Context and Neglect: Kurt Vonnegut and the Middleclass Magazine

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Context and Neglect: Kurt Vonnegut and the Middleclass Magazine.

Lori Philbin

A Thesis in the Field of English
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

The scholarship focusing on the work of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has largely centered on his novels. Most studies have neglected Vonnegut’s start in the popular magazine market writing short stories. A few notable scholars have focused on the stories: Jerome Klinkowitz, Peter J. Reed, Jeff Karon, James Thorson, and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff. Even with the work of such scholars, there have been few studies that consider the context of Vonnegut’s earliest stories and how the influence of the middleclass magazine market not only shaped Vonnegut’s career but had continued impact on his later novels. This study explores Vonnegut’s first eight stories: “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,” “Thanasphere,” “EPICAC,” “All the King’s Horses,” “Mnemonics,” “The Euphio Question,” “The Foster Portfolio,” and “More Stately Mansions.” The stories are considered within the context of their first publication venue, the magazine Collier’s, and how that context shows connections between the stories and his novels such as Player Piano, Cat’s Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five. Understanding this intertextuality provides a deeper understanding of Vonnegut’s larger world of connected themes, characters, and settings.
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Kurt Vonnegut, Jr’s short stories have been largely dismissed in the body of scholarly approaches to his work. This is in no small part due to Vonnegut’s own remarks. Vonnegut opened an anthology of his short stories, *Welcome to the Monkey House*, claiming “the contents of this book are samples of work I sold in order to finance the writing of the novels” (8). In the scholarship of early Vonnegut stories that does exist, there is a notable lack of consideration of Vonnegut’s first short stories and their context within the original magazines. Those original magazines, called slicks, were filled with glossy pages, a large number of pictures, and advertising targeting a large consumer base. By overlooking these connections, the subtler meanings and the wider universe of all Vonnegut’s fiction lacks fundamental underpinnings.

When Vonnegut’s short fiction is given critical attention, the work is usually studied in collections such as *Welcome to the Monkey House*. Rarely are the stories read in their original form: within the pages of the slicks where they were first published. Reading these stories out of their original context dismisses the influence that popular magazines had upon Vonnegut and undermines the complete picture of Vonnegut’s vast universe. Not only did Vonnegut first publish in magazines, but he worked in public relations for General Electric (GE), another position in which we would have paid considerable attention to a variety of media sources. Vonnegut repeatedly revisited his early stories in his novels. Any discussion of Vonnegut’s work as a connected universe must include them. To understand the shaping of the earliest stories, the connections to
other content in their original publications—ads, other short stories, essays and news articles—must also be included. They are found in the themes he carried into his work from the slicks and from the influence of his Collier’s editor, Knox Burger.

With nearly a hundred short stories and a limited space to explore this hole in research into Vonnegut’s work, this essay will consider the first eight stories, covering the first two years of publication. A starting approach to understand Vonnegut’s place in popular magazines is to understand the market and genre of Vonnegut’s fiction. Vonnegut’s work is not simple to categorize. Does it matter which genre might classify his work? As we’ll see, genre and market played a large part in Vonnegut’s early career. Genre and readership certainly had a role in the magazine’s decision to publish his work.

How could the influence of a popular magazine really matter? Vonnegut himself spoke in a self-deprecating way of these stories, calling them “high grade, slick bombast” (Vonnegut and Wakefield, Letters 51). Yet, Vonnegut’s stories weren’t simplistic, as this attitude toward popular magazines might suggest. In fact, from the first story, Vonnegut created a connected world with elements that he would continue to build upon throughout his career. Not only that, but as he reveals in his letters, he studied that market and wrote with the magazines in mind so that the stories would be chosen for publication.

Early Vonnegut stories have the seeds of the later, fundamental Vonnegut characteristics found in his novels; but crucial to this thesis, they also exhibit intertextuality—critically noted to be found in his novels. In Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale explains intertextuality as “the relations among two or more texts, or between certain texts, or between specific texts and larger categories such as genre, school, period” (57). Vonnegut’s fiction shares characters and settings, notably the character
Kilgore Trout who appears in *Slaughterhouse Five* and several other works. But this intertextuality did not start in his novels or stay in his novels. It started from his first story, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,” where readers are first introduced to Wyandotte College, a recurring setting in Vonnegut’s fiction (the college is revisited in “EPICAC,” “The Euphio Question,” and “The Big Trip Up Yonder” published in *Galaxy Science Fiction* and later retitled as “Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow”).

Before Vonnegut’s first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), eleven short stories appeared in *Collier’s* and one in *The Saturday Evening Post*. The first, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” (Feb 1950) introduced several aspects of Vonnegut’s future fiction. Here begins the weaving of a larger community that would thread through many of his works: middleclass characters, college professors, military officers. Common themes infiltrate through his short stories, gain a foothold in his first novel, and keep invading his work from there. Such themes include: secrecy, a search for identity, the ethics of war, and being outside history/community. To fully understand how these themes begin in the stories, the full text of the magazine should be examined alongside Vonnegut’s work. As George Bornstein claims in *Material Modernism*, “any material page on which we read any poem is a constructed object that will encode certain meanings even while placing others under erasure” (31). For instance, when reading a story about a computer who falls in love next to articles about war and ads about pressed business shirts, the surrealness of a computer with a soul (EPICAC) in a 1950s suburban-type setting (set by the magazine’s content) brings the idea of loss of individual identity into sharper focus. This encoding starts with connections from story to magazine and continues with the larger
body of Vonnegut work. In every instance of an early Vonnegut appearance in *Collier’s*, a connection to his novels and to the other magazine content can be made.

If Vonnegut is considered an author of middleclass experience, then it’s crucial to understand the full evolution of his work from its origin in middleclass magazines. Vonnegut read widely and certainly read *Collier’s*. Interspersed within *Collier’s* fiction content, the business side of the magazines—the ads—sold the American dream. In *Cold War Narratives*, Andrea Carosso describes that 1950s audience:

…there was the face of prosperity—America as the Land of Opportunity, a beacon of freedom, a nation enthusiastically celebrating its newly-won well being. This was America under the reassuring spell of the television sitcom, enjoying the purported glamour of the suburban home and its endless array of never-before-seen appliances, where consumption was understood as a close synonym of happiness. (8)

There, in that magazine audience, Vonnegut found the middleclass. Even if this inspiration often inspired parody, his stories fit within the context of the magazine’s advertising, its readership, and the other content that reached toward the ideal America. His discomfort in trying to attain a middleclass income and his inability to fit into the stereotypical view of the middleclass caused him to both want the ideal while poking fun at it. America was embodied in ads for new cars, washing machines, and toothpaste. It was also concerned with the horror and guilt over the atrocities of World War II. There is no other way to fully understand the stories except to read them in context on the pages of the magazine, beside the other stories and ads. This early work heralded the types of stories to come, most especially the work that pushed him into the status of an enduring author, *Slaughterhouse Five*. Understanding how these stories connected to the broader text of *Collier’s* gives them deeper meaning and reveals the root of intertextual connections within Kurt Vonnegut’s canon.
Despite the rich area of research exploring this intertextuality could provide, with a few exceptions—such as work from critics Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, Jeff Karon, Jerome Klinkowitz, and Peter Reed—the short stories are completely shunted aside. As Karon says, “No one prefers to speak about Kurt Vonnegut’s short stories, and critics have often, without apology, denigrated them, particularly those stories from Vonnegut’s early ‘slick’ submission period” (105). This shunting aside started with one of the first serious critical treatments of Vonnegut’s fiction in 1979’s “The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut: Portrait of the Novelist as Bridge over Troubled Water” by Leslie A. Fielder and continued through the comprehensive tome, The Clown of Armageddon by Peter Freese in 2009. While novels may be expected to garner most of the critical attention of an author’s published fiction, a complete understanding of Vonnegut’s oeuvre depends on examining how his short stories shaped the themes and vital connections between his works.

This thesis contends that the research and the editor-requested revisions Vonnegut put into placing his first works created a foundation that influenced him throughout his career and that the context of his early work followed him after he left the world of the slicks. Not only is studying the stories crucial to understanding Vonnegut’s body of work, but understanding them in the context of their original publication—the magazines, the inspiration, and the influence of his editor—is vital.
Chapter II
Early criticism

His first story, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,” after its initial rejection, finally found its way into readers’ hands in the February 11, 1950 edition of Collier’s. Nine stories would follow before his first novel Player Piano. Upon release of that novel, Vonnegut received his first critical review. From that first review and through the decades that followed, the focus remained almost entirely on the novels. There has been a considerable amount of work dedicated to understanding Vonnegut’s fiction. Those characteristics discussed by critics should also apply to his short stories.

Surveys of early Vonnegut criticism show a focus on humor and originality such as “The Curious Reception of Kurt Vonnegut” by Donald Morse and The Clown of Armageddon: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut by Peter Freese. If a reader wants to understand all things Vonnegut, the massive tome by Freese is a solid place to start. Critic Gilbert McInnis says of Clown, “with this superbly written and researched book, Freese has definitely situated himself at the pinnacle of Vonnegut scholarship” (192). Through the work of Morse and Freese, as well as deep-searching through journal and newspaper databases, it becomes plain that Vonnegut’s short stories weren’t reviewed prior to publication of his novels. In fact, it took a while for Vonnegut to be regularly reviewed for any of his work. In 1952 the New York Times Book Review did include a positive summary of his first novel, Player Piano, “Whether he is a trustworthy prophet of not, Mr. Vonnegut is a sharp-eyed satirist” (Hicks). As harbinger of criticism to come,
the next *Times* review came in 1963 after the publication of Vonnegut’s fifth novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, “irreverent and often highly entertaining fantasy” (Southern).

In 1968, one of the earliest reviews of Vonnegut’s short fiction appeared in the *New York Times*. Critic Mitchel Levitas rounds up *Welcome to the Monkey House*, a collection of Vonnegut’s short stories, and takes a dig at several of the stories as well as the magazine medium in which they first appeared. In “A Slight Case of Candor” Levitas spends a considerable amount of space for a short review in describing the magazines in which the stories first appeared—which is an unusual Vonnegut review of the time in mentioning the original publication context. But Levitas uses that context to either consider the story or dismiss it. He calls *Collier’s* “a conspicuous failure of our capitalist magazine economy” while considering a story from *Playboy* as ‘heartwarming.’” In making this distinction by magazine, Levitas contradicts himself as he also put the stories in one of two categories: the contemporary tales (being predictable and having “easily recognizable types”) and science fiction stories which he calls better than most in the genre, saying that those stories were “crisply transmitted and often with humor” (35). Considering that many of these science fiction stories were published in *Collier’s* along with the derided contemporary tales, the review seems uneven in deciding on quality based on which magazine published the story, but the review is still notable as a rare critical look at the early short stories. Also of note, Levitas gives a positive look at the science fiction stories and does not, as Vonnegut later felt critics had done, deride the genre.

On April 6th 1969, *New York Times Book Review (NYTBR)* ran a front-page feature on Kurt Vonnegut. This was a turning point. In this issue, nineteen years after
Vonnegut was first published in *Collier’s*, in what Freese calls the first critical review of note (“Critical Reception”), CDB Bryan penned “Kurt Vonnegut, Head Bokononist.” Bryan posits that critics dismissed Vonnegut because they viewed him as a science fiction writer, a black humorist, or a satirist. Or they were “unwilling to forgive Vonnegut for having written patently commercial short stories” and ignored his work entirely (2).

While Bryan’s piece ran on the second page of the *NYTBR*, the front page was dedicated to another critical review of importance, Robert Scholes’s favorable review of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Scholes calls out a passage from the book—a description of protagonist Billy Pilgrim’s mother—“Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops” (*Slaughterhouse 31*).

The review that’s been repeatedly considered to finally launch Vonnegut toward literary acceptance took note of a consumerist theme in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. That consumerist theme had been a part of Vonnegut’s fiction from his time in the trenches of magazine fiction writing.

Scholes says of this quote from *Slaughterhouse-Five* that the “pathos of human beings enmeshed in the relentless triviality of contemporary American culture has never been more adequately expressed” (23). While Scholes lauds Vonnegut for his representation of American culture and Bryan positions the critics as having ignored Vonnegut because he wrote “patently commercial short stories,” they failed to appreciate how Vonnegut came to have such a keen analysis of consumerism—his work in writing commercial short stories.

While a *Times* review for Vonnegut’s sixth novel can be excused for limiting its scope and not delving into the author’s background in short fiction, up to this point,
Vonnegut received minimal critical attention. Scholes’s review opened the door to further literary study but at first, only for his novels. His short fiction continued to be largely ignored, dismissed, or panned.

