters (twenty-three for just 175 pages of text)” (Donald Barthelme 6). In other words both Barthelme and Vonnegut construct collage-like pictures to represent a decentered universe. In Vonnegut’s stories, however, there is a hint of narrative that is unseen in Barthelme’s work. Both Barthelme’s and Vonnegut's fiction follow "the description of the typical Tralfamadorian novel in Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), where there are no beginnings, middles, or ends, but just the depth of many marvelous moments seen all at one time" creating an open form that brings the reader into conversation with the author (Donald Barthelme 45). Without middles, there is no clear transition from beginning to end, emulating the breaking down of causality. Vonnegut creates a series of circumstances that are random expect for the characters experiencing them and the readers’ awareness of them, making the reader an active member in the novel and underscoring the ability of our awareness to connect things that are otherwise disparate. Klinkowitz writes that Vonnegut demonstrates this connecting property of human awareness “by frustrating the reader’s understandable attempt to make the succeeding pages accumulate in meaning, thereby holding off such judgment until the book’s end, where its separate parts can be appreciated in their totality” (Donald Barthelme 45). Both Vonnegut and Barthelme play off of our expectations of conventional narrative. When we cannot locate the traditional elements of narrative, we wait for them, all the while drawing connections that could be useful in the overall story. When the overall story does not end up being a traditional narrative, the connection we have made still remains.
Despite similarities in style, Vonnegut and Barthelme have different agendas. Barthelme is propelled by a need to create a distraction in the face of meaninglessness. Vonnegut is motivated by the eyes of his community. Vonnegut writes, “A friend of mine once spoke to me about what he called the ‘existential hum,’ the uneasiness which keeps us moving, which never allows us to feel entirely at ease…I would describe the hum that is with me all the time as 

embarrassment” (Palm Sunday 169). This is a kind of self-consciousness that reflects an identity that is formed within a community, not the individualistic identity of an existentialist. This refers to the object-relations humanism introduced by Kristeva, which encompasses a “set of theories which postulate that relationships, beginning with the mother-infant dyad, are primary, and that intrapsychic, interpersonal, and group experiences lay the foundation for the development of individual identity,” meaning that humans are intrinsically social, contrasting the individualistic agenda of the previous eras (Birns 143). This offers a psychoanalytic backing for a social, moral, and material humanity, implying that our material interactions as well as our human connections form into our individual identity and, if positive, can propagate trust and compassion. This materiality is seen in Barthelme’s writing, but in a self-reflexive and semiotic way. Vonnegut is striving to decipher meaning from the material in order to reconstruct some humanist meaning out of the fragments left by postmodernists.

In Palm Sunday, Vonnegut uses a mesh of various narrative styles to present a collage of his new and old work with snippets of others’ works to create a “sort of autobiography” (xiii). He writes, “This book combines the tidal power of a major novel with the bone-rattling immediacy of front-line journalism- which is old stuff now… But I
have also intertwined the flashy enthusiasms of musical theater, the lethal left jab of the short story, the sachet of personal letters, the oompah of American history, and oratory in the bow-wow style” \((\text{Palm Sunday xii})\).

For Vonnegut, literary technique is less important than a text’s function. A meshing of styles is seen in many of his novels, where he pieces together personal experience and philosophy into fictional and sometimes fantastical situations. Even in fiction, and especially in \textit{Timequake}, Vonnegut inserts personal dialogue and references real experiences to give the reader a feeling of sincerity. Klinkowitz writes, “Reading anything Kurt Vonnegut has written is to engage in a remarkably personal dialogue with the man himself, and it is in his nonfiction prose that this manner is most apparent” \((\text{Vonnegut the Essayist 1})\). Vonnegut attempts to create a sincere human connection through his writing. His “overall method is to personalize, to look past obscuring technicalities in order to see the human dimension and, most important, to express that dimension in familiar, trustworthy terms” \((\text{Klinkowitz, Vonnegut the Essayist 14})\). The fictionalizing of his experiences gives his presentation of truth the “jab of the short story” that strings a connective tissue throughout. The “bow-wow style” he refers to is the direct, fast-paced style used also by Barthelme.

The collage-like style of Vonnegut’s fiction exemplifies the breaking down of cause and effect in which a character's life is not wedged between beginning and end, one thing leading to another, but rather encompasses the beginning and end as a part of the whole. Vonnegut adopts a circular view of time, and often finds himself or his characters visiting the past in present-time, as though time has not passed. In \textit{Slaughterhouse-Five}, Vonnegut writes, “It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows
another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone, it is gone forever,”
giving the impression that time does not have an end (35). There is no separation between
past, present, and future. This circularity in Vonnegut’s earlier works is just as paralyzing
as it is in Beckett’s plays because there is no end to it. In *Timequake*, written in 1997, an
end is revealed as a new freedom for humanity: free will.

Vonnegut’s characters live free of linear time and so are liberated by the absence
of causality. This lessens the importance of intention and puts greater responsibility on
people for their actions, a belief also held by French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre who
once said: “We are left alone. Without excuse…We are condemned to be free” (5).
Vonnegut’s characters do not mourn passed time nor do they wait for an inevitable end,
because they exist in seemingly random circumstances and times. The characters
themselves are the only thing that holds these circumstances together. This suggests a
certain empowerment of the self. Despite the time or the circumstance, the characters
remain a constant in Vonnegut’s books, revealing the transcendental quality of humanity.
Vonnegut writes, “We are all experiencing more or less the same lifetime,” which blurs
the boundaries of generations and time and presents life as a transcendental, collective
experience (*Palm Sunday* 161).

Vonnegut’s secular humanism can be related to “Christianity or to any traditional
faith” as a “coherent cultural order reestablished, on a secular basis, after the breakup of
the traditional religious order” (Carroll 192). Despite his allegiance to most postmodern
theory, Vonnegut still believes it is beneficial for humans to have something that looks
like traditional structure, to believe in their value despite the leveling implications of a
decentered universe which will allow them to take responsibility as subjective thinkers
for their community. Vonnegut’s acknowledgment of setting in “American history” separates his stories from Barthelme and Beckett who tend to set their stories outside of a clear place in time. Vonnegut acknowledges not only the time from which he is writing, inclusive of political and social issues, but also builds a family and community for his characters so that his stories can show his readers how it’s done. This reflects another scientific theory that human compassion is not a result of biology, but of art and imitation. William Flesch explores this process: “It is hard to see how so surprising a phenomenon as human cooperation could arise through evolutionary processes.

Cooperation is first a matter of relations between individuals. If the explanations recently proposed for the evolution of cooperation can shed light on narrative, what will turn out to be important is the audience’s relation to the things imitated, to the nonfactual events and actions recorded and represented” (13). Vonnegut is trying to build a relationship with the reader in order to introduce them to and teach them compassion.