Then in 1970, *Esquire* published “The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut” by Leslie Fiedler. Fiedler presented Vonnegut as a pop artist and that pop novels are “buried treasure” (8). But he follows with “His short stories…seem to have been written with his left hands…and he has no special talent of short fiction in any case” (10). While the positive critical attention gained steam, the work Vonnegut did in creating short stories that contributed to that larger body of work continued to be scorned.

Even when giving a somewhat positive nod to Vonnegut’s short stories, critics still gave them little space. For instance, in 2011’s *Unstuck in Time: A Journey Through Kurt Vonnegut’s Life and Novels*, Gregory Sumner made a cursory statement “the stories hold up” (24), but despite this positive assessment, there is little time spent addressing Vonnegut’s stories—even in the chapter dedicated to *Player Piano*—arguably an extension of the story “EPICAC.”

Sumner dedicates two paragraphs in chapter one to Vonnegut’s stories. Add an earlier paragraph in the “Preface” and that’s the extent of coverage for Vonnegut’s short stories in the book’s three-hundred and twenty-nine pages. Sumner seems to sum up the lot of them with the idea that Vonnegut “kept food on the table with tales custom-built to appeal to the middlebrow readers of *Collier’s* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*” (24). Interesting to note here, Vonnegut only placed two stories in *LHJ* while he had eleven in the *Saturday Evening Post*. By selectively using *Collier’s* and *LHJ*, Sumner dismisses Vonnegut’s stories by implying that they had a primarily female audience and that such
female-oriented middleclass publications are not eligible for critical consumption. The story venues are criticized as much as the stories themselves.

By sheer number of pages, Freese’s Clown, a seven-hundred and sixty-nine-page tome, should have enough space to consider the novels as well as the short stories, but only one page is dedicated to Vonnegut’s short story writing career. Another critic points to Vonnegut’s writing the short stories for magazines to support his family “by concocting well-paid formula stories for the big slick magazines” (16).

If taking into account the number of pages dedicated to an element of Vonnegut’s work is an extension of perceived importance, it’s striking that Freese spends more time discussing one particular Vonnegut critic than Vonnegut’s short stories. That critic is Peter J. Reed. In Freese’s critical survey he notes that Reed has “perceptive readings” of Vonnegut’s work. If Freese considers Reed perceptive, it stands to follow that he should have considered Reed’s turnaround in his view of the short stories (Reed published research on the short stories several years before this work by Freese). Reed is a notable Vonnegut critic who would eventually pay attention to the short stories, but at first, he too, ignored them. Critics were not the only ones framing these stories to be ignored. Vonnegut did so as well.

Influence of science fiction on the stories and criticism

In the preface to the short story collection, Welcome to the Monkey House, Vonnegut wrote, in a passage oft quoted by critics (such as the previously mentioned Freese and Reed), “The contents of this book are samples of work I sold in order to finance the writing of the novels. Here one finds the fruits of Free Enterprise” (7). Do we take Vonnegut’s own words at face value? Did he only write these stories to make
money? And if so, does commercial appeal make those stories less worthy of study?

After all, Vonnegut still found the stories valuable enough to agree to several collections of his works, to allow some stories to be anthologized, and to continue writing stories after publication of his first novels. He did not abandon them. The tenor of the entire preface is rich with self-deprecation, and the emphasis on free enterprise is a clue that he does place some valuation on the stories from that perspective. That this quotation, given in a collection of the stories, is used as a reason to skip the entire collection should give the reader pause. Read within the context of his other work, this quotation should be weighed along with Vonnegut’s usual style, heavy with parody and humor.

In using these quotations from Vonnegut, many critics fail to understand an important element of Vonnegut as artist: his continued self-deprecation. Not only is self-deprecation evident in his fiction, but he continually uses it in his letters, essays, and speeches. One such example of this comes in a letter to Knox Burger in 1966 regarding the novel that would become *Slaughterhouse-Five*: “Within the next few months I’ll finish the Dresden book, which will be about the size of the Bobbsey Twins, and that’ll be the end for a while. It reads like a telegram, and it’s the one I always thought it was my duty to write” (*Letters* 29). Vonnegut makes light of *Slaughterhouse-Five*—comparing it to a telegram—a work many call one of the best American novels ever written.

Vonnegut’s self-deprecating comments put forth contradictions, or at least a change of heart, in his own view of being considered a science fiction writer. In a 1965 essay, Vonnegut famously said about the publication of *Player Piano*, “I have been a sore headed occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘science fiction’ ever since, and I would like
out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal” (“Science Fiction”). This seeming aversion to the label of science fiction has been quoted by Freese (“The Critical Reception of Kurt Vonnegut”), Susan Farrell (Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut), RL Nadeau (“Physics and Metaphysics in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut”), and many others. Since then, there has been varied discussion of Vonnegut as a science fiction author, but in 2012, a collection of his letters was published by Delacorte (edited by Dan Wakefield). Within those letters is an interesting view of Vonnegut’s from before he received negative critical attention as a science fiction author. In a 1950 letter to his friend Miller Harris, he said, “I hope to build a reputation as a science-fiction writer” (47).

A search of scholarship on Vonnegut shows that no critic has seriously considered this short quote from his letters. This seemingly one-line part of a letter explains much about Vonnegut’s fiction choices in the coming years. This reveals initial plans for fiction-writing that not only impacted his novels but seemed to be exactly the path he chose with his fiction. At the time, science fiction was a burgeoning genre for the middleclass.

As Albert Berger notes, before WWII, science fiction had been relegated to pulp magazines such as Amazing Stories (“Triumph of Prophecy” 143), but by the 1950s, science fiction was finding its way to more mainstream American readers. At first, that move leant the genre no more critical reception than being in the pulps. In 1973, academic R. D. Mullen co-founded, co-edited, and published Science Fiction Studies. Mullen says of the critical acceptance of magazine fiction of this period:

> Quality, slick, pulp—terms I learned in high-school English. It was only later that I learned that the term “quality magazine” originated not out of
respect for the intellectual level of *The Atlantic*, *The Century*, *Scribner’s*, and *Harper’s*, but as a short form of “magazines for people of quality.” The big slicks—*The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s*, *The American*, *Cosmopolitan* were the magazines of the great American middleclass, respectable enough in that they represented, if not prosperity plus cultural refinement, at least prosperity and good behavior… You studied literature to achieve cultural refinement, to be counted among those who read *The Atlantic* rather than *The Saturday Evening Post* and so among those who had risen above the crass materialism of ordinary people. (371)

Thus describing the way in which critics viewed any material published in the slicks, Mullen says of science fiction when he began teaching it in 1969: “even though originally published in pulp-paper magazines, [science fiction] was much more serious than the generality of popular fiction.” The genre had a recent “kind of breakthrough, as breeching the walls of the literary establishment” (372).

For Vonnegut, he had targeted a genre in the slicks that would be critically derided because of the magazine which published him. Through his letters, it’s not clear that he worried about the literary establishment’s view of science fiction until it was used against him. Rather, he wrote what he thought worked for the magazines he targeted. No matter when he started paying attention to critical views of the genre, his books were considered science fiction at a time the literary establishment did not welcome it.

*Collier’s* turned out to be a magazine looking for the type of content and themes that would dominate most of Vonnegut’s entire fiction career. Before publishing Vonnegut, they’d printed the likes of Philip Wylie’s “Deliverance or Doom” in 1945 as well as “Blunder” in 1946. The Wylie stories critiqued the use of the atomic bomb—the type of military technology that would be a focus of Vonnegut’s future work. In the same time period, what would turn into the classic post-apocalyptic science fiction novel, *The Day of the Triffids* was published as a serial in *Collier’s* by John Wyndham (“Revolt of the Triffids” appeared in five issues in January-February 1951). Stories in *Collier’s*
showed science fiction authors as critical of war departments, bureaucracy, and politics—
critical, yet still careful not to criticize the US government’s use of the atomic bomb in
WWII. Berger’s “The Triumph of Prophecy: Science Fiction and Nuclear Power in the
Post-Hiroshima Period” explores some of the stories and authors of this period.
Explaining science fiction editor John W. Campbell’s efforts during that time, Berger
says,

The reaction of SF writers to the appearance of nuclear weapons in the
real world took place in the midst of the campaign Campbell had been
waging to raise the quality of science fiction above the rudimentary level
of cowboy or spy stories set in space, and by the end of the war his efforts
were beginning to have the intended effect. (144)

As these stories were changing the genre and finding new audiences in the slicks, that
more general audience required themes and styles more suited to that market. Vonnegut
became adept at understanding that audience, using them as a testing ground for the
themes he started there and continued to explore. He honed his style for that market—a
style full of humor, quick sentences, fragmented narrative, and layered criticism. Trying
to understand the aftermath of WWII, Vonnegut dealt in stories meant to entertain as well
as prod deeper themes.

Knox Burger, Vonnegut’s first editor at Collier’s is credited with creating a
“haven for Science Fiction” at Collier’s (Ashley 3). When the magazine published
Vonnegut, they were also publishing Jack Finney and Ray Bradbury. This was a time of
change in the science fiction genre. Critic Gérard Klein positioned the 1950s as a time of
transition to the work of the sixties: “SF had now passed from the stage of tumultuous
teenage dreams to the adult stage, which manifested itself in focusing on the sufferings of
humanity” (3). Klein calls Vonnegut a “forerunner” of the transformation of science
fiction in the 60s which changed the genre into a middleclass genre (7).
Adrian Mellor provides a counterpoint to Klein’s explanation of this change but does agree on the point of social class providing a basis for that change:

Thus what begins in 1950s SF as an index of the crisis of this particular fragment of the middle class, ends a decade later as a literary expression of a much broader crisis permeating a much wider social group. During the 1960s, SF comes to speak for ‘the educated middle class’ as a whole, and the crisis which is articulated through SF’s gloomy prognostications is no longer that of a narrowly defined, scientifically oriented class fraction. Rather, SF becomes one of the vehicles used to express the long-standing pessimism and ambivalence which characterises a much broader section of the educated middle class in capitalist society. (21)

This change in the genre was as much due to Collier’s editorial direction as the authors such as Vonnegut who brought that change about.

Editors not only created the artistic direction of the magazines but would expect Vonnegut’s stories to add to that same direction. Through revision letters, Knox Burger (along with Vonnegut’s agents and other editors) had a direct influence on this evolution of Vonnegut’s focus, at times through revisions and at other times by asking for particular stories. This in and of itself would prove the magazine had some influence over his stories, but does this influence matter in the larger scope of his work? It should. After all, Vonnegut is considered an author of the middleclass both from a viewpoint of writing for a middleclass audience but also writing from a middleclass experience. As a man with a public relations background, he was also aware of how the slicks influenced the middleclass in the age of consumption.

While critics started to note Vonnegut as a novel writer, his short fiction continued to be critically ignored for its intersection of pop-culture style, middleclass concerns, mass market focus, and use of science fiction genre. However, there were articles or mentions of the short fiction. For instance, in 1977, while building his reputation as a Vonnegut scholar, Jerome Klinkowitz wrote “A Do-it-Yourself Kurt
Vonnegut Anthology,” a notable exception to the usual practice of only critiquing the novels. Klinkowitz’s article details how to obtain Vonnegut’s uncollected short stories and says, “his popular stories of the fifties have become a lost art” (83). The stories had remained mostly unappreciated by scholars. That began to change in 1997.

The first in-depth criticism of the short stories

Peter J. Reed undertook the first book-length study of Vonnegut’s short stories, *The Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut* (1997). *Short Fiction* focuses on proving that the stories “retain their importance in their own right and for their place in Vonnegut’s artistic evolution” (154). In supporting this hypothesis, Reed discusses a large swath of Vonnegut’s short fiction and points out the themes, style, and structure in them that can also be found in the novels. Reed is well-positioned to consider how the stories fit into Vonnegut’s oeuvre. He has a long history in Vonnegut scholarship and helped Vonnegut’s novels to be taken seriously. His first extensive work on Vonnegut, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* was published in 1972, but for years, he continued his Vonnegut scholarship by focusing on the novels. Finally, Reed realized his error in early dismissal of Vonnegut’s short stories. In *Short Fiction*, he argues that the stories cannot be set aside if considering Vonnegut’s career: “Most critics have felt free to talk about Vonnegut the novelist while setting aside the short stories… But I have come to think increasingly that to do so means to impose an artificial compartmentalization upon the body of his work” (xi).

He goes on to show how isolating the short stories distorts the perspective of the stories and misinterprets their intrinsic position in Vonnegut’s canon (2). To prove the
essential need to study the stories, he highlights the thematic and stylistic characteristics shared between the stories and the novels.

Reed covers how Vonnegut’s magazine career carried into his novel writing. His short, fast writing style may have started in his early journalism days but as Reed states, “timing and compression are essential to sustain such a narrative technique and it is in the stories that Vonnegut learns and refines the method that underlines the construction of the novels” (*Short Fiction* 5). This stylistic development started while studying how to attract the audience of the middleclass magazine reader. For example, his short sentences, word choice, and pacing: “joke-like conclusion of chapters” came from writing a middleclass magazine style (*Short Fiction* 5).