Just as Beckett balances despair with humor, and Barthelme tempers emptiness with irony, Vonnegut uses comedy to soften the blow of his assertion that we are ignoring our responsibilities as members of humanity. Vonnegut urges his readers to act as subjective thinkers and to actively exist, warning, under a veil of humor, of the material consequences of our not doing so. Vonnegut writes “comedy that, encompassing threats and dissonance of a contemporary chaotic world, remains painful,” similar to Beckett's notion that “nothing is funnier than unhappiness” (Reed 36). Vonnegut’s books resemble disjointed science fiction narratives that comment on our plight indirectly through metaphor and hypothesis, but then he shifts into satirical humor, making light of the all-but-light fate of his characters: the destruction of humanity. His stories often depict a not-
so-far removed image of “an incomprehensible world in chemical dependence” that is our material setting in a philosophically decentered universe (Reed 37). Although Vonnegut acknowledges our collapsed causal system in his “painful comic rendering” of the science fiction narrative, he questions its significance if our material world is collapsing (Reed 36). *Timequake* highlights the irony of presenting the Nobel Peace Prize to the inventor of the hydrogen bomb when his wife was a pediatrician. Peter Reed writes, “the comedy in his fiction expresses a resistance to accepting the logic of the horror it depicts” meaning that perhaps Vonnegut is offering a way out of our meaninglessness through a material rendering of the philosophy (37). The ill-fate of humanity is not inevitable or philosophically determined, as it is for Beckett and Barthelme. It is brought on by human negligence and can be avoided through human awareness and social action. Sartre writes, "If I didn’t try to assume responsibility for my own existence, it would seem utterly absurd to go on existing" (McBride 104). Like Beckett, Vonnegut believes that the prospect of meaninglessness generates stagnation, so Vonnegut urges his readers to reclaim their existence, not in the real or in distraction, but by creating a new, human-centered casual system. Vonnegut sees meaninglessness as a call to invest that much more in humanity. If nothing else is looking after us, we must look after one another.

Vonnegut’s writing functions as a tool for his readers to experience and learn from his words. Vonnegut writes “to give the reader pleasure” and to construct a human connection with the reader (*Palm Sunday* 95). His belief is similar to Beckett’s in that the only thing that matters is human awareness and the connection we feel with other people. David Andrews explains that Vonnegut measures writerly success “by its relatively utilitarian, experiential, and ethical functions,” in other words, by whether the readers
invest enough in the story to allow it to make an impression on their sense of morality (18). It is “art’s communicative function is most important to Vonnegut” because it creates a bond between author and reader within the context of an idealized humanity (Andrews 19). Vonnegut's writing does not tout communication as much as it facilitates it.

Andrews continues that “this is in keeping with the idea that art, a physical artifact, is in itself unimportant. For Vonnegut, art does not possess intrinsic value; rather, it refers to humanity's intrinsic value” (19). Vonnegut invests in content that is separate from form to carry his message. The lightheartedness of Vonnegut's work, in his structure and content, are all attempts to draw the reader in, to urge us to not only feel the connection between ourselves and the narrator, but to experience the joy of having that connection.

Vonnegut believes that language has the power to create. He writes, “language is holy to me…literature is holy to me…Our freedom to say or write whatever we please in this country is holy to me. It is a rare privilege not only on this planet, but throughout the universe, I suspect. And it is not something somebody gave to us. It is a thing we give to ourselves” (Palm Sunday 150). This speaks to Barthelme's philosophy that meaning lies in our ability to think creatively. Barthelme and Vonnegut agree that the possibility of creating meaning lies within us. Vonnegut writes, “I believe that all the secrets of existence and nonexistence are somewhere in our heads- or in other people’s heads,” meaning that individually, we have insufficient resources to create meaning, but collectively we have enough to improve our fate and create a reason to live (Palm Sunday
150). This implies that humanity needs no other source outside of itself to provide its own structure of meaning.

Vonnegut emphasizes the importance of communicating with one another as a means toward collective meaning and a stronger morality. He says, “I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has so far found. By reading the writings of the most interesting minds in history, we meditate with our own minds and theirs as well” (Palm Sunday 50). Here, Vonnegut acknowledges the goal of his writing, to help bring about a collective meaning through self-consciousness and community.

Unlike Barthelme, Vonnegut regards creativity as beneficial only if it instills morality. According to Vonnegut, creative thinking for distractions sake is all that it is, a distraction from our true purpose- a much more grounded purpose: to be kind to one another. Vonnegut warns that thinking abstractly could do more harm than good. In his book Galapagos, Vonnegut writes:

And oh, yes, you could say, 'Wasn’t that ingenious of them?' and, 'They could never have done that if they hadn’t had great big brains,' and 'You can bet nobody today could figure out how to do stuff like that,' and so on. Then again, those people wouldn’t have had to behave so resourcefully, wouldn’t have been in such complicated difficulties, if the planet hadn’t been made virtually uninhabitable by the creations and activities of other people’s great big brains. (226)

Vonnegut believes that with tangible human issues concerning the environment and our communities, meaninglessness and feelings of despair are nothing more than a product of our “big brains’ overcomplicating things. The point, according to Vonnegut, is how we use the time we have and how we treat one another. Vonnegut stresses in Timequake that evolution has done little towards human compassion. Richard Dawkins writes, “Be
warned that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we were born selfish” (Carroll 366). Vonnegut argues that we must take work to create meaning for ourselves through community, because life, in its random and uncertain nature is not going to make it easy.

In examining Vonnegut's humanist philosophy, David Andrews addresses the question in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* that seems to fuel Vonnegut's writing: “What in the hell are people for?” Andrews writes, “The question remains unanswered because it assumes an ultimate design within which humans have a meaningful, crucial function...In the absence of such ultimacy, Vonnegut grants humanity a wholly practical, humanistic purpose. People are for people” (18). In Kristeva’s world of semiotics, Vonnegut reasons that people, like everything else, have no signifiers, they only have each other. The purpose of Vonnegut’s books is to raise compassion to the highest ideal and to show the destruction that ensues when those ideals are neglected. In *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, Eliot Rosewater proposes to say at a baptism: “There’s one rule I know of, babies…God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (93). The concept of a human rule, which Vonnegut proposes, contradicts the notion of a decentered reality. Andrew’s writes, “Were *Rosewater* a Barthelme story, the infants might respond by objecting that Eliot, in eliminating divine design, has eliminated the ultimate foundation for altruism. Why be kind? Who says? Vonnegut says” (18). In presenting a tangible solution to a philosophically intangible problem, Vonnegut is taking somewhat of a traditional stance of author as “creator.” Vonnegut is the author and therefore can portray any number of
contradictions in his book as long as it serves his purpose of creating an idealized world which people can learn from and imitate. He presents morality. He offers meaning and with meaning comes consequence, something Beckett and Barthelme do not address.

Vonnegut addresses one of the major themes in Beckett's plays, the inevitability of a lonely end. Vonnegut writes, “No matter how old we are, we are going to be bored and lonely during what remains of our lives” (Palm Sunday 163). Unlike Beckett, Vonnegut does not believe this is a result of the symbolic. He views it as a human cause that could be amended through community: “We are so lonely because we don’t have enough friends and relatives. Human beings are supposed to live in stable, like-minded, extended families of fifty people or more” (Palm Sunday 163). Vonnegut sees loneliness as a result of an irresponsible humanity that put other priorities ahead of our human need for community. "When we or our ancestors came to America, though, we were agreeing, among other things, to do without [large extended] families. It is a painful, unhuman agreement to make. Emotionally, it is hideously expensive” (Palm Sunday 164). Like Beckett, Vonnegut believes that loneliness (however unavoidable in the end, according to Beckett) is unnatural and is a solvable problem. Vonnegut's solution is simple and clear: “I recommend that everybody…join all sorts of organizations, no matter how ridiculous, simply to get more people in his or her life. It does not matter much if all the other members are morons. Quantities of relatives of any sort are what we need” (Palm Sunday 164).