Reed’s most compelling argument to link the stories to the novels is the reuse of several concepts. Reed finds: “The topics or themes dealt with in the short stories recur in the novels, not surprisingly, so it is predictable that some of the images associated with them—EPICAC, Ethical Suicide Parlors, equalizing handicaps, for example—should recur, too” (*Short Fiction* 6)

After detailed study of the stories and their placement with the novels, Reed concludes that the stories “do not simply stand beside the novels. The stories have, in effect, become part of those novels, both in their contribution to the skills and experience invested in creating them, and in the continuing place within the longer works of Trout stories, vignettes, and a highly segmented construction” (154).

Reed makes a substantial starting place for the idea of examining cross-fertilization, and yet for several years, not much followed with the short stories as their main focus. Klinkowitz continued building on his Vonnegut scholarship, including
discussion of the short stories. His interpretations of the short stories add to the valuable base in which to start an understanding of them and their part in the full canon.

While continued scholarship helps build the case that Vonnegut’s short work is worth studying, most studies approach the stories from an anthologized point of view and do not take much notice of where the stories were first published. A search will provide articles that touch on a few of his short stories such as “Harrison Bergeron” (a now frequently anthologized and taught short). Several essays such as “Kurt Vonnegut's Cold War: The Short Stories of the Fifties” by James Thorson and “Science and Sensibility in the Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut” by Jeff Karon focus on topics and themes. There has been critical work that viewed the stories in context to some extent—such as Reed’s work and a recent study, *Post-Jungian Psychology and the Short Stories of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut* by Steve Gronert Ellerhoff. Ellerhoff explores how some of Vonnegut’s stories would have been read by Collier’s readers by framing his interpretation in the historical context of the time, but he does not explore direct intertextual connection between Collier’s content—especially advertisements—and Vonnegut’s stories. There is still much to learn by studying Vonnegut’s short stories on the page of the magazine.
Chapter III
What’s missing from the current criticism?

The original venue for Vonnegut’s fiction gives a better understanding of how the short stories would have been read by their first audience. Vonnegut’s tales appeared beside other stories, articles, and editorials. Since the original readers would have had that same context, positioning the stories as they first appeared will give a better understanding of their broader meaning. Not only would readers have brought their own context relevant to the time and place of their reading, but Vonnegut used his understanding of his audience to create a depiction of middleclass consumerism that became the basis for his long career of exploring, critiquing, and sympathizing with that middleclass.

In a pivotal article for periodical studies, “How to read a page”, George Bornstein argues a “…literary work might be said to exist not in any one version, but in an archive that brings all versions together” (29-30). Vonnegut’s stories must be considered in this light, especially in the case of “EPICAC” when discussing Player Piano. The computer first appears in the eponymous story but then a descendant reappears in Player Piano. The theme of machinery replacing humans returns, as well as the connections to Vonnegut’s time working for GE. A few critics have explored this connection such as Peter Freese in “Kurt Vonnegut's ‘Player Piano’; or, ‘Would You Ask EPICAC What People Are For?’” and Ádám T Bogár in “Can a Machine Be a Gentleman? Machine Ethics and Ethical Machines.” Many critics, even while studying Player Piano, never
acknowledged the existence of the earlier “EPICAC.” For example, “The Engineers Take Over” by Granville Hicks and “Vonnegut's ‘Player Piano’ and American Anti-Leisure: Idle Time in Hell” by Wesley Burnett and Lucy Rollin skip over the story even though the reuse of a lead character makes the omission glaring.

Another critic who added to this idea of all versions being one work was Fielder in The Divine Stupidity of Kurt Vonnegut. He goes so far as to call God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater and Slaughterhouse a single work because of their common characters, themes, obsessions, and whimsy (15). Fiedler claims Vonnegut “rifled” from his earlier books, showing that Vonnegut borrowed heavily against previous novels but not acknowledging that he also borrows against the short stories is an oversight. “Ideally, a reader should learn his territory as he revealed it: be introduced to the fictional Ilium, New York in Player Piano; to Indianapolis and Cape Cod and Tralfamore in the Sirens of Titan” (16). Omitting the connection to the stories is a glaring problem considering Ilium appears in several of his short stories such as “Poor Little Rich Town” and “Deer in the Works.”

In one of his letters, Vonnegut’s own words lends credence to the idea of all versions being a part of the whole. In a Playboy interview he said, “Slaughterhouse and Breakfast used to be one book. But they just separated completely. It was like a pousse-café, like oil and water—they simply were not mixable. So I was able to decant Slaughterhouse-Five, and what was left was Breakfast of Champions” (Wampeters 207).

While this may make a case that these are two separate books, it shows how interconnected the stories were before separation. In turn, Slaughterhouse-Five had come from an unpublished short story, “Captured,” he’d submitted to Playboy in 1967. In his
submission, he explained, “please find enclosed a short story called ‘Captured,’ which is actually the first episode in a war book I’m working on” (Letters 113). These connections draw a direct line from fiction he’d written and submitted as a short story and the whole of the narrative that is Captured/Rosewater/Slaughterhouse/Breakfast.

A critic that does take into account this heavy thematic connection between the stories and the novels is James L. Thorson in “Kurt Vonnegut’s Cold War: The Short Stories of the Fifties.” Thorson does an excellent job connecting the themes of war in the stories to the novels. However, Thorson explicitly states that he is using the anthologized versions of the stories from Welcome to the Monkey House (102) which causes a problem in the analysis. For instance, Thorson posits: “The anti-war elements in these short fictions may not have been universally popular when they appeared...” (103) While this by itself isn’t necessarily an erroneous statement, it simplifies the complicated mix of sentiments between Collier’s readers, the editors, and the fiction that expressed views on war, both subtlety and not so. Trying to maintain a more general audience in the face of a quickly changing world after WWII, Collier’s shied away from direct criticism of the US government during the developing conflict in Korea. While trying to continue a patriotic swell in the magazine’s content, the chosen stories and articles also held subtle warnings against another full-out war. The publisher disliked content that seemed critical of the US government when a conflict seemed imminent and did not want to stoke fear, but rather, confidence. Stories of humor and everyday concerns balanced that fear and the need to know the state of the country even while leaving behind those hints of warnings that war was ugly.
Thorson says of EPICAC’s not wanting to think about war, “The joking tone covers a certain amount of serious anti-war theme, but with the addition of the romantic element, it clearly passed the editorial board of Collier’s with flying colors” (105). By implying that Vonnegut has disguised an anti-war theme, this still shows a direct relationship between the story and the magazine through subversion—a theme carried into Player Piano. While “EPICAC” touches on difficult themes—machines replacing humans, what to do with war weapons after the war, and suicide—the bumbling love story told with humor makes it an entertaining read that fits with the other content of a consumer magazine even while showing how war machines cannot fit into society when war is over. Player Piano continued this subversion by showing how machines meant to relieve drudgery caused a boredom in humans who needed work to be happy. Their work became tearing down machines and rebuilding them—a type of drudgery that machines were meant to replace.

Of “All the King's Horses” Thorson postulates that Collier’s bought it due to “patriotic element woven into” it (106). While patriotism wouldn’t have been a strike against the story, this is another over-simplification when reading the entire magazine. In the same issue, there is, indeed, a piece written by Thomas E. Dewey, “The Red Czar Moves to Conquer Us,” in which the author makes the case to build US war resources in answer to Russia's movements in the Cold War. Further inspection of this same Collier’s issue reveals “Mr. Haskins' Escape” by Jack Weeks and “City Under a Dagger” by Howard Brodie both of which juxtapose everyday citizens against the threat of war. This tactic of the civilian’s leery perspective of war is also found in the first two stories Thorson discusses, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” and “EPICAC.”
Reading the story in its original issue gives more perspective on the editorial input and acceptance of those stories, but understanding the published Vonnegut canon can also be expanded by taking a look at his rejections to the same magazines. For instance, the entire Collier’s October 27, 1951 issue was dedicated to one theme: a hypothetical World War III and its impact. The issue was titled “Preview of the War We Do Not Want.” Vonnegut had been invited to contribute to “Preview of the War We Do Not Want,” and had even been paid for a story, but his story was removed from the project. He believed his part of the issue was pulled because the publisher felt the story was anti-American (Strand 212). This historical context of Vonnegut’s work within Collier’s verifies Thorson’s point regarding Vonnegut’s having to tone down his views of war but neglects the elements of the accepted stories which Vonnegut crafted within the limitations of Collier’s.

Other Collier’s pieces in that period included patriotic essays calling for militarization, cautionary articles such as “War's Tragedy in Korea” (August 1950), and a November 1950 editorial, “War Won't Prevent War.” The magazine gave its readers a certain worldview on the U.S.’s involvement in war that contributed to Vonnegut’s developing technique of dealing with war themes by counterbalancing them with humor and middleclass concerns.

One of the first works of note to take the magazine’s context into consideration is Steve Gronert Ellerhoff’s Post-Jungian Psychology and the Short Stories of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut: Golden Apples of the Monkey House. Ellerhoff’s focus is to frame Vonnegut and Bradbury as mythmakers. He sets out a “mythodology” to reading
the stories. The time and place of Vonnegut’s stories—contextualized in the magazines—are a foundation of that mythmaking.

Ellerhoff’s work has insightful criticism of several Vonnegut stories through use of close readings, historical perspective, and cultural illustrations. Ellerhoff’s goal is to consider “the stories in the periodicals where they were first published, the artwork, advertisements, editorials, and varied articles help timestamp each one in a collective context” (187). In the case of Vonnegut, beyond well-done critiques of the illustrations, there are only a few mentions of advertisements and other magazine content (there are some mentions of related articles but not in direct connection to Vonnegut’s stories). Ellerhoff’s study does not show specific shared context between the content of the magazines themselves and Vonnegut’s worlds nor how that shared context impacted the stories. Rather, he makes a strong case that the popular culture aspects of a mainstream magazine provide historical perspective for understanding Vonnegut’s work.

As Ellerhoff does prove, viewing the stories within the context of the original publications (Collier’s, etc.) shows a deeper meaning than studying them stripped of context in their later anthologies. But we must go further and view how the intertextuality between advertisements, stories, and other editorial elements—including the impact of science fiction as the genre for choice for the first short stories—informed Vonnegut’s fictional world.

This discussion of intertextuality is missing from most scholarship, but if considering Vonnegut’s view on patterns and tales, this omission seems glaring. Though he had used self-deprecation in the past to be dismissive of some of his work, those remarks must be considered in light of the type of humor he was known for. To
understand Vonnegut’s perspective on his work, it is important to also consider his continued reuse of elements of his own fiction. Not only does the reuse show that all of his work should be considered rather than shunted aside, but it shows that Vonnegut’s use of intertextuality is an intentional part of his fiction—meaning that all of it is an important part of his oeuvre. As described by James Whitlark, Vonnegut’s work for his anthropology thesis would indicate that in understanding the context of a tale and the retelling of that tale, the magazine should be considered. “Consequently, an author should begin with anthropological understanding sufficient to hold a reader’s attention with old patterns, yet reshape them into those forms necessary to speed social development” (79). Those patterns can be found not only in the story but in the other tales, advertising, and editorial content published alongside them.
Vonnegut’s early stories are the seeds for the world he created over his lifetime of work. These origins and the context of these stories are underpinned by Vonnegut’s ambivalent need to both join as well as critique the American middleclass. Heavily influenced by the confluence of his own experiences with World War II, the drudgery of middleclass corporate jobs, and his immersion into the slicks, these influencers created a trajectory that led him to the novels. The relationship between his writing for Collier’s and his work at GE created a feedback loop in how he experienced the middleclass and imagined it.

In the following section, two stories will be discussed in light of Vonnegut’s path from working at GE, to writing for the slicks, and to incorporating that work into the novels. These steps were vital and without those steps, the novels would not have been the same.

The middleclass imbued his work and not only did he reach his audience, but critics viewed him as an author who explained that social class. Understanding his short stories shows how Vonnegut got into the position of being a part of and a critic of the middleclass while he developed the precision and skills to be adept at writing from that position.

The early stories as well as his first novel are outwardly inspired by his work at GE. This start undeniably shaped how he was received and how he developed as a
commercial writer for the slicks. The magazine market had direct connection to his work as GE advertised in the slicks as well as their technological work was discussed and even featured on the pages.

How did Vonnegut get into this position of trying to attain, reaching for, then critiquing the middleclass? After returning from WWII and unable to finish his graduate work, Vonnegut needed a job. The pressure of needing money and being unable to make the kind of salary that would give him middleclass comforts led him into accepting a job at GE in Schenectady, New York, where his scientist brother worked. Vonnegut did not accept a job as a biochemist, to follow his undergraduate degree, nor as an anthropologist, the direction of his failed attempt at a graduate degree, but as a public relations writer. Dissatisfied with his work at GE, Vonnegut submitted stories to various magazines.

After a submission at Collier’s ended in rejection, he started conversing with the fiction editor at that magazine, Knox Burger. During this time, as evidenced by his letters and early essays, he studied the magazine thoroughly and attempted to understand from Burger what kind of story would work for the magazine. While he drew upon the material conditions of his work at GE, he began a process of writing to the reader market that created the foundation that the rest of his fiction relied upon.

In the “Introduction” to Bagombo Snuff Box, he describes himself as a boy in a warm nostalgic scene reading the Saturday Evening Post after its anticipated arrival:

While I shop for a story, my eyes also see ads for automobiles and cigarettes and hand lotions and so on. It is advertisers, not readers, who pay the true costs of such a voluptuous publication. And God bless them for doing that. But consider the incredible thing I myself have to do in turn. I turn my brains on! (9)
As a reader, Vonnegut not only read and paid attention to the stories but also the advertisements and considered the publication from cover to cover—as a whole. In describing how he read slicks as a boy, he shows that as an author, he’s aware of the advertisements and content from cover to cover.

In his *Letters*, he reveals that as an adult author, he not only read *Collier’s* to understand the style and themes common to their fiction but also had opinions on their business decisions:

> Exciting new things happening to *Collier’s*. A fiction folio. What alarms me is the ease with which the folio may be detached from the rest of the book...The fiction folio in the 7/26 issue looked more substantial and interesting than the article folio. As long as fiction is going to be set apart, the point of separation in the book should be more dramatic than it is. I didn’t find the little red box on page 42 until the third trip through. If the articles get any worse, the fiction folio should secede. (56)

Vonnegut studied the market and this magazine enough to write to Knox Burger in 1952 “*Collier’s*, in taking its stand in favor of big business, has sided with one of two forms of socialism being forced on the people of this country” (*Letters* 54). In putting *Collier’s* in the category of big business, Vonnegut signals that the corporate interests of the magazine may not reflect the best interests of its own audience.

Vonnegut had a history of reading *Collier’s* and critiquing what he found there. It would be no surprise that an author who built a career on intertextuality between his own works and allusions to fairytales, Shakespeare, and other well-known media would connect his short stories to the content of the magazine that featured him.

The themes which started in these early stories continued into his novels. These were directly influenced by GE, his editor, and the expected themes of the magazines he targeted. While working at GE, Vonnegut met, reported on, and attended lectures by scientists who worked on both technology at GE and for the military. His knowledge of
scientists and the technology they created led to several recurring themes which were not
only first expressed in his early stories but were directly drawn from the content of
Collier’s. For discussion in this thesis, two of the more prominent are the idea of the
benevolent scientist and secrecy.

A common theme addressed by every one of his first eight short stories—
discussed here—is the theme of secrecy. From the idea of a man secretly in love with his
workmate to the government keeping secrets from its citizens, this theme started from the
first story and extended through his novels.

The secret programs at GE that contributed to the military and nuclear
programs—for example, cloud seeding, his brother’s GE project had secret
experiments—continued alongside the consumer products divisions, and these two tracks
created a means for Vonnegut to compare the types of work GE sold to the public verses
what they hid from it. Vonnegut’s GE stories ran alongside ads for consumer products on
the very pages of the magazine that published him.

The benevolent scientist—or its contrast, the trapped lab rat—is a trope in five of
the first eight of his short stories (“EPICAC,” “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,”
“Thanasphere,” “All the King’s Horses,” and “The Euphio Question”). This science
fiction trope is explained as a contrast to the “mad scientist” in “Of Power Maniacs and
Unethical Geniuses.”

…the “benevolent” scientist already includes traits of ambivalence. The
benevolent scientists are naive when dealing with powerful interests; they
mean well but see their discoveries being put to some perverted use. The
“ambivalent” scientists are those who are easily manipulated; they are
idealistic but become progressively corrupted; they are ambitious but lose
sight of the consequences of their work; and, most importantly, they grow
willing to violate ethical principles for the sake of gaining new knowledge.
(Weingart 283)
Inspired by some of the GE researchers he worked with and who he considered to be naïve in understanding the full repercussions of their work, Vonnegut used this trope extensively. He describes this kind of scientist as “morally innocent” (Wampeters 83).

These themes were borrowed not only from life experience, but from tropes used in other stories in Collier’s. Both the benevolent scientist and secrecy carried forward into prominent themes in his novels. To fully understand how those themes came to be broached and explored, the stories must be read within their full context.

“The Euphio Question”

“The Euphio Question” builds upon a landscape created in Collier’s—this connecting of works being a technique Vonnegut honed here and continued throughout his fiction career. In this case, the idea of middleclass domestic happiness is critiqued and explored through a focus on household appliances. That comparison informs Vonnegut’s later work which also addresses the idea of utopia found in home appliances, possessions, and technology—ideas notably explored in Breakfast of Champions.

The “Euphio Question” returns to Vonnegut’s prevalent theme, should a scientific discovery be used simply because it was found? This story is also a return to a technique Vonnegut used in his first story, the war correspondent’s report as a narrative form (this technique will be discussed in more detail in the section covering “Report on the Barnhouse Effect”). In this case, the narrator gives his report to the Federal Communications Commission of events that happen in a personal residence near Wyandotte College—another return setting—when a machine is made to pump out a newly discovered radio signal that causes a constant euphoria. The people caught under the spell of euphoria are unable to take care of themselves or care about anything as
mundane as eating. It nearly ends in catastrophe with the people within hearing range of the signal wasting away. The machine, similar to the mood organ later described in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, creates an apathy, a machine-made utopia that fails in the middleclass living room. They keep the euphoria device secret while they determine if they can sell it. In the end, when the experiment nearly kills them, only the media man—a radio announcer—wants to continue with the plan to sell the device. The scientist and the professor outvote him, deciding they cannot, putting ethics above a shot at personal wealth.

“Euphio” is Vonnegut’ sixth published story and his sixth story to address themes he took from his work at GE. So far, his stories had all been, in a sense, GE stories. His views of corporate life, the machines GE built, their participation in military applications, and the scientists who created them all contributed to these stories. In an interesting turn, this story ran alongside a GE washing machine ad (see fig. 1).

The washing machine ad uses terms like “wonder” and “easy” alongside a picture of a smiling mother and child to show the promise of an easier, happier life. The ad juxtaposes middleclass consumption alongside a story hinting at secret experiments that GE (and its counterparts) conducted that have emotional and material effects that the consumer doesn’t see. In a real sense, the washing machine is a version of the Euphio device, offering a way to happiness through a machine.

Advertisements and American consumerism is a prevalent theme Vonnegut continues, even through the use of referencing appliances and advertisements that sell the machine as a way to live out the American dream.
Each piece gently, thoroughly cleansed in a GENERAL ELECTRIC!

Figure 1. Each piece gently, thoroughly cleansed in a GENERAL ELECTRIC!

General Electric advertisement. Collier’s, 12 May 1951, p. 52.
Scholar Robert Merrill describes *Breakfast of Champions* as “filled with social commentary of every conceivable variety, especially a series of rather crude reflections on American hypocrisy” while juxtaposing the exploration of humanity and the machine (155). In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut returns to his critique of middleclass domesticity and the machines in the home even going so far as to include drawings of ads. A long-running reference in the novel, a fictional company, Robo-Magic, made washing machines. The ad (fig. 2) was described in the text: “It showed a high society woman in a fur coat and pearls. She was leaving her mansion for a pleasant afternoon of idleness, and a balloon was coming out of her mouth. These were the words in the balloon:” (250).

![Figure 2. Art by Vonnegut in Breakfast of Champions p. 250.](image)

*Vonnegut interspersed his own drawn imagery, including fictional ads, in this novel.*

Not only is Vonnegut parodying the idea of appliances making life luxurious, but he breaks up this novel with imagery and messages similar to the way his stories had been in *Collier’s*. The implication being that readers would not only intake the stories,
but the advertisements around them. And that those advertisements are part of the overall story.

While “Euphio” was still a GE story despite its setting outside of corporate America, its focus is again on the middleclass. But in another change for Vonnegut, this story’s narrator lets the reader into his home and introduces his wife and child—domesticity, the step beyond falling in love with a coworker (“EPICAC” and “Mnemonics”). So far, the stories had been set in a military or office setting. This change brings his readers closer to where they read the stories, and closer to where he’ll take his future novel setting, outside of the military and into middleclass life.

“Euphio,” like several other of Vonnegut’s early stories, has a connection to the “Barnhouse” issue of Collier’s. In “Cabbages and Heads,” an editorial, a new radio show is described as an addition to the “head-examining” profession (74). The editorial referred to a radio program by Nandor Fodor, a psychoanalyst, who’d play songs then analyze the lyrics and hidden meanings. Collier’s noted Fodor’s interpretation of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” as having an “aggressive, militant note. Bands may become dangerous, he warned, a sort of secret weapon…he went on the air to probe the emotional depths of the practically machine-made verses of our popular songs” (74). This idea of machine-feeding emotion over radio waves parallels with the machine in “Euphio.” That the content played over the radio could impact emotions to such an extent that it weaponized it highlights a theme that Vonnegut built upon from this story, technology used as a tool to create false utopia.

As Jerome Klinkowitz pointed out, “EPICAC” and “Euphio” were “as thematic a work as any of the stories written for his magazine market of the 1950s, the narrative’s
dystopian ideas of an unhappy future are played against recurring scenes where characters strive for domestic happiness” (Vonnegut Effect 52). Tackling those themes with humor became Vonnegut’s trademark and a main thrust of most of his novels. The striving but failing to find domestic happiness were presented as a need for his characters as well as for himself. He frequently used his own self as a character both outright (as in Jailbird) and more subtly by using autobiographical elements or a stand-in author character. Inserting himself allowed him to align with his middleclass audience so that a critique of the need to find domestic happiness was a critique of himself as well as others of his social class. Instead of alienating, he brought the reader in with self-deprecating humor. Inserting GE into his stories allowed him to critique its model of consumerism and its advertising which uses the idea of domestic happiness to sell its appliances. But as shown in “Euphio” that happiness cannot be achieved through machines, and GE is selling products that cannot provide the happiness it sells.

Without reading “Euphio” on the pages of Collier’s the evolution of the machine as a way to provide domestic bliss as well as a flawed means to try to attain utopia doesn’t have its beginning. It is a precursor to the novel Player Piano and should be read as such.
Chapter V
War and the Military Industrial Complex

Vonnegut’s early life was marked by his military service in World War II—the firebombing of Dresden while he was there as a prisoner of war having an understandable impact. After returning from WWII and having lost much of his memory of the Dresden firebombing, he tried to understand his experience there while working with GE, a government contractor. Even as he faced his inability to fit into the corporate world of GE, needing the salary, he told stories of the war while writing public relations copy for a company that was part of the military industrial complex. Vonnegut became familiar with secret GE projects—such as a cloud seeding project his brother, Bernard, worked on—and yet through edits and studying middleclass commercial fiction, faced how the public came to view or could accept those projects. GE might experiment in cloud seeding in secrecy while advertising washing machines in the slicks. His early work at GE and writing for *Collier’s* This time became not only the starting point of Vonnegut’s continued themes but was the start of his using his complicity and concern with selling the military industry (as a GE publicist) to the public.

“Report on the Barnhouse Effect”

Understanding how “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” was positioned on the pages of *Collier’s* shows how Vonnegut drew upon inspiration from GE to treat the idea of technology and the morality of its use. It’s appearance in *Collier’s* also revealed how
readers would view it in the climate of the ‘50s, highlighted by their familiarity with the war correspondent report. This story shows a direct connection to Cat’s Cradle, and as Vonnegut’s first published short story, introduces readers to the idea of the benevolent scientist—a direct and lasting inspiration taken from a scientist at GE\(^1\). This section will show “Barnhouse” was directly influenced stylistically by previous Collier’s content, Collier’s worldview of US diplomacy and militarism, and Vonnegut’s view of GE’s role in scientific research.

“Report on the Barnhouse Effect” takes the form of a report given by a graduate student, the narrator, when his professor uses a special mental power to control physical objects. At first Professor Barnhouse teaches himself how to roll dice with his mind but eventually learns how to destroy the world’s weapons. Believing his abilities will create world peace, Barnhouse contacts the US military, but they want to use his abilities for war. Hiding from the militaries of the world, he disappears and starts systematically destroying the world’s weapons, but Barnhouse is worried about passing on his ability. He doesn’t believe he’ll live long enough to completely rid the world of weapons. This belief comes from the idea that his family’s history of early death will strike him as well. In the end, the graduate student learns how to do the Barnhouse effect, disappears, and follows his mentor’s footsteps.