Vonnegut believes that human interaction and companionship is what humans should strive for to ensure a meaningful life. He also believes that community will offer purpose and stability to individuals: “Marriage is collapsing because our families are too
small. A man cannot be a whole society to a woman, and a woman cannot be a whole society to a man. We try, but it is scarcely surprising that so many of us go to pieces” (Palm Sunday 164). “As for boredom,” Vonnegut writes, “we are supposed to be bored. It is a part of life. Learn to put up with it” (Palm Sunday 164). This reflects Barthelme's notion that we might not be happy with our mortality, but we have no choice but to deal with it.

Vonnegut empowers and guides his readers through his stories and his characters. They are the connecting force between events and are exempt from the restrictions of linear time. Vonnegut’s books reveal a movement away from high-postmodernist philosophies and into a material-based way of thought. He proposes that despite a decentered universe, we can create our own causal system through community. His books promote and simulate human connection to ultimately heighten our morality and spur conscious action to protect humanity from its own negligence.

4. Inside the Works

All three authors dabble in various mediums, but their preferred mediums are those that best emulate their visions. Beckett’s stage plays are a social medium bringing people together in an empty space, while his view encourages them to accept life’s meaninglessness and to come together in their shared human awareness. Barthelme’s and Vonnegut’s works engage the reader individually. Barthelme’s fragmented short stories craft distraction for the reader because of the quickly shifting narratives. Vonnegut’s novels require more time of the reader, working to invest the reader in his vision. Within
the three author’s works are strategic pacing, tone, structure, and content which further support each author’s vision.

4.1 Samuel Beckett’s Plays: *Waiting for Godot and Krapp’s Last Tape*

*Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* exemplify Beckett’s philosophy in form and content. *Waiting for Godot* premiered in 1953 and was published in 1954. *Krapp’s Last Tape* premiered and was published in 1958. Beckett unites form and content to portray the real and to urge his audience to take comfort in the sublime. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, he explores the dehumanizing nature of categorization through Krapp’s tape recordings. *Waiting for Godot* explores the sublime in the presentness of the main characters, Didi and Gogo, and in their dialogue suggesting circularity, or as Beckett puts it, coincidence of contraries. Beckett illustrates contraries, utilizing light and dark on the stage to explore the relationship between life and death, the meditative and the primal, and the ego and the id. *Waiting for Godot* underscores the futility of faith as a symbolic structure offering a false sense of progress.

Notable in Beckett’s plays are the silences and pauses in action and dialogue. These silences encourage self-consciousness in the audience members and a sense of dread in facing the real. This environment creates something close to what Beckett believes is divine: humanity as a self-aware whole connected through the sublime. Beckett emphasizes the importance of accepting an undifferentiated real by portraying loneliness as a product of the symbolic and as a recurring fear in the characters of *Waiting for Godot*. 
Waiting for Godot highlights the uncertain nature of a collapsed causal system and the error in searching for an absolute where none can be found in the symbolic. Didi and Gogo are rendered stagnant in their desire for an absolute. Didi says, “Let’s wait till we know exactly where we stand” before making a decision (13). The two refrain from action because they are waiting for the certainty that was only possible before Nietzsche’s death of God. As Peter Gay explains, “Beckett’s principle message [is] that life is a catastrophe from birth…and that salvation, even though promised, will never come” (452). They are waiting for God(ot). Beckett emphasizes that seeking any certainty in meaninglessness results in a stagnation because certainty refutes the undifferentiated nature of the real. Both Didi and Gogo repeat “it’s inevitable” in various circumstances, meaning that events will carry out one way or another and it is all the same (23). They have no control of their circumstances because they are unable to access a cause and effect system, a system with consequence. Because moments pass inconsequentially, Beckett’s characters have no convictions.

Lyotard wrote that the sublime can only exist in the now-in the ever-present moment between the past and the future (249). Unlike Krapp, the characters in Waiting for Godot have no connection to or memory of their past. Lance St. John Butler writes that there is a “kind of contingent Being-Thereness” a “presence” in which “Didi and Gogo in Godot are not going anywhere or doing anything, they are just ‘there’ with a vengeance” (10). The characters’ presence creates an immediacy in which the audience might drop their pretenses, confront the real, and ultimately experience the sublime. Gogo never remembers the past because that would nullify their presence. Vladimir states, “[Estragon’s] forgotten everything!” (67). Estragon is cut off from anything before
or after him. “I’m not a historian,” he says, stressing that it should not be expected of him to remember (72). Didi and Gogo are present on a nearly bare stage, representing the sublime-our self-consciousness-in the face of the real. The presentness of the characters produces a sense of anticipation in the audience which makes them more reactive to the minimal stimuli Beckett offers in his plays, but it also impels them to look outside of the stage for reinforcement. This creates a kind of heightened awareness in the audience members of their community.

Beckett presents the passing of time in *Krapp’s Last Tape* as a series of unrelated moments in order to show the lack of cause and effect and the fragmented nature of the symbolic. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, these moments are captured in tape recordings. Though time has passed, Krapp has not changed, indicating that there can be no progress in a meaningless world. Krapp enacts the fragmenting effects of the symbolic by organizing his life into a series of isolated periods through tape recordings. By identifying himself through differentiated moments, Krapp has alienated himself even from his past selves. Beckett believes that categorization is dehumanizing because it limits the human spectrum.

Beckett’s theory of the coincidence of contraries assumes that opposites exist on a spectrum so that one end verifies its counterpart: Black implies white, nothingness implies self-consciousness, and in *Waiting for Godot*, a positive outcome verifies a negative outcome. Pozzo underscores life as a spectrum by describing time as a series of passing moments that have no clear definition:

(suddenly furious) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one
day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (calmer) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more. (103)

Everything happens in one grand, present moment. Life is just a flash in the darkness; a flash in the nothingness.

Light and dark in Beckett’s plays represent a circular view of life and death. Life does not cause death. As with Foucault’s circular causality which assumes linearity cannot exist without causality, life is cyclic by nature. There is not just one life or death for Beckett’s characters. They may step in and out of the light, of existence and consciousness, many times before the lights go out for good. This is where the play’s form supports its content. These acts of leaving and reentering illustrate that life and death exist on a spectrum. In Waiting for Godot, the characters are only able to live by the rules of blurred boundaries and uncertainty:

POZZO. I don’t seem able... (long hesitation)...to depart.
ESTRAGON. Such is life. (50)

To underscore circular causality, the second act does not pick up where the first leaves off, but rather starts where the first began. Past events have no influence on later events.

Waiting for Godot also uses dark and light to represent the primitive and the meditative aspects of humanity. The play is situated in a pool of light surrounded by darkness. Under the light, the characters perform, but all material action takes place off stage in the darkness. It is as though the characters enter the symbolic in the light and return to a primitive state off stage. On the lit stage, Beckett reveals the futility of the symbolic, acknowledging contradiction between his message and his medium. Action under the light is repetitive with only slight variations. Pozzo urges Estragon to persuade
him to “take a seat,” while feigning modesty, “No no, I wouldn’t think of it! (Pause. 
Aside.) Ask me again” (37). Beckett is remarking upon the senselessness of social 
etiquette and highlighting the triviality of performed action. The light reveals the 
symbolic which we implement to deal with our meaninglessness. By acknowledging the 
futility of the symbolic, Beckett implies that something else exists in the realm of the 
mind- in the light- and that is the real.