Though his first story is often mentioned in surveys of Vonnegut’s work—primarily positioning it as his first published work—only a few critics have evaluated it. Reed frames the story in a thematic way by drawing attention to the anti-war sentiments and the ethical responsibilities of scientists (Short Story 30). Thorson also weighs the story mostly on matters of war and science (103). In Vonnegut in Fact, Jerome

\(^1\) See references to GE scientist Irving Langmuir in The Brothers Vonnegut (Strand).
Klinkowtiz highlights the themes and repeated use of a public spokesman as narrator (30). Since the title and the narrator’s choice of relating the story as if it’s a report to a governmental agency underscores the story as a “report,” the reader is invited to judge whether or not the report is believable. To do so, the way the report is conveyed determines its believability. What kind of report is this story? Is it a war correspondent report, a technical report given to a governmental agency, or a GE research report? It’s a mix of all three, borrowing elements of each, but in the end, this is a technical report that is, ironically, not at all technical and definitely unscientific. It is a flawed report.

Klinkowtiz points out in *The Vonnegut Effect* that the narrator parallels Vonnegut’s previous background as a graduate student but the way in which the narrator gives his technical report stands in contrast to how a GE research report would be written.

Any scientist and any scientific publicist would shudder at the narrator’s result. “It’s all anecdotal,” they would charge. “But that’s the beauty of the thing,” this laboratory publicist who was trying to write his way out of the corporation might say in response, for that is precisely the point of “Report on the Barnhouse Effect.” It tells the story of a researcher who discovers a power all out of proportion to his own meagre stature and humble methods. (*Vonnegut Effect* 21)

Vonnegut drew upon his experience in GE public relations and his familiarity with scientific research reports, but the way he wrote the story could have been influenced by war correspondence reports published by *Collier’s* and similar magazines. For example, an article, “Report on the Midwest” (Davenport), appeared only months before “Barnhouse.” The narrator recounted his travels to the Midwest, a journey taken to find the Midwest middleclass. It relied heavily on the correspondence report style that *Collier’s* had relied on during the war, such as with “Report from Germany” (Jacobi) which recounted the mood of German citizens during the last days of WWII:
On one of the first days of the New Year, I went into one of Berlin’s numerous Bierstuben for a glass of the yellowish water passing as beer in wartime Germany. It was a typical workers’ rendezvous, permeated with many unpleasant smells, among which that of sauerkraut stood out. My left arm was in a sling from injuries received in an air raid a few days earlier. It gave an opening to one of the patrons (a workman) to strike up a conversation. He supposed I owed my bad arm to one of those “verdammtete Tommies,” and I answered that I did. (11)

This repeated use of the war correspondent report style would have been familiar style to Collier’s editors and readers. So would the technical report. Thorson suggested “the form of the ‘report’ that the author uses in this story is adapted from the technical reports which were often presented to the United States Congress by weapons researchers” (103).

Vonnegut used the form of the technical report—the narrator addresses a government agency—while mixing in the more personal, immediate type of correspondence report. The “Barnhouse” narrator is both dealing with reporting to an oversight agency while he’s, in a sense, still at war. In comparison to the war correspondent report above, “Barnhouse” begins similarly.

Let me begin by saying that I don’t know any more about where Professor Arthur Barnhouse is hiding than anyone else does. Save for one short, enigmatic message, left in my mailbox on Christmas Eve, I have not heard from him since his disappearance a year and a half ago…I have been urged to write this report because I did research under the professor’s direction and because I was the first to learn of his astonishing discovery. (18)

Vonnegut used this personalized, flawed technical report again not only in “The Euphio Question” but also in Mother Night.

My name is Howard W. Campbell, Jr.

I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination.

The year in which I write this book is 1961.
I address this book of mine to Mr. Tuvia Friedmann, Director of the Haifa Institute for the Documentation of War Criminals, and to whomever else this may concern. (17)

This method of speaking directly to the audience is one in which Vonnegut returns again and again. From his first story, he uses a spokesperson as narrator and continues to develop this technique—sometimes by making himself a character and speaking directly with readers. In the case of “Barnhouse” the communication is flawed. Even while giving a technical report, he uses personal reaction and reflection rather than only relating scientific research. While admitting that a key element of Vonnegut’s fiction is to speak directly to readers, Bill Gholson notes, “It is not too surprising then that problems of communication are of central concern to Vonnegut’s narrators” (137). He goes on to say that “in each of the novels that follow Slapstick, Vonnegut speaks directly to the audience” (138). Vonnegut did address his audience directly from the beginning, and at the very first, it was in this form of a technical report.

Beyond narration style, Ellerhoff delves into contextual meaning and inspiration behind “Barnhouse” and draws interesting conclusions regarding the story and relevant pop culture. He speculates that readers of Collier’s might draw a comparison between the character of Barnhouse and a public figure of the time, Donald Barnhouse, a preacher whose sermons played on radio stations across the country and that readers may have associated the character Barnhouse with a holy man (43). As the story is centered on military application of a discovery, Ellerhoff extensively discusses that theme as well as the meaning behind Vonnegut’s term “‘dynamopsychism,’ or force of the mind” (“Barnhouse” 18). Ellerhoff breaks down the meaning of the word through the root of “dynamo” as a machine and “psychism” as part of the psyche (44), but a reader of Collier’s may have another perspective on the term “dynamo.”
In a July 30, 1949 issue of *Collier’s* Howard Whitman’s article “Richest Man in the Cemetery” took a look at the early deaths of executives who work too hard in high pressure jobs. The opening line seems as if it could have even come from Vonnegut’s pen. “A friend of mine has just committed suicide, but it didn’t say so in the papers. The obituary said ‘heart attack’” (17). This article describes men as dynamos who work too hard until they die at a young age: “What makes the dynamo whir? Not brains, energy, ambition and all those noble things we talk about…It is unhealthy balance which burns them out. Psychologists call it neurotic drive” (17). This sensationalist description seems to fit well with Vonnegut’s “force of the mind” and has a fitting parallel with Professor Barnhouse who expects that he will die early and burn out due to using his dynamo ability too much.

Vonnegut worked with his agent to revise “Barnhouse,” and eventually it was accepted by *Collier’s* but only after adapting it for that kind of market and reader. That adaptation shows an even deeper tie to *Collier’s* from a behind-the-scenes viewpoint. This story had been submitted and rejected several times from several magazines, including from *Collier’s*, before its eventual acceptance. In its original form, Professor Barnhouse participated in an operation by the Atomic Energy Commission instead of, as in the final story, the military (Vonnegut’s and *Collier’s* connections to the AEC will be discussed in more detail later). The original story ended with the professor’s student reading a manifesto left behind by Barnhouse (Strand 117). After an initial Knox Burger rejection, this manifesto was completely cut from the accepted version. The story was too “sententious” for *Collier’s* (Strand 121). This story was the beginning. It touched on the themes that would carry throughout his novels: scientific discovery, weapons research,
the benevolent scientist, and secrets—Barnhouse had hidden his powers before coming forward, he left coded messages to the narrator on how to find his own powers, and then he disappeared.

The benevolent scientist—a scientist who researched for the sake of discovery without considering the implications—connected this story to others, from “Barnhouse” to “EPICAC” to what he called his Ice-9 story, Cat’s Cradle. Vonnegut described this type of character:

I have already called the fictitious inventor of the fictitious Ice-9 an old-fashioned sort of scientist. There used to be a lot of morally innocent scientists like him. No more. Younger scientists are extremely sensitive to the moral implications of all they do. My fictitious old-time scientist asked, among other things, this question: “What is sin?” He asked that question mockingly as though the concept of sin were as obsolete as plate armor. Young scientists, it seems to me, are fascinated by the idea of sin. They perceive it as anything human that seriously threatens the planet and the life thereon.

While I was working at General Electric, long after the Second World War, the older scientists were generally serene, but the younger ones were frequently upset. The young ones were eager to discuss the question as to whether the atomic bomb, for instance, was a sin or not. (Wampeters 83)

Understanding the breadth of connections of “Barnhouse” is especially crucial to understanding Cat’s Cradle. The short story defines those personal connections between Vonnegut and GE while underscoring how scientific discoveries should matter to the middleclass and how it fits into the type of work a company like GE does for its consumers verses its government.

“Thanasphere”

Vonnegut’s story “Thanasphere” has intricate connections to his later work and reading it on the pages of Collier’s reveals how its readers would have positioned it.
Exploring its full context shows a crucial connection between this story, the Atomic
Energy Commission; GE’s position in not only the nuclear industry but its involvement
in secret government projects; and Vonnegut’s use of themes reused in later work—
particularly *Cat’s Cradle*. To give *Cat’s Cradle* its full perspective, one should start with
“Thanasphere.”

Written before the first manned space flight, in “Thanasphere” the US military
secretly launches an astronaut into space. The military initially decides they have a
success when the astronaut reports in from orbit, but then the astronaut reports hearing
voices. When he claims he’s communicating with ghosts, the officers deny the
astronaut’s proof that he’s speaking with dead people and decide the man is tricking
them. A rocket scientist believes his machines have succeeded but the human has failed.
To keep the mission secret and hide what they see as a failure, and after supposing the
astronaut has decided to commit suicide, they do nothing to convince him to guide the
craft to a safe landing. The ship crashes.

This story is rarely discussed in Vonnegut scholarship. A large reason for its
minimal consideration could be that researchers ignored Jerome Klinkowitz’s advice in
his “A Do-It-Yourself Kurt Vonnegut Anthology” (1977) in which he encourages
Vonnegut fans who’ve read most of his works, including the collected short stories, to go
to their libraries and find the un-collected stories in the original magazines. This not only
encourages readers and scholars to seek the uncollected works, but as this essay shows,
provides more context to those stories. Instead, most scholars rely on the published
collections. This meant that early scholarship largely ignored stories such as
“Thanasphere” which remained uncollected until 1999 when a selection of previously
uncollected stories were published together in *Bagombo Snuff Box*. Though Klinkowitz discussed “Thanasphere” and encouraged readers to find it in its original source, the magazine, he focused on the middleclass slant of the story and did not discuss the magazine in context nor the theme of military and scientific secrecy. This scientific secrecy theme is a major underpinning of the story since it starts with a secret, unfolds in a secret project, and ends with the secret death of an astronaut.

Vonnegut’s second *Collier’s* piece could be, at least in some part, a reaction to the words and actions of the Atomic Energy Commission’s first chair, David Lilienthal—who’d begun a public relations campaign to make nuclear power seem accessible to the middleclass now that the nuclear program was no longer a secret. As part of Lilienthal’s campaigning to convince the American people that nuclear energy could be benevolent, he wrote an article for the June 11, 1949 issue of *Collier’s*, “What Good is the Atom?”

Not only had Vonnegut and *Collier’s* readers been familiarized with the AEC but Vonnegut had an internal view into GE’s part of that nuclear program and its dealings with the AEC. These connections came together in his stories and novels. Since he’d originally written “Barnhouse” to have the AEC behind the military testing that involved Professor Barnhouse, Vonnegut had already framed the AEC as a foil for scientists.

“Barnhouse” appeared in the magazine in February 1950. In an undated Vonnegut letter sent soon after, he jokes about going into business and selling “hot” ties. “This here bowtie is made out of the ribbon the Atomic Energy Commission uses as its official marker for dangerously-radioactive areas” (*Letters* 47). Lilienthal’s *Collier’s* article likely played into Vonnegut’s building view on the AEC but it was compounded by a Lilienthal event Vonnegut attended.
On March 7, 1950 Vonnegut attended a speech given by Lilienthal, who had recently resigned from the AEC. In his “Address to the American Physical Society” Vonnegut says that GE scientists had urged Lilienthal to come speak (Wampeters 83). He goes on to describe it:

I have never seen a more depressed audience leaving a theater. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was a lighthearted comedy when compared with Lilienthal’s performance for that particular audience, on that particular night, in that particular city, where science was king. The young scientists and their young wives had learned something which most scientists now realize: that their bosses are not necessarily sensitive or moral or imaginative men. (83)

This speech had a lasting impact on Vonnegut, and his remarks on it expands upon the theme of the unaware scientist who is more concerned with his research than the implications of it. Vonnegut divided scientists into old-fashioned or young, where the young would question working for a company that weaponized their discoveries. In the case of Lilienthal, his speeches were intended to make nuclear energy seem benign. Considered within the context of Vonnegut’s stories, not addressing radioactive side effects made Lilienthal either a scientist who didn’t consider the moral implications of research, or a representative of companies and governments that took advantage of those naive scientists.

Lilienthal’s *Collier’s* piece described uses of atomic research for medical and energy purposes outside of weapons development. He states, “The popular mind is more important to our future than atomic laboratories” (18). He’s appealing to the middleclass *Collier’s* audience by saying research is crucial but at the same time seems to verify Vonnegut’s recurring theme on the benevolent scientist, that research is a primary goal over ethics. Lilienthal goes on to promote atomic research in scientific and medical research in order to allay the public’s fears about nuclear war. In a sense, he’s asking the
public to accept the advances that splitting atoms can provide despite its military uses. This has a reflection in “Thanasphere” when the results of a military endeavor uncover a discovery that’s then squashed as it has no military use.

The AEC and secrecy opens the events in “Thanasphere”. The story begins with a report of windows rattling in Sevier County, Tennessee due to an explosion from the direction of a secret Air Force experimental station. That secret Air Force location was likely a reference to the McGhee Tyson Airport in Alcoa, Tennessee. McGhee Tyson had been accommodating the military during WWII as it secretly supported the Manhattan project’s Oak Ridge location. That Air Force presence and General Electric’s work in Oak Ridge would have been known to Vonnegut. The story’s location alludes to the concerns of the day that would have occurred to Collier’s readers—the same readers who’d have read Lilienthal’s “What Good is the Atom” where Lilienthal describes Oak Ridge’s new atomic reactor. In other sections, Lilienthal discusses the secrecy around nuclear projects and that some knowledge is no longer secret. The Collier’s reader would be aware enough to consider secret bases and secret projects while reading Vonnegut’s story.

In September 1948, the AEC, through letters written by Lilienthal, ordered GE to deny recognition of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) as the bargaining agent for workers at GE’s Atomic Power Laboratory in Schenectady.  

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2 In 1950, the Air Force openly deployed units as security for the nuclear facilities in Oak Ridge. It was officially named an Air Force base in 1952 (“Base History”).  
3 Working in public relations for GE in Schenectady, Vonnegut would have been well aware of Lilienthal’s actions. Lilenthal called for GE to remove the union because the union’s officers had “alleged Communist affiliation or association” (“U.S. Agency Bars 2 CIO Unions”). GE then withdrew recognition of the union (“G.E. Atom Plant Upstate to End Ties with U.E.”). In response, the union sued the AEC and GE (“Union Sues Atom Commissioners And GE for Million Over Work Ban”). In an escalation of the disagreement, Lilienthal directed GE to withdraw recognition of the union for all workers at GE that worked on classified
While Lilienthal was surely discussed at Vonnegut’s workplace and GE was also involved with the secrecy around the nuclear program, the scientists were interested in Lilienthal’s thoughts. His views on the nuclear program would have been influential not only at his workplace but to Vonnegut and his readers.

Restoring the full context of “Thanasphere” sets it up as a precursor to *Sirens of Titan* and the beginning of a recurring story of ghosts in space. In *Sirens*, Winston Niles Rumfoord is a wealthy man turned astronaut who becomes lost in time and space with his dog. They appear and disappear, providing a tourist attraction run by a showman at Rumfoord’s estate. Rumfoord and his dog are “billed as ghosts” (111). This ghost in space returns as a fable, a story within a story, in *Jailbird*. In the novel, a fictional author’s story tells of a judge who travels “two and a half galaxies away from Earth, who has had to leave his body behind and whose soul goes flying through space, looking for a habitable planet and a new body to occupy” (*Jailbird* 99). This initial setup bears a close resemblance to a retelling of *Sirens*. The judge lands in a parking lot of “Finletter Air Force Base” another return to using fictional air bases such as in “Thanasphere.” Without “Thanasphere” this theme of ghosts or souls lost in space doesn’t have its starting place. This ghost travels in time and space, through the stories and novels before it circles back to “Thanasphere,” the essential starting point for *Sirens* and *Jailbird*.

“All the King’s Horses”

“All the King’s Horses” is Vonnegut’s most war-focused of his early stories—a precursor to *Slaughterhouse-Five*—and is the result of the critical impact of *Collier’s* on atomic projects—even those outside the Schenectady labs (“New Action Taken Against Electric Union”). In April 1949, the union lost its suit (“Court Backs Refusal”).
how he positioned not only war stories but a treatment of prisoners of war. This story shows an evolution of his recurring theme of the benevolent scientist by flipping it into intentional cruelty. The characters in this story are like mice trapped in a maze given pain for the experimenter to watch and observe. To understand how Vonnegut started this change toward more directly addressing war themes and cruelty, viewing it within the magazine shows how not only the readers had been conditioned to view world events—like a chess game—but also how his thematic and stylistic evolution was directed by editorial pressure from Collier’s.

“All the King’s Horses” tells of the aftermath of a plane crash in China that strands a group of sixteen: US Colonel Bryan Kelly, his wife, their twin ten-year-old boys, the pilot, and a group of US military men accompanying them. While a Russian observer stands by, refusing to help by claiming neutrality, the Chinese leader who imprisons them demands that Kelly face him in chess. The Colonel’s side of the board does not have wooden game tokens as the Chinese leader’s does. Instead, the game uses his family and his men as chess pieces. A captured piece means death for the humans. As the play progresses, the Colonel has to decide who will be sacrificed. The men who leave the board are executed. He has to face the death of men he’s sworn to protect while deciding that to save the rest of his family, he has to sacrifice a son. In the end, he loses men but before he loses a son, the game is interrupted by the assassination of the Chinese leader. The story also blatantly explores Russian interference and the spread of communism.

Several critics have noted the similarities between “All the King’s Horses” and The Chessmen of Mars by Edgar Rice Burroughs (Thorson 107 and Ellerhoff 49). This
isn’t a difficult conclusion with a character in *Player Piano* being named Edgar Rice Burroughs Hagstrohm. Ellerhoff also shows the influence of the chess game in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* stories (49-50). The title of Vonnegut’s story “All the King’s Horses” is an allusion to Humpty Dumpty, a character in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Not mentioned by Ellerhoff but bolstering his argument is Vonnegut’s original title of the story, “White King,” another character in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

The idea of leaders treating their people as pawns is not new and the *Collier’s* reader would have understood that paradigm in discussing world events. In the May 28, 1949 issue *Collier’s* had made that outright comparison with “The 25 Men Who Rule the World.” Alongside sketches of twenty-five world leaders, George Kent presents the worldview, “In this checkerboard world the major pieces are prime ministers and politicians, not kings and bishops. But a handful of men still move nations of pawns. Meet the men who are mapping your future in a cold game of global chess” (18). The article then goes on to give brief descriptions of each leader with Truman, Churchill, and Stalin leading the cast of illustrations. By this time, *Collier’s* had already run a long piece “Russia's Children from Cradle to College” by Arthur Goodfriend and “MR. Z” a foreign correspondent writing under a touted veil of secrecy. The article details the lives of children raised in Russia. One picture’s heading underscores the importance of chess in the Soviet educational system: “From the kindergarten on, chess is the Soviet Union's favorite indoor sport. It is highly esteemed because it develops qualities of planning, strategy and foresight in the Soviet child” (41). Readers of “All the King’s Horses” would place even more emphasis on the choice of the game chess, with a Russian observer, in a Chinese leader’s stronghold.
The moral of “Horses” is more straightforward than much of Vonnegut’s fiction, even including “Barnhouse” where despite his having cut the moralizing sermon at the end, the character speaks and acts on his anti-war sentiments. Vonnegut’s stories in *Collier’s* directed his later fiction in making these views—through recognizable connections to familiar content and themes—not just more salable, but also more nuanced. By using subtle references to the textual and visual history of the slicks and a worldview familiar to magazine readers, Vonnegut told his first war story. The reaction from the *Collier’s* publisher and other editors left an impact.

In response to another *Collier’s* editor’s opinion that “All the King’s Horses,” the war games story, “savored of knee-jerk anticommunism,” Vonnegut wrote to Knox Burger:

> I am a registered Democrat, pro-Fair and New Deal, distressed by the new anti-subversive laws, hate McCarthy, enflamed by Communist smears on liberals—etc., etc. But, dammit, Knox, I don’t like Communist Russia any more than I did Nazi Germany. There are some 3,000 Americans dead in Korea, killed in a chess game with Russia looking on. That is a lot of dead people and a plenty sickening situation. I have sixteen on my chessboard, which is peanuts. Them as may say I am insensitive to put an inflammatory thing like “White King” on the market are, perhaps, too insensitive to a casualty list as long as King Kong’s arm. (*Letters* 50)

Vonnegut had written this in a letter on October 31, 1950 to accompany his revisions to “White Knight,” the later retitled “All the King’s Horses.” This letter indicates an antiwar view that he believes should be shared with *Collier’s* readers and shows his frustration that he’d be editorially restrained from writing from that viewpoint. That frustration would continue to shape how he presented antiwar sentiments.

In the spring of 1951 Vonnegut was invited to write a story for a special issue of *Collier’s*, described by David Seed: “the use of a periodical format to ‘report’ on a future war was further developed in the special issue…devoted to the ‘Unwanted War,’ took
some ten months to prepare, and was addressed—notionally, at least—to Stalin and his
Politburo” (115). The issue was ambitious, and Knox Burger reportedly said, “It was
going to make a big splash…with top-notch writers already on board: Edward R.
Murrow, Arthur Koestler, Robert Sherwood, maybe even John Steinbeck or William
Faulkner” (Strand 192). The issue eventually published in October of 1951 as “Preview
of a War We Do Not Want” with the mentioned authors, excepting Steinback and
Faulkner. And without Vonnegut. Burger invited Vonnegut into the issue during a lunch:

On the spot, Kurt pitched Knox on an idea for a story about a
cabinetmaker in occupied Czechoslovakia. He is making a booby-trapped
desk for the Russian commandant in charge of his town, but when the
Americans take over, the cabinetmaker continues making the same deadly
desk for the new captain: Russian, American—it doesn’t matter to him.
One occupier is as bad as another. (Strand 192)

Vonnegut turned in the story, but Burger asked for a revision to “[tone] down the story’s
bitter antiwar tone. At Knox’s suggestion, he had even rewritten the ending to make a
point about the decency and sensitivity of the American occupiers” (Strand 210) but
though Collier’s paid him for it, they left the story out of the issue. While the issue may
have had an antiwar theme, the publishers wanted patriotic pieces that did not question
the US government’s stance in the coming cold war.

The editorial direction and the expectations of the Collier’s reader had an impact
on Vonnegut’s word choices, his treatment of themes, and perhaps contributed to a
frustration with the treatment of war and American patriotism. These revisions and word
tweaking occurred while he wrote Player Piano. The same kind of editorial feedback as
he received after “All the King’s Horses” had caused “The Commandant’s Desk” to be
pulled. Yet, with Slaughterhouse-Five being considered his most influential work, it
seems remiss to overlook Vonnegut’s first treatment of a prisoner of war story. “Horses”
provides a look at how his style was shaped by *Collier's*. It also provides a crucial foil to *Slaughterhouse* by its relative directness and should be read as a precursor that shaped the later, seminal novel.

Overall, Vonnegut’s military themed stories fit within the type of fiction *Collier’s* was acquiring—as evidenced by the previously mentioned issue dedicated to the “Preview of the War We Do Not Want.” While he attempted to write stories that would be bought, he also continued his efforts to pen his “war story,” telling different sides of conflicts in these stories while returning to the same ideas of uncaring oversight, benevolent scientists, and flawed communication. He returned to these ideas again and again, creating connections to his later works from the very beginning.
Chapter VI
Intertextuality

Vonnegut started using intertextuality as a technique during his short story writing era and built upon those stories from his first published work until his last. Not only did he rely heavily on theme, character, and parable reuse, but claimed intertextuality as a fundamental element of his work. While creating his first original stories, Vonnegut learned the limits associated with writing for the middleclass magazine market. Working around those limitations, he became adept at using humor and parody, coming at a difficult topic indirectly, and telling a layered story with references both subtle and obvious. His novel writing removed some of those limitations and though he gained some freedom in writing his later novels, he continued to refer back to his own work, reusing the same characters, themes, and parables. Even before writing his first published short story, Vonnegut studied and understood the impact on readers of layering and building connections.

Though Vonnegut did not graduate from the University of Chicago as an anthropology student, a field change from the chemistry degree he’d attempted at Cornell, his intended thesis clearly showed his interest in intertextuality—even though the thesis was ultimately rejected.

The thesis, “Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales,” has been lost, but since then, he’s given lectures and interviews explaining his research and theories. Vonnegut describes his thesis in Palm Sunday: “I collected popular stories from
fantastically various societies…I graphed each one” (285). When the anthropology department asked what the graphs meant, Vonnegut didn’t have a good answer (*Palm Sunday* 287), but the work led him to a conclusion that would be a staple of his writing: tales—cultural stories, seminal works, or fairytales—are revisited by cultures and authors over and over. In a self-interview in *Palm Sunday*, he states, “I guarantee you that no modern story scheme, even plotlessness, will give a reader genuine satisfaction, unless one of those old fashioned plots is smuggled in somewhere” (99).