Beckett scorns our primitive impulses which are revealed in the darkness of his 
plays. Off stage in the darkness, Gogo is assaulted, emphasizing the boorish nature of our 
actions when nobody is looking (64). The darkness is the material versus the meditative. 
When “Vladimir uses his intelligence” Vladimir says in defeat, “I remain in the dark” 
signifying that the dark is not a place for reason or intelligence (13). The darkness is our 
id, the place of earthly desires. The light is our ego, the place of control and performance. 
In Krapp’s Last Tape, Krapp leaves the stage to drink, engaging in earthly indulgences. 
On stage, under the light, he grapples at self-revision by methodically listening to tape-
recordings of his former self describing his rejection of love in favor of a more certain 
path. The symbolic is an attempt at control.

There is a clear correlation in both plays between repetition and controlling the 
unexpected. Didi and Gogo repeat their conversations in Waiting for Godot. Krapp is 
highly ritualistic. In Krapp’s Last Tape, Krapp’s recordings allow him to revisit his 
former self, but offer no condolence for his future isolation. This theory is an allegorical 
rendering of Freud’s repetition compulsion theory in which people repeat traumatic 
events in order to “bind to” them (Weatherhill14). In Beckett’s rendering, the characters’ 
repeated action is an attempt to bind the concept of the real to their imagination in the
symbolic. Rob Weatherill describes Freud’s theory: “If the mind is able to ‘bind’ an experience, it is able to process and think about that experience. If not, then the individual simply, passively reacts to the experience in a reflexive and literally ‘mindless’ fashion (14). Representing the transition from Lacan’s image stage to the symbolic stage, the characters in *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot* are unable to bind the real to the symbolic, so they ultimately identify with the symbolic in order to ease the tension. Beckett’s characters are attempting to control their circumstances in the symbolic which leaves no room for the uncertainty of the real. This highlights the false comfort in symbolic structures. Beckett’s characters act predictably and noncommittally, refusing to face the real that is so apparent around them. Their repetitive actions are habitual and disconnected, showing an attempt to bind the real but never able to because of their symbolic existence.

For Beckett, there is no way to escape the truth of the real through symbolic structures of any form. Beckett’s goal is to urge his audience to accept the real as a step towards self-consciousness in the sublime. *Waiting for Godot* highlights the futility of spiritual or religious endeavors as false constructs of meaning. Gogo, referring to Transcendentalism, proposes finding meaning in Nature:

> ESTRAGON. We should turn resolutely towards Nature.  
> VLADIMIR. We’ve tried that. (71)

Didi’s response and their unchanged situation imply that their attempt was unsuccessful. Beckett addresses the fault in constructed meaning. Vladimir states, “When you seek you hear…That prevents you from finding…That prevents you from thinking,” meaning that seeking out meaning will provide a meaning, but it will not be a false construct that
undermines the real (70). Accepting constructed meaning as truth, Beckett argues, will prevent us from achieving the sublime.

Another example of constructed meaning in *Waiting for Godot* can be found in Didi and Gogo’s faith in Godot. Their relationship with God(ot) acts as a warning to those who put stock in objective meaning. The traditional system of absolute truth and objective meaning may offer hope, but it is a false hope that will never come to fruition. Hoping for Godot simultaneously motivates Didi and Gogo to continue living and keeps them stagnant in their position:

   ESTRAGON. Let’s go.
   VLADIMIR. We can’t.
   ESTRAGON. Why not?
   VLADIMIR. We’re waiting for Godot. (51)

Didi and Gogo are limited by their constructed meaning, but Beckett has left a bleak alternative. There is nothing to fall back on. Didi and Gogo actively and desperately choose to wait for Godot because when they do not, the vast nothingness sinks in. When his characters stop performing and stop engaging in the symbolic, these are the moments of the sublime. The real is apparent and his characters are unable to sustain the symbolic as a defense against it. These moments of the sublime exist in the pauses and silences in his plays.

   The characters’ pauses and silences take place under the light, as do their performances. The same higher consciousness that chooses the symbolic can also choose to let it go. This is the power of our conceptualization implied by the sublime. The pauses in *Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* are moments of unveiling for the audience. These are moments where the symbolic falls away and we get a glimpse of the real. The pauses
encourage meditation in the audience, completely “beyond the reach of the primitive mind” and towards the sublime (Beckett, Disjecta 26). Beckett’s pauses offer full disclosure to the audience, revealing the true stagnation behind the characters’ performances. The pauses are awkward moments that generate self-consciousness and tension in the audience.

Beckett’s silences in the plays function similarly to his pauses, but the silences are heavier and more serious. The silences arise when the characters’ performances cannot be sustained. Action and dialogue fall away to silence and stillness. The following scene from Waiting for Godot exemplifies the silences found throughout the play:

VLADIMIR. Listen!
*They listen, grotesquely rigid.*
ESTRAGON. I hear nothing.
VLADIMIR. Hsst! (*They Listen…*)

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Silence. (15)

These periods of silence represent Beckett’s nothingness. The recurring silences reinforce the constant presence of the real underneath the symbolic. Didi and Gogo may deflect the real once in a while thanks to play or quick wit, but the silence inevitably pulls them back.

The silence in Krapp’s Last Tape has a similar inevitability. Krapp plunges himself into the constructed world of his past by listening intently to his tape recordings, but this construction cannot satisfy him. Krapp is using repetition and structure in order to gain control over meaninglessness. Without a system of cause and effect, his actions are futile and the individual tapes cannot replace the undifferentiated nature of Krapp’s existence. This suggests Freud’s view that the “‘compulsion to repeat’…striv[es] towards
a goal that [is] apparently totally incompatible with the interests and the happiness of the individual” (Weatherill 14). Krapp becomes overwhelmed by his lack of control and stops the tapes to brood in silence. The silence, for Beckett, is the only place where the full weight of the real comes to light and therefore where the sublime can flourish. The real is so whole that no sound or action can intrude upon it. The silence, more than the pauses, extends past the stage and out to the audience, creating a space in which the characters and audience can experience the real and share in the divinity of the sublime as a collective whole.

A major theme in *Waiting for Godot* is the inevitability of loneliness and the human desire for company. Didi and Gogo are aware that they will end up alone and without purpose, but they do not acknowledge it, instead they embody it in their loneliness. Beckett acknowledges that meaninglessness is something difficult to face alone, which is one reason he chooses to disclose our plight in the social medium of a stage play. When left alone in the light while Estragon sleeps, Vladimir desperately awakes him, explaining, “I felt lonely,” (103). Even when upset, Estragon yells, “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!” showing a desperation for company (63).

The function of companionship in *Waiting for Godot* is not just to dispel loneliness, but to validate our existence. Didi tells the Boy in Act I, “Tell him [(Godot)] …Tell him you saw us. (Pause) You did see us, didn’t you?” this shows a need for validation that only another person can provide (56). In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Krapp captures different versions of himself every year on tape in order to create a kind of artificial company to ease his loneliness and to validate his existence. In Beckett’s
uncertain world, even our being is called into question. Beckett’s characters are desperate to avoid losing themselves to the uncertainty of being: “Nothing is certain,” but people can, at least, validate one another (59).

Uniting people through his plays is Beckett’s ultimate goal. After creating a negative space in which people can experience the real, Beckett offers hope that we are not alone. Both *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* promote community simply by providing a medium through which Beckett’s audience can achieve the sublime as a group. The plays touch upon the major themes in Beckett’s philosophy, including the coincidence of contraries, the real and the sublime, and bonding through the trauma of our meaninglessness. Beckett’s plays also contain themes that are later seen in the works of Donald Barthelme and Kurt Vonnegut. *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp’s Last Tape* function in form and content to present a clear outline of Beckett’s philosophy of meaninglessness and to offer hope in our ability to conceptualize and the communal experience of watching his plays.