Vonnegut learned to use his background in anthropology and as a public relations writer while writing stories for *Collier’s*, and at the same time, he began weaving intertextual context into the stories to address scientific and political issues of the day. His lived experience made the stories personal for him and his readers. The stories gave him a means to express his frustration with the corporate world, explore that same corporation’s role in weapon’s research, and make fun of his own social status and need to attain more, all while using methods he’d been developing since his anthropology thesis: intertextual linkage and reuse. This method of reuse made his work more accessible to readers by borrowing myths and fables from outside *Collier’s*, from *Collier’s* content, and from his own fiction.

In “All the King’s Horses,” Vonnegut had already shown intertextual linkage between his stories and fairytales. He’d later show a more obvious and undeniable link to interweaving tales into his work with *Bluebeard*, a fictional autobiography of an abstract expressionist artist. In the novel, the protagonist writes about Bluebeard, the fairytale character, while the novel itself has distinct parallels to the tale. In a section of the book,
the protagonist explains what happens in the fairytale. In “The Eight Elements of Intertextual Use of Fairytales” Kevin Paul Smith explains this intertextuality:

Here, not only is Bluebeard explicitly mentioned, but a full synopsis of the tale is included to drive home the importance of the intertext...[The tale] acts as a supplement to the story and fulfills the paradoxical nature of the supplement highlighted by Derrida; although it may appear supplementary (or dispensable), the fairytale plot takes on greater importance, becoming a model by which the reader can understand the text. (17)

Vonnegut understood and used these linkages. This type of linkage reappears in the revision of “Mnemonics.”

“Mnemonics”

“Mnemonics” is the first story which shows Vonnegut incorporating American culture into his story—specifically celebrity culture—as a way to critique it and add layers to the characters on the page. This type of incorporation was not only borrowed from the pages of the magazine that printed the story but continued as a method he’d use in characterization, most notably in Sirens of Titan and God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine.

Of the first short stories, this one may be the least considered in scholarship, but it is a clear turning point. The story deserves attention for its firsts: the first to center pop culture directly in his stories and the first to focus on middleclass concerns rather than an element of the military industrial complex. It’s also a prime example of Vonnegut’s use of intertextuality between Collier’s and his work.

“Mnemonics” tells the story of a corporate man, Alfred Moorhead, who’s secretly in love with Ellen, his secretary—another story dealing in secrets. Alfred has a problem remembering facts and figures without referring to his notes. In an attempt to improve his
work ability, he attends a memory course and learns a technique that associates lists with mental scenes he creates with starlets such as Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner standing in for items in a list. While his memory seems to improve for business, he forgets himself and accidentally speaks to a starlet in his mind, calling her, “Baby.” Ellen believes he’s finally revealed his feelings and “remembered” her (38).

This short, one-page story was another that Vonnegut revised extensively after an initial Collier’s rejection. The original story hinted that “corporate blandness of the company man might be concealing war trauma” (Strand 112). In his extensive revision, he dropped the hints of war and replaced it with hints of American culture. Yet, the elements of American culture that he employs raise a question about how much Vonnegut looked to Collier’s for inspiration.

In the same issue of Collier’s as “Barnhouse” (the same issue with connections to “Euphio”) the article “Danger: Broadway Beauty at Work” (Zolotow) has a notable similarity to “Mnemonics.” The profiled actress, Nanette Fabray, has taken a memory course. She’s mentioned as a contemporary of Ava Gardner and several other stars. For this actress, unlike Alfred in Vonnegut’s story, the memory courses have not worked. It’s likely that these points in common did have an influence on Vonnegut’s final revision of “Mnemonics.”

The story had already been written, revised and rejected by Collier’s and other publications by the time “Barnhouse” was published. After “Barnhouse” appeared, he revised “Mnemonics” again, changing to the lighter, more pop-oriented story. Vonnegut had previously read stories in Collier’s to note what readers and the editors might want. After his first visit with his future editor Burger, he bought an issue of Collier’s on the
train ride home from the meeting, and after reading decided “in concept, the stories weren’t far off from what Kurt had been writing, but their execution was better. Back at home, Kurt started working on a short-short right away” (Strand 130). That story didn’t sell, but he’d shown a willingness to understand and write a kind of story that would sell—something he freely admitted he’d intended with his self-deprecating quotes mentioned above that he sold stories to finance his novel-writing. As retold in *The Brothers Vonnegut*, when Vonnegut first started writing, he felt good about his stories. After his first “Mnemonics” rejection, he still kept writing. “He had faith in ‘Barnhouse.’ Not only was it a good yarn; it was in keeping with the tenor of the times” (121). After several revisions and after researching the *Collier’s* market, he finally created a version that was accepted.

“Mnemonics” used the technique of dropping celebrity names. Not only does this draw the reader in to identify with the main character, but it critiques the obsession the American culture has with celebrity, a culture that *Collier’s* added to. This criticism of celebrity culture is further addressed in *Sirens of Titan*—where the main character is a millionaire who achieves several types of celebrity which all undermine his happiness. It becomes a recurring element in several books, starting with *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, featuring the wealthy Rosewater heir whose celebrity also undermines his journey to attain domestic happiness. Starting any reading of Vonnegut’s novels by understanding his initial story addressing celebrity obsession provides a deeper context of the novels and a place in which to see that celebrity obsession play out. In *Rosewater* and “Mnemonics” the obsession intervenes. In the case of Moorhead, his celebrity fantasy intervenes between him and his secretary. For Rosewater, his celebrity status limits his
ability to make friends with the working-class people he tries to help on his travels. They cannot treat him the same or accept him fully. In the case of Moorhead, the possibility of happiness is still there but for Rosewater, this intervention doesn’t have a comedic ending and poses lifelong issues.

“EPICAC”

Vonnegut’s third piece at Collier’s is one of his more discussed short stories as it is generally viewed as a precursor to his first novel, Player Piano, but the story’s context on the pages of Collier’s is rarely discussed. This story is a launching point for Vonnegut, showcasing elements that influenced his growth as an author, issues of the middleclass. Crafting for the type of commercial stories that would appeal to readers of the slicks, in “EPICAC” Vonnegut relied on themes that were a direct reflection of his work at GE, notably the idea of the benevolent scientist—the type of scientists he worked with daily. Other themes include secrecy, technology for the sake of technology, and office boredom/politics.

This section will provide a closer look at this story and its placement in 1950 Collier’s, specifically how elements are directly tied to earlier Collier’s articles. The connection to other Collier’s content not only gives a deeper understanding of the story but adds to the foundation of a world that continued in his first novel, Player Piano.

“EPICAC” tells of a scientist who tries to get the attention of his coworker but in failing to get her to go on a date, seeks help from the supercomputer at his disposal. Rather than being depicted as a sterile, room-sized supercomputer, EPICAC has a personality: an artificial intelligence (AI) who writes poetry for the scientist to give to his love interest. EPICAC falls in love with the same woman but the protagonist tells the AI
that he isn’t human and therefore, can never be with her. EPICAC kills himself. Of note in this story are the repeated mentions of budget to justify EPICAC’s continuance and the juxtaposition of love, textual art/communication, and humanity.

In this retelling of Edmond Rostand’s play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Vonnegut continues to explore themes of military science, secrecy, and suicide/mortality. Though the device of falling in love through the poetic words of another man is used, few critics draw the comparison to *Cyrano*. A search of criticism yields one study, “Oedipus e-mails his mom: Computer-mediated romance develops as a science fiction sub-genre” by Adrienne Wells Janney. However, Janney does not discuss the story’s context in *Collier’s*.

Understanding the story from its position in *Collier’s*, the *Cyrano* connection might be more obvious. In “Genius on a Low Budget” (Small), the September 16, 1950 issue of *Collier’s* brings its readers a sympathetic look at a movie director known for producing films with a low budget, Stanley Kramer. Kramer has not only found success against the odds, as presented by this piece, but at the time of the article, is producing a film version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The article calls the Cyrano story a “classic” and presents the movie as a possible risk for Kramer, the genius producer. Understanding that the magazine’s readers of “EPICAC” would have been introduced to an upcoming production of *Cyrano* would suggest a stronger comparison between the play and Vonnegut’s story. In this case, that the computer wrote the poetry but did not have his love revealed, as is the case with *Cyrano*, underscores the question of humanity and love in Vonnegut’s version.
Cyrano wouldn’t have been the only familiar element to the Collier’s reader. They would have recognized the name EPICAC as referring to the real supercomputer, ENIAC and its successor UNIVAC. In 1947, Collier’s ran the story “It All Adds Up” by John Lagemann to introduce readers to the ballroom sized “supercalculator,” but alas, it also lets readers know that ENIAC (electronic numerical integrator and computer), “the first electronic machine in operation” is on its way out for an even larger and faster EDVAC (Lagemann 22-23). After their initial military use, these machines were used for, among other things, the US census.

In 1949, Collier’s visited the census counting supercomputer again with “150,000,000 Noses—Count ‘Em.” ENIAC has become more outdated. The Census Bureau was to use the UNIVAC:

> It is similar to the Eniac, a computer used during the war to calculate the flight of projectiles; it was said to be able to complete computation before a missile reached its target. Today, the more compact and versatile Univac will serve a civilian purpose for the first time. This is a 10,000-tube affair that like the human brain has a memory. In other words, it can do one problem, lay it aside or remember it while it does another. (Kent 58-59)

These distinctions, the civilian versus military and the computer with a memory versus the one that can’t remember are also distinctions between the model ENIAC and Vonnegut’s EPICAC. They are contrasts the reader of Collier’s might understand when reading “EPICAC.” However, viewing the personified computer in this story as a former-military computer who would normally count people—something Collier’s had slanted as patriotic, to participate in the census—would juxtapose a being meant to count people with one who could never be a person.

This short story is crucial as a precursor to Player Piano. The contrast of a human-like EPICAC in the story to the later one of the same name showcases the sterility
of the machine in the novel that replaces human workers. *Player Piano*’s main character Paul Proteus postulates that the next industrial revolution would bring thinking machines: “That would be the third revolution, I guess—machines that devaluate human thinking. Some of the big computers like EPICAC do that all right, in specialized fields” (21). If “EPICAC” is read as a part of *Player Piano*, this thought of a computer thinking and having human emotions, becomes a real part of the future Paul alludes to here. These thinking machines could not only replace humans, but they could fall in love and decide to cut their lives short as well. EPICAC in *Player Piano* is the flipside to the one in the previous short story.

Readers of “EPICAC” would have been aware of the *Cyrano* movie as well as the supercomputers from which “EPICAC” and *Player Piano* drew inspiration. This knowledge gives even more context in which to understand the later novel, showing another side to EPICAC as a character and a possibility.

“The Foster Portfolio”

“The Foster Portfolio” sets up the idea of the American dream being for sale and tying the content of Vonnegut’s stories directly to ads present on the pages of *Collier’s*. Reading the story in the original publication is crucial to understanding how a reader would have interpreted it alongside the advertisements. Later, Vonnegut uses direct allusions to advertising providing that American dream in several novels including *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Breakfast of Champions*. Viewing “Foster” within *Collier’s* provides a starting point of this technique that found its way into the novels.

“The Foster Portfolio” tells of an investment consultant with a new client, Herbert Foster, a bookkeeper, who has newly inherited a considerable fortune in a stock portfolio.
Foster doesn’t want his wife or child to know of the inheritance, nor does he want to cash in on his new fortune—not even to pay off a few debts so that his family can live more comfortably. The counselor doesn’t understand Foster’s reticence until he follows him to his second job at a restaurant. There he finds Foster playing jazz under an assumed name. The reader is left to believe that Foster would rather live in a middleclass house with middleclass worries because the temptation of his art would lead him to run away from that middleclass house, wife, and child.

Like its predecessor, “Mnemonic,” this story did not focus on themes of the military industrial complex but rather, it takes the reader back into the living room and back to a character with secrets. This story takes on the American dream directly, creating a dynamic tension in a story written to the Collier’s formula that underlines the fragility of that dream. Set among ads intended to tempt a middleclass reader to buy products that would make their lives easier, this story asks how art and happiness matters while surrounded by commercial products that are advertised as being a means to happiness.

In the same issue as this story, an ad for a Clary bookkeeping cash register appeared (see fig. 3). It wasn’t the first time the adding machine had been advertised. The Collier’s reader would have had a background to call this type of machine to mind when introduced to it in the story. The reference to the type of machine sold in the magazine builds onto the world that Vonnegut is not only creating but critiquing.