4.2 Donald Barthelme’s Short Stories: “Nothing a Preliminary Account,” “The New Music,” and “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”

Barthelme’s faith in distraction as a stay against meaninglessness is apparent in his collection of short stories, *Sixty Stories*. Barthelme takes a direction different from Beckett. It is more playful and less direct. He writes indirectly in order to knead the message into the form of his stories rather than in the content. In “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” Barthelme emphasizes the difference between reason and the imagination and finds delight in the unexpected. “The New Music” shows the necessity for distraction
despite its semiotic nature and highlights the limits of traditional structures on our imagination. Finally, in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” Barthelme questions the artist and comes to terms with the limits of irony to provide a satisfactory solution to our decentered universe. Barthelme finds empowerment in our creativity and refuge in delight. He argues that our meaning lies in free play and distraction which is without pattern, and created and recreated out of the shifting relationship between reason and the imagination and between old and new generations.

“Nothing: A Preliminary Account” sets the groundwork for Barthelme’s view. The story emphasizes that our ability to imagine is just as important as our ability to reason. The search for meaning, despite meaninglessness, opens an opportunity for free play and therefore delight. The search is an end in itself. Barthelme meshes symbolic structures to emphasize the semiotic nature of the decentered universe. Always in Barthelme, the unexpected comes from fragments of the old. In “Nothing,” the question of meaning is always present, but the answers are ever-changing and susceptible to impulse and irrationality.

In “Nothing a Preliminary Account,” Barthelme creates a dialogue between two speakers, one imaginative and one reasonable. One speaker lists what Nothing is not and the other keeps him on course. The imaginative speaker thinks of everything there is while the reasonable speaker urges him closer to the inevitable realization of a decentered universe. These are not necessarily two separate people. It is unclear in many of Barthelme’s stories if the speakers are part of the same mind or not. Both speakers are working towards the same goal, to define Nothing, but the imaginative speaker,
representing Barthelme’s faith in distraction, engages in free play in order to imply Nothing- or meaningless- without facing it. The reasonable speaker, representing Beckett’s modernist view, urges them to get to the core of it. This scientific approach parodies the structuralist method of stripping away the symbolic to expose the real. Barthelme steps back from this approach to emphasize that our ability to imagine and create things is worth acknowledging because there is no real to expose.

By listing all of the things that are not nothing, Barthelme is revealing and relishing the free play we would be missing if we only focused the meaninglessness a decentered universe implies. Within the list we find more than just objects, but also short anecdotes about human interaction, and philosophies. By mixing these various symbols on the same level, Barthelme is revealing their semiotic nature, opening the opportunity for delight in creation. The imaginative speaker lists “the handsome Indian woman standing next to the stone table,” which introduces the old spirituality America has long correlated with Native Americans, then ends with, “holding the blond, kidnapped child,” turning the initial picture into something unexpected (239). Barthelme does the same thing later on, describing “two naked lovers having a pillow fight,” an innocent and pure scene which flips into a disturbing situation on the whim of the imaginative speaker, the “male partner will, unseen by his beloved, load his pillowcase with a copy of Webster’s Third International” (239). Barthelme’s use of the unexpected exemplifies the unpredictability of human nature in a decentered universe and underscores the power of our imagination to create. By choosing Webster’s Third International as the object in use, Barthelme is further showing the futility of trying to attain definitive meaning. The male partner has a book of meanings but is using it to facilitate his impulsive behavior. The old
symbolic structures that once offered meaning have now been re-appropriated as semiotic objects for play.

Barthelme inserts philosophical concepts into the list, some in passing: “Neither is [nothing] the proposition *esse est percipi* [to be is to be perceived], nor is it any of the refutations of that proposition” (239). Heidegger believes that reality, or the objective presence of things, is concealed by our own projections of reality and that concealment is harmful to our being (Heidegger 5). Barthelme believes that our only reality is a decentered universe, but instead of revealing this reality, as Heidegger suggests, Barthelme strives to conceal it under free play. The characters continue a slightly deeper philosophical pursuit into Heidegger’s theory, before repudiating it by naming Sartre as Heidegger’s adversary “among others” (241). Then, tongue in cheek, the narrator announces, “But Heidegger is too grand for us,” (241). But Barthelme cannot leave it there; after all, the search for meaning is what Barthelme condones, so the speakers “applaud [Heidegger’s] daring” then return to their “homelier task, making a list” (241). Barthelme is acknowledging the weight of philosophy and reason, but remains committed to distraction and creativity. This way, as in Barthelme’s other stories, Barthelme hints at the abyss of meaninglessness, while remaining on the surface.

Unlike the imaginative speaker who is dreaming up the list, the reasonable speaker is in a hurry to complete the list: “Good, we got that in. Hurry on,” “We are nervous. There is not much time,” and he repeats, “Hurry. Not much time.”(239-240). Barthelme later quotes Beckett, “Burning to be gone,” implying that whipping through distraction after distraction will only bring you to the end faster. It is the use of our imaginations, taking time to think of the definitions that gives us meaning. Coming to the
end- to the realization of a decentered universe- will only bring us and our distractions to a halt, to stagnation. Barthelme reveals towards the end of the story that “the list can in principle never be completed,” and it is not meant to (241). The imagining, no matter how futile, gives us delight. Again: “How joyous the notion that, try as we may, we cannot do other than fail and fail absolutely and that task will remain before us, like a meaning for our lives” (242). All of these seemingly random situations, thoughts, and objects are “not much, but not nothing” and they will suffice to create a distraction from the decentered universe (242).

Just as Barthelme compares reason and the imagination, he also establishes a dichotomy between the old and new generations In “The New Music,” compliance with the traditional structures of the old means an unbearable stagnation, while deviation from the traditional keeps us moving. This is precisely what Barthelme is doing in his own fiction by working out of Beckett’s minimalism. Constructing meaning is a never ending process that recurs in every generation. This reveals a human need to question our purpose, but also to find a distraction if our purpose is nil.

“The New Music” presents the traditional 19th century structures and modernist structures as equally unappealing for humanity. Barthelme shows the limiting qualities of the traditional structures on individual freedom when one speaker proposes a new form of religion, in the shape of “Pool, [the] city of new life…the revivifier…city of hope,” echoing baptism. However, Pool is tightly structured and therefore limiting: “Pool. The idea was that it be one of those new towns. Where everyone is happier. The regulations are quite strict” meaning that in order to have the comfort of certainty, we must maintain a degree of structure which precludes free play and therefore delight (336). The speaker
adds: “even if one does not go there, one may assimilate the meaning of Pool,” implying that meaning is easily and objectively accessible in the traditional structures, which counters the subjective meaning the new generation seeks (355). The second speaker has been to Pool and is not interested in returning: “I’d like to just rest and laze around,” revealing the modernist notion that once the traditional structures have been rejected, humanity loses its convictions (337). Neither the traditional nor the modernist approach seems an attractive option for humanity, offering either regulated structure or stagnation.

The limiting effect of traditional structures on creativity is emphasized in another section of “The New Music,” when the two speakers begin describing their oppressive mother. The mother, being of the older generation, represents the traditional structure. The mother regulates their actions, “sitting there ‘lowing and not-‘lowing. In her old rocking chair” (338). She is an image of restraint. She moves but does not progress, showing the futility of traditional structures. The mother keeps her children from playing musical instruments, muffling their creativity. If trying creativity keeps us moving, the mother, representing causality, does not allow it. Causality does not lend itself to irrationality. The mother imposes her stagnation on their distraction. They could not exist if not for her- just as Barthelme’s work could not exist if not for the traditional and modernist structures before him- but they must reject her in order to flourish. Free play can only exist in a decentered universe: “Momma wouldn’t have ’lowed it. But Momma’s gone” (340). Barthelme is acknowledging that his playful writing would not have the impact it does if Beckett’s starkness had not come before it. The two generations oppose each other but are part of the same family.
Barthelme introduces the use of distraction to provide relief from humanity’s dismal prospects. The first speaker, desperate to find distraction in newness, turns to art, “the new music.” The new music is described as “drumless,” referring to the lack of rhythm or predictability in postmodern art (337). He portrays a ridiculous image that self-referentially satirizes postmodern art: “To make up for the absence of drums the musicians pray nightly to the Virgin, kneeling in their suits of lights in damp chapels provided for the purpose” (337). This describes the new music as a conglomeration of the traditional and the new, but that is shallow. By rejecting the structures as symbolic and using them as semiotic signs, then what is left is movement propelled by free play. But to have distraction is not enough. Distraction without delight is the same as running through a list of “not nothings” without pausing. It is missing the point. The point is to be surprised, to feel delight, not just to go through the movements.

Barthelme is criticizing Ezra Pound’s “Make it new!” mantra for the modernist movement (Gay 4). Though Barthelme was a postmodernist, he still wanted his work to make a difference, to function in society to make people question the traditional structures and feel delight. The characters in “The New Music” are almost laughable in their obsession with newness and play because they are unaware of the decentered universe that implies it. The characters are no deeper than the new music, because they too are functioning as distractions for the reader. Barthelme’s characters are just another part of the performance on the page.

Without directly stating it, Barthelme acknowledges that even his stories are mere distractions from our decentered universe and will not provide a withstanding solution to our meaninglessness. The new music is rumored to have achieved miracles in the same
vein as many religions. “A man who was a Communist heard the new music, and now is not. Fernando the fish-seller was taught to read and write by the new music, and now is a leper, white as snow,” which puts religion and art on the same level as institutions attempting to find meaning (340). This is a satirical rejection of art or religion as a means to create meaning. The speaker describes “William Friend,” note the humble name, who “was caught trying to sneak into the new music with a set of bongos concealed under his cloak, but was garroted with his own bicycle chain, just in time” (340). The man who attempts to reinstate a rule from the past generations, to bring in the drums, gets strangled by an act of irony. Barthelme is showing that irony negates the structures of past eras, and that our obsession with newness is so desperate because any reminder of the old is threatening. The frantic newness and lack of structure of the new music suggests that postmodern art may be just another structure that has its own rules and limitations.

“The New Music” acknowledges the attempts of various generations to deal with our meaninglessness, but each attempt is as ineffectual as the next because the decentered universe is our only reality. One of the speakers finds a “bird that fell into the back yard,” and thinks “it might be hungry” so he gets a Frito and tries to “get it to eat the Frito,” which it does not (340). The speaker has hope for the bird’s survival. The mother finds the speaker and punishes him for treating the bird poorly “then [throws] the bird away…anticipating no doubt handling of the matter by the proper authorities,” which is equally as useless to the bird as trying to feed it a Frito. The bird is our meaninglessness which elicits different responses from different generations. The repeated failed attempts to deal with our meaninglessness properly coincides with the final message in “Nothing:
a Preliminary Account.” It is the search that keeps us moving; the reality always stays the same.

In “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” Barthelme questions the function of art in a society and explores the function of irony. He argues that creation is the artist’s purpose, no matter what function a work of art might serve. The story is a dialogue between Q and A. Q represents mechanical reasoning whose priorities lie in functionality while A represents individual creativity whose priorities lie in irony. Q questions A at a basic level, attempting to find the beneficial function of irony in a society. “Do you think your irony could be helpful in changing the government?” to which A answers with a highly imaginative hypothetical situation, deflecting the question (155). In this dialogue, Barthelme is questioning the role of the artist in society and asking if art’s worth can be measured by society’s standards of functionality. A does not care whether his irony, representing postmodern art, fits into Q’s calculated priorities, because A’s irony is meditative, not practical: “Q: You’re not political?/ A: I’m extremely political in a way that does no good to anybody/ Q: You don’t participate?/ A: I participate.” and he continues to give another imagined account (155). Again, Barthelme is rejecting the power of art to create any real meaning in a decentered universe, but asserts that it can still offer relief from it. This dissatisfaction with art as a distraction from meaninglessness hints at the beginnings of the more material solutions that arose after the height of postmodernism.

At every turn, A undermines the seriousness of Q’s task by answering ironically, which A explains is the function of irony: “the object is deprived of its reality by what I have said about it” (159). This refers to the re-appropriation of the symbolic as semiotic
which gives A an individual power within society, a way to deviate from and triumph “over the world” (159). Barthelme is attempting to offer empowerment to people through his irony, even though it is irony that ultimately reveals the decentered universe that implies their meaninglessness. A says, “I am trying to annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his disapproval,” meaning that Barthelme is trying to distract from a decentered universe in order to help deal with it (160). In the story, A uses irony to offer some hope in the face of meaninglessness, even if it has no practical function. Q asks, “Does it give you pleasure?” to which A responds, “A poor… A rather unsatisfactory…” even though A claims to love his irony (161). Irony implies a decentered universe while distracting from it, but Barthelme questions its use. A says the same thing about his fantasies, that they provide “a poor… a rather unsatisfactory…” pleasure (154). This refers to Barthelme’s offer of hope in imagination, which also falls short of providing a tangible solution to meaninglessness. Eventually Q finds the measurable function of irony: to benefit the greater good through reconciliation, but A negates that discovery by remarking: “(bitterly): Yes, that makes up for everything, that you know that story” (242). Barthelme concludes that art is not measured by its function, and that irony may be unsatisfactory, but what makes his art and irony valuable is that it may lead to something unexpected. It may instill a sense of delight. It may not be much, “but it’s not nothing” (242).

These three stories, though very different in structure and form, cohere to provide a multifaceted support of Barthelme’s main theme, that distraction and delight are the only relief from the constant weight of the decentered universe. Distraction comes in the form of creativity and free play which cannot exist without an active conversation between old and new structures. His stories are presented in a fast-paced, fragmented way
which on the surface looks harmless, but at closer look reveals the looming truth of meaninglessness.

4.3 Kurt Vonnegut’s Book: *Timequake*

Kurt Vonnegut calls for a more practical solution to our meaninglessness in a new causal system based on secular humanism. In his movement away from a decentered universe, his work usually takes a recognizable story structure, though not always the form of narrative. *Timequake* is a good example of Vonnegut’s later work. The book vacillates between Vonnegut’s autobiographical stories, segments of an unfinished novel, and his “alter-ego” Kilgore Trout’s short stories. Through his autobiographical pieces, Vonnegut introduces the reader to his extended family to give an example of a supportive human community and to establish a personal connection to the reader. The theme that runs through “Timequake One,” the unfinished novel, is that human connection and a sense of purpose by means of a community is what makes life worth living. Community provides the human center that repudiates a decentered universe. Trout’s short stories support this view, stressing that after accepting life’s meaninglessness it takes effort to become a subjective thinker and to take responsibility for one’s own meaning through compassion and creativity. Vonnegut believes that human awareness is what gives us the power to become the creators of our own meaning. By the end of the book Vonnegut challenges the reader to become a vital member of society by making an effort to act selflessly.

Vonnegut adopts postmodernist techniques, but still makes use of conventional literature by summarizing stories through the mouthpiece of his alter-ego, Kilgore Trout.
Vonnegut writes, “All I do with short story ideas now is rough them out, credit them to Kilgore Trout, and put them in a novel” (17). Vonnegut summarizes Trout’s stories throughout *Timequake* in order to get the moral across without falling too far into conventional story writing.

Vonnegut acknowledges that the purpose of his writing is to present how things “ought to be” not how things necessarily are in order to illustrate a moral humanity which people can imitate and learn from. To emulate ideas rather than recreate reality, Vonnegut introduces caricatures that represent and highlight certain aspects of society. He writes in *Timequake*, “‘I don’t write literature. Literature is all those la-di-da monkeys next door care about. Those artsy-fartsy twerps next door create living, breathing, three-dimensional characters with ink on paper,’ [Trout] went on, ‘Wonderful! As though the planet weren’t already dying because it has three billion too many living, breathing, three-dimensional characters!’” (71). Vonnegut reinforces his work as a medium for his message of humanism, not simply a medium for entertainment or conventional narratives. He writes, “Trout might have said, and it could be said of me as well, that he created caricatures rather than characters,” which can be seen especially in Trout’s short stories presented in *Timequake* (72). Vonnegut writes, as Trout, that creating three-dimensional characters would take time away from “calling attention to things that really matter: irresistible forces in nature, and cruel inventions, and cockamamie ideals…” (72). In other words, Vonnegut intends to explore and create his humanism through and with his writing: “I am a philosopher. I have to be,” in hopes that he can solve some of the problems we have as a society, not just replicate them (216).
In *Timequake*, Vonnegut creates a family tree of sorts by sharing with the reader his own personal connections. The only three-dimensional characters in *Timequake* are people who really existed, people with whom Vonnegut had a true human connection. The accounts of him and his sister, or his last moments with his ex-wife, urge the reader to feel what he must have felt— to be empathetic. Vonnegut urges us to grin when he recalls his sister’s cynicism: “Allie, in Heaven now, hated life and said so,” and to be warmed by his ex-wife’s optimism: “her favorite exclamation was: ‘I can’t wait!’” (1, 134). Talking of their deaths evokes sadness or relief, depending on Vonnegut’s account of them. He writes about his first wife’s funeral: “I did not speak at her Episcopal obsequy. I wasn’t up to it. Everything I had to say was for her ears alone, and she was gone” (134). Despite the sarcasm that runs deep in *Timequake*, Vonnegut is never ironic when he shares these moments. One gets the feeling that these moments of connection are pure. These moments are our reason for living.

Vonnegut argues that we have evolved to a point of self-awareness which allows us to recognize our own meaninglessness. He writes, “It appears to me that the most highly evolved Earthling creatures find being alive embarrassing or much worse” (1). He is referring to the meaninglessness that Beckett urges us to face because it proves our powers of conceptualization. But for Vonnegut it also proves that many people have nothing to live for, resulting in our loss of conviction. According to Vonnegut, this evolution is not ideal for the progression of humanity and might in fact lead to its destruction. “For practically everybody,” Vonnegut writes, “the end of the world can’t come soon enough” (2). Vonnegut summarizes this theory in a fictional anecdote about Kilgore Trout’s father, Raymond, researching the Bermuda ern, a bird that had evolved a
habit of destroying its young: “In the past, and presumably for thousands of years, the females had hatched their eggs, and tended the young, and finally taught them to fly by kicking them off the top of a steeple. But when Raymond Trout went there as a doctoral candidate with his bride, he found that the females had taken to bowdlerizing the nurturing process by kicking the eggs off the top of the steeple” (185). This evolved behavior, which was not a result of “anything people had done, so far as anyone could tell,” was still “dwindling [the] population” of these erns. The erns are humans, as far as Vonnegut is concerned. He does not believe that there is anything we can do about our “big brains” over-thinking and overcomplicating our presence. He writes, “I visited Rockefeller University recently, and they are seeking and finding more and more genes that tend to make us behave this way or that way, just as a rerun timequake would do” (137). Vonnegut maintains that we are responsible for dealing with our biological fate as well as our meaninglessness in a moral and worthwhile manner.

Vonnegut stresses that paying attention to the next generation is one of the most important steps we can take as a community. He proposes new amendments to the constitution, offering tangible, material solutions to our meaninglessness. The first one is that “every newborn shall be sincerely welcomed and cared for until maturity” (176). In Timequake, Vonnegut strongly commends pediatricians as saintly aids towards the continuation of humanity. He writes, “But isn’t it time for us to ask now if she [Elena Bonner], or any pediatrician or healer, wasn’t more deserving of a Peace Prize than anyone who had a hand in creating an H-bomb for any kind of government anywhere? Human rights? What could be more indifferent to the rights of any form of life than an H-
Vonnegut repeatedly questions the priorities of our society in relation to what he believes our priorities should be; children at the top and community right after.

Vonnegut believes that being in a community puts necessary responsibilities on an individual and raises humanity’s collective morality. A community can give an individual a sense of purpose and belonging, which Vonnegut believes is vital for human progression. The second amendment Vonnegut proposes is that “every adult who needs it shall be given meaningful work to do, at a living wage,” revealing that work- material, practical work- creates meaning and is sufficient in reviving the will to live.

The concept of the timequake warns against living life without being aware of it. It is a ten year period of repeated history in which everybody must relive their lives exactly as they had before, conscious of the repeat but unable to say or do anything differently. After the timequake, Kilgore Trout develops a mantra to shake people out of their Post Timequake Apathy: “You were sick but now you’re well again and there’s work to do” (196). This could be a mantra for the postmodern humanist era. Modernists, including Beckett, established an inescapable meaninglessness which was reinforced by the postmodernist notion of the decentered universe. Vonnegut is attempting to shake the inescapability of our meaninglessness by offering human empowerment in free will. “You were sick but now you’re well again,” tells us that there was meaninglessness and despair, but now there is an answer: “there is work to do,” giving people a sense of tangible purpose.

Later in the novel, Vonnegut proposes two more amendments. One, that “every person, upon reaching a statutory age of puberty, shall be declared an adult in a solemn public ritual, during which he or she must welcome his or her new responsibilities in the
community, and their attendant dignities,” and “every effort shall be made to make every
person feel that he or she will be sorely missed when he or she is gone” (202). This is
Vonnegut placing the responsibility of human worth and meaning on other humans, on
his readers. He is proposing that we commit to existence as subjective thinkers (Earnshaw
167). He writes, “Such essential elements in an ideal diet for a human spirit, of course,
can be provided convincingly only by extended families” (202). Community, Vonnegut
believes, will provide the same comfort that the traditional structures once gave
humanity, a purpose and human connection.

Vonnegut’s timequake represents the current state of humanity and warns that we
are letting life go on without us. He repeats throughout the novel “rerun or not,” implying
that there is no difference from our everyday lives and our lives on “automatic-pilot” (8,
220). Vonnegut is not accusing humanity or his readers of anything for which he does not
also accept guilt. He writes, “I have taught creative writing during my seventy-three years
on automatic pilot, rerun or not,” admitting that he too has been pulled along by
meaninglessness and insignificant priorities, but also showing that he is doing something
meaningful, teaching the next generation to be creative. According to Vonnegut, the only
way to rebound from the apathy produced by meaninglessness is to become subjective
thinkers and to consciously make life better. Vonnegut writes that by rejecting
meaninglessness rather than embracing it like Beckett does, we can live free of its threat.
He writes, “Only when people got back to when the timequake hit did they stop being
robots of their pasts. As the old science fiction writer Kilgore Trout said, ‘Only when free
will kicked in again could they stop running obstacle courses of their own construction’”
(xv). Vonnegut believes that allowing meaninglessness to drive us is hazardous, but just
as dangerous as the other “obstacle courses of our own construction,” like war or economics or any other structure that pushes in the opposite direction of humanity and morality’s progress.

After the apathy of meaningless wears off, we are in a situation much like the end of the timequake: “[Trout] and everybody else were suddenly obligated to think of new stuff to do, to be creative again” (xvi). Vonnegut stresses that with free will comes responsibility to create a life worth living. We can choose to live on “auto-pilot” as if in a timequake, or we can really live as subjective thinkers by being “aware” of our lives. Being aware of our and others’ lives gives life meaning. Vonnegut offers a personal anecdote about awareness: “My uncle Alex Vonnegut…taught me something very important. He said that when things were really going well, we should be sure to notice it…Uncle Alex urged me to say out loud [when things were going well]: if this isn’t nice. What is?” (14).

The power Vonnegut gives to human awareness is great. He writes that our awareness “is a new quality in the Universe, which exists only because there are human beings” (243). It is what makes us special and our lives worth living. He believes that human awareness has the ability to alter our essence and our surroundings: “Physicists must from now on, when pondering the secrets of the Cosmos, factor in not only energy and matter and time, but something very new and beautiful, which is human awareness” (243). He writes, “I have thought of a better word than awareness…Let us call it soul” (243). Human awareness, according to Vonnegut, gives us the ability to act as creators of our own meaning, giving us the divine power to create a human causal system.
The power to create meaning comes from the collective effort of a community to be kind and to show compassion. Compassion, according to Darwin, was the driving force behind a moral society (Carroll 367). Compassion is the moral of many of Trout’s stories in *Timequake*. One such story is called “No Laughing Matter,” in which Vonnegut presents compassion as a divine product of humanity and the quality of the most enlightened individuals in a community. Vonnegut writes:

Trout said in “No Laughing Matter” that the pilot and his bombardier had felt somewhat godlike on previous missions, when they had had nothing more than incendiaries and conventional high explosives to drop on people. “But that was godlike with a little g,” he wrote. “They identified themselves with minor deities who only avenged and destroyed. Up there in the sky all alone, with the purple [atom bomb] slung underneath their plane, they felt like the Boss God Himself, who had an option which hadn’t been theirs before, which was to be *merciful*. (11)

The pilot was merciful because “that’s what his mother would have wanted him to do” (11). Vonnegut is exemplifying what “ought to be” in this story by presenting a situation that could potentially lead to the destruction of life and morality, but instead, because of community, ends in compassion. Compassion is shown as a product of self-consciousness within a community.

Vonnegut argues that creativity lends itself to compassion because we are able to imagine other people’s stories and empathize with them. This is the case in another Kilgore Trout story in which an alien race called the Booboolings fall from being compassionate and aware to living on auto-pilot due to the destruction of community and imagination:

Trout said Booboolings were among the most adaptable creatures in the local family of galaxies. This was thanks to their great big brains, which could be programmed to do or not do, and feel or not feel, just about anything. You name it! The programming wasn’t done surgically or
electrically, or by any other sort of neurological intrusiveness. It was done *socially*, with nothing but talk, talk, talk. Grownups would speak favorably about presumably appropriate and desirable feelings and deeds. The brains of the youngsters would respond by growing circuits that made civilized pleasures and behaviors automatic. (19)

Vonnegut utilizes Trout’s stories in order to write didactically while maintaining the casual connection through his disarming first person dialogue with the reader. In this passage, social interactions within a community are again the key to a meaningful life. When certain human constructions, including over-thinking and inventions like the television are introduced, the Booboolings lose their ability to think creatively, and therefore lose their compassion. The loss of creativity leads them to live in a world like our own: “Without imaginations, though, they couldn’t do what their ancestors had done, which was read interesting, heart-warming stories in the faces of one another. So, according to Kilgore Trout, ‘Booboolings became among the most merciless creatures in the local family of galaxies’” (20). The stories Vonnegut writes under Trout’s name are cautionary tales about what we will become if we don’t revive our compassion and heighten our morality.

Vonnegut acknowledges that we cannot be saints all the time, but by acting kindly and compassionately every once in a while we boost the morality of the human community. For example, he writes, “Hooray for firemen! Scum of the Earth as some may be in their daily lives, they can all be saints in emergencies. Hooray for firemen” (7). Just as we are differing parts contributing to a bigger human community, we have differing parts within ourselves that ideally act to boost our morality and imagination. Trout says at a gathering of Vonnegut’s fictional and personal guests, “In the beginning there was absolutely nothing, and I mean *nothing,*” he said. ‘But nothing implies
something, just as up implies down and sweet implies sour, as man implies woman and
drunk implies sober and happy implies sad. I hate to tell you this, friends and neighbors,
but we are teensy-weensy implications in an enormous implication” (28). This hints at
Beckett’s nothingness and the more positive implications of it, but it also evokes
Beckett’s “humanity is divine, but no man is divine” (22). Like Beckett, Vonnegut
suggests that because of human awareness, we are the something out of the nothing.

At the end of *Timequake*, Vonnegut urges us to follow his humanist agenda just as
his caricatures do. He reiterates his belief that “Many people need desperately to receive
this message: ‘I feel and think much as you do, care about many of the things you care
about, although most people don’t care about them. You are not alone,’ giving the reader
a script to work from in the reader’s own community (221). In the closing chapter,
Vonnegut calls on the reader in a way he does not in the rest of the book: “What being
made alive almost worthwhile for me was the saints I met, people behaving unselfishly
and capably. They turned up in the most unexpected places. Perhaps you, dear reader, are
or can become a saint” (240).

Vonnegut’s *Timequake* blends the personal style of Vonnegut the autobiographer
and the didacticism of Vonnegut the activist. Vonnegut constructs a human connection
with the reader by opening his personal life and the structure of the novel up to the reader.
His anecdotes are sincere and humorous, drawing the reader in, which prepares the reader
to accept the more conventional stories presented under Vonnegut’s alter-ego Kilgore
Trout. Vonnegut believes that community and human awareness will allow us to create a
humanist meaning to replace the objective meaning that was lost in the modernist era.
Vonnegut gives the reader hope by creating a space within the novel for human connection as well as offering a tangible solution to a decentered universe.

5. Conclusion

All three authors have faith in the human spirit. None of them are willing to accept meaninglessness without also acknowledging some hope for humanity. Their works are social tools that function to spread hope. Beckett finds hope in our ability to conceptualize the real even if we can’t imagine it. He encourages a human connection among his audience members through the shared experience of the sublime. Barthelme finds hope in our creativity and the possibility of delight in the unexpected. He offers a distraction from the decentered universe in the free play of his stories. Vonnegut finds hope in compassion and community and believes that “people are for people.” His writing provides a human link through his openness as a narrator and his unconventional structure, while his moral anecdotes offer a tangible solution to meaninglessness. The authors speak directly with their audiences, they all acknowledge what is at stake, whether it is stagnation or the loss of morality, but they always offer hope. Their goal is to find some human empowerment that will give their audiences some certainty, some course of action, in a life we might not be prepared to face.
Bibliography