Not only would Collier’s have given its readers a basis for seeing Foster’s job but it would have provided a view into the investment consultant’s job. Whether or not a reader had ever invested, they’d have created an idea of what an investment consultant
Figure 3. Retailers! See How Clary Bookkeeping Cash Register Cuts Work on Markups, Taxes, Reports, Etc.!

Clary advertisement. Collier's, 8 September 1951, p. 55.
might do based on their reading of the magazine. Readers would have seen repeated
advertisements of investment services, the kind of service provided by the “Foster”
narrator. In the same issue as “Foster” a public service announcement sponsored by, in
part, the Magazine Publishers of America urged readers to buy US Savings Bond.
Readers would have been given messages that not only should they invest, but it was
their patriotic duty to support the defense of the country (fig. 4). If investing was
necessary and expected, the story set among such advertising presented Foster’s decisions
as even more outside of what would be expected of a middleclass worker.

Government bonds weren’t the only investment option advertised in Collier’s.
Merrill Lynch bought ads during the period that asked the question, “Well, what would
you do with the $500? or $1,500? or $5,000?” (fig. 5). The company encourages readers
to request their pamphlet, “What Everybody Ought to Know About This Stock and Bond
Business.” The narrator of “Foster” has his own pamphlet and his own ideas on how to
invest a windfall. The pamphlet the character uses would have not only been something a
Collier’s reader could recognize, but perhaps even visualize at that point in the story. But
no matter how the narrator pushes his view on how to live the dream, Foster chases his
own dream, of music, just like his father had. In this case, Foster chooses to continue his
boring job because his art could become an uncontrollable obsession. This runs counter to
the usual middleclass need to rise out of middleclass and causes discomfort for the broker
character as well as the reader. This discomfort forces a critique of that need to strive for
the next rung of social class despite the longing for artistic fulfillment.
Figure 4. U.S. Savings Bonds are Defense Bonds

*U.S. Savings Bonds are Defense Bonds - Buy them regularly*

America, Advertising Council and the Magazine Publishers of advertisement. Collier's, 8 September 1951, p. 57.
This story can be read as a precursor for *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, another tale of a son chasing his father’s reputation and situating his happiness within the ideal of the American dream. The theme of the novel can be summarized from one passage in the beginning: “Thus the American dream turned belly up, turned green, bobbed to the scummy surface of cupidity unlimited, filled with gas, went band in the noonday sun” (9). Money, accumulation, and consumption all turned the American dream. Even a man such as Eliot Rosewater, with the best of intentions, cannot remain pure to that dream. The similarities between “Foster” and *Rosewater* are of note and give an alternative to the character of Rosewater. Appearing in several other novels including *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Rosewater’s character was often revisited and retold by Vonnegut. To fully understand Rosewater, he should be considered an extension of Foster and the story as a precursor to *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. Foster needs to limit his jazz playing to only a few nights a week in order to handle his obsession and keep his life at a level he can maintain. Like Rosewater, he seeks restraint. For Foster, the restraint keeps him from running away and deserting his family like his father had (while Rosewater runs away and deserts his family as a form of restraint). Foster lied to his wife, hid his wealth, and allowed his son to live in near-poverty. The question of the dream continues into Vonnegut’s next published story but in a more commercial way.
Figure 5. Well, what would you do with the $500? or $1,500? or $5,000?

“More Stately Mansions”

If “Euphio” provided the first Vonnegut story to play-out the bigger ideals of science in the living room and “Foster” brought the American dream into the center of that living room, then “More Stately Mansions” took the living room and weighed it against consumerism and the slick magazines on the coffee tables. This story provides a direct critique of magazines. Reading it within the magazine is imperative not only to understand what Vonnegut is critiquing but to show how the content of the magazine provides connections to his novels. Understanding “Mansions” and its influences and context adds to the understanding of God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Slaughterhouse-Five, Breakfast of Champions, Bluebeard, and the wider Vonnegut world.

“More Stately Mansions” begins with a couple—an unnamed narrator and his wife, Anne—moving into a neighborhood and meeting their neighbors, Grace and George McClellan. It doesn’t take long for them to notice that Grace has an obsession with home decorating. Her conversations inevitably focus on décor—knowledge she’d gleaned from popular magazines. George tolerates Grace’s obsession and is described as being affectionate with her. Despite the peculiarity, the couples become friends. After two years, the narrator is finally invited inside George and Grace’s home. He's surprised that it’s rundown rather than an example from a home décor magazine, as Grace has described it for years. Grace believes what she finds in magazines is real even though their house is rundown and in need of repair and updating. In the end, her husband arranges to have the house updated and decorated the way Grace envisioned for years. She never notices that it was updated, believing it was that way all along. The obsession is a thinly veiled critique of how the standards set by magazines can influence the
middleclass in both the need to attain status and the consumerist habits that fed the
magazine itself with ad revenue.

Again, Vonnegut revisits secrecy. George tries to keep neighbors out of the house
so Grace’s delusions about their home décor will not be revealed. George’s tenderness
toward Grace and his acceptance of her delusions make this Vonnegut’s most sentimental
story of the early work. The story leaves behind a hint that trying to achieve the ideal
American house as told by magazines has driven Grace into delusions. Grace frequently
mentions and keeps filing cabinets full of clippings from fictional magazines Better
House and Garden and Good Homelife, plays on the names of real magazines Better
Home and Gardens and Good Housekeeping. While Collier’s did not focus on home and
garden specifically, it still carried that kind of content within the mix of news and fiction.
Often enough during that time period, that setting of what design and products to own
appeared in a GE ad (fig. 6). As GE had done repeatedly in advertising its appliances, this
blanket ad depicts a GE product depicted as a middleclass necessity that would enhance
happiness and comfort. Not only that, it shows a certain kind of middleclass setting,
positioning the blanket in a setting of décor and financial stability that is an entire image.
It’s not just a blanket. It’s an ideal.
Figure 6. General Electric’s New Kind of Automatic Blanket

Before Vonnegut placed his first story, and after receiving several rejections, he turned to the magazines themselves to understand what editors wanted. Of those were several in which he already had familiarity such as *Collier’s* and *Saturday Evening Post*, but he considered many others:

Magazines like *Spicy Detective*, which Kurt read as a kid, and those he had never read, like the women’s magazines: *Redbook, Mademoiselle, Cosmopolitan, Glamour, McCall’s*. To appeal to editors there, stories had to feature things women cared about: relationships, family, love. He and Jane bought copies of those too and read them, analyzing the fiction they published. (Strand 90)

He later placed several stories in the *Ladies Home Journal, Cosmopolitan, and Redbook*. His stories did not appear in *Better Homes and Gardens*, but he did remark on the magazine, saying “There was a simple formula in *Better Homes and Gardens* once about how much a person should spend on furniture. For a ten thousand dollar house you should have ten thousand dollars’ worth of furniture” (*Letters* 79). He’d surveyed what he considered women’s magazines and magazines such as *Collier’s*, and in writing his tales of middleclass, those magazines featured prominently. Not only is he researching the stories to tailor his own to be similar but is using the other magazine content as the raw material which he’ll use to critique the middleclass. This story is the first where he not only used but also critiqued the magazines outright.

If these magazines are a central part of Vonnegut’s art, they are also central to Grace’s artistry in décor, even if that artistry isn’t realized in reality until the end of the story. Like with the character Foster, the artist as a middleclass suburbanite is complex. In “Art, Domesticity, and Vonnegut’s Women” Susan E. Farrell makes a connection between Grace and the protagonist of *Bluebeard* mentioned above for its outright use of the fairytale. “Although Grace McClellan’s palette is the home, one of the few outlets for
creativity available to ordinary housewives in the early 1950s, Vonnegut takes her artistic ambitions seriously. The story suggests that such ambitions can make life worth living” (94). This view of art making life worth living is deconstructed and visited again in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, before he does so again in the later Bluebeard. Eliot Rosewater searches for meaning not only in art and literature but in various jobs from politician to fire marshal. Using Fielder’s theory of Rosewater and Slaughterhouse being a single work because of their common characters, themes, obsessions, and whimsy (15), then this single work can be expanded from “More Stately Mansions” as well as the previously considered “Foster” story with its connections to Rosewater.

In Rosewater, a side character, Fred Rosewater, has a habit of going to the newsstand, glancing over girly magazines, and then reading Better Homes and Gardens instead. His wife habitually redecorates. In one scene, he puts down Better Homes and Gardens and picks up a Kilgore Trout novel—the fictional author that Vonnegut intersperses through the majority of his fiction (160). Using the connections of characters, magazines, and themes, a direct line can be drawn from “More Stately Mansions” to Rosewater (a take on Hamlet) to “2BR02B” (or, “To be or not to be” a novel written by character Kilgore Trout in Rosewater but later written by Vonnegut for publication in 1962) to Kilgore Trout (his first appearance was in Rosewater) to Slaughterhouse (Trout reappeared). “Mansions” was part of the beginning and the continued intertextual connections of these characters and themes and as such, must be read as part of that broader world.
Chapter VII
Conclusion

By the time Vonnegut’s initial eight stories were published in _Collier’s_, his editor Knox Burger had left the magazine and worked at Dell as an editor. Vonnegut would send his novels to Burger—who would later edit _Sirens of Titan_—but at this point, Vonnegut had begun to acknowledge that the magazine market was changing, though he would still go on to place dozens more short stories. _Collier’s_ closed in 1957. The original inspiration of GE and his first editor would no longer hold a prominent role in the day-to-day life of his short-story writing, but those first years left a lasting impression on Vonnegut’s fiction. Those stories can still be found in copies of _Collier’s_ and should still be studied alongside other features and advertising as they were first intended to be read.

In “The Rise of Periodical Studies,” Sean Lantham and Robert Scholes argue that when studying periodicals, scholars shouldn’t omit the advertising while keeping only the literary pages. “The culture of the past is alive in those advertising pages—as alive as in the texts they surround” (520). In the case of fiction in 1950s slicks, a broad understanding of middleclass American culture of the time doesn’t provide as much of a context as seeing the ads themselves. Which ads run in the magazine? Which products are featured and how are they sold? A magazine that sells ads focused on different markets will impact how the fiction is written as well as read. A piece positioned in a magazine with ads for furniture and clothing might be read differently than a piece in a
magazine that runs ads for tires, liquor, and savings bonds. As Lantham and Scholes also point out, “Periodicals, however, are by their nature collaborative objects, assembled in complex interactions between editors, authors, advertisers, sales agents, and even readers” (529). If these interactions should all be considered, then as Bornstein says, “the literary work might be said to exist not in any one version, but in all the versions put together (Material Modernism 6).

If all versions contribute to the one, when reading “The Euphio Question,” the scholar might note the GE advertisement running alongside it and consider the themes of the story and Vonnegut’s history with the company. That advertisement adds to the story and becomes a part of it. As noted in that crucial NYTBR “Slaughterhouse” review, the critic says, “The pathos of human beings enmeshed in the relentless triviality of contemporary American culture has never been more adequately expressed” (23) in a reference to the consumerism of American culture. This expression of the middleclass could describe any of the stories set among the advertisements and make them part of the story.

This essay sought to show the links between Collier’s, its other content, Vonnegut’s first stories, and the broader canon of his work. To do so, this essay presented Vonnegut’s anthropology thesis—a work that relied on connecting tales—as a starting point. In his thesis, he evaluated cultures, among those cultures would be 1950s America and the culture represented in magazines. After working at GE and gathering career-long inspiration there, he began a process of writing and studying the magazine market. Through his own method of work and research, he built a base on which to study his work by looking at connections, allusions, intertextuality, and retellings.
From that base, eight stories were shown to have connections between them, the magazine, and later novels. Those same eight stories were also created with editorial direction and influence—another connection to the magazine stories that would play a part in his fiction.

The closer study of the stories showed several turning points in Vonnegut’s fiction that are relatively undiscussed. The progression of changes shows us the evolution of stories about the military industrial complex to casting its effects in the middleclass living room. The stories also showed a stronger tie to the theories he repeated through his career, of the fairytale retellings and the reader’s response to them.

By considering what appeared on the pages before it and with it, a look at “EPICAC” in context can help a scholar find deeper understanding of _Player Piano_, as the origin of the EPICAC computer has roots in people counting. “EPICAC” also hints at “Ice-9,” a story that eventually became the novel _Cat’s Cradle_. The exchange in “EPICAC” draws in the oblivious benevolent scientist, another connection to _Cat’s Cradle_:

“So romantic, so poetic,” she murmured, more to her control panel than to me. “That's the way with mathematicians—all hearts and flowers.” She closed a switch. “I could get more warmth out of a sack of frozen CO₂.”

“Well, how should I say it?” I said, a little sore. Frozen CO₂, in case you don't know, is dry ice.

“Try and say it sweetly,” she said sarcastically. “Sweep me off my feet. Go ahead.” (“EPICAC” 36)

Pat speaks facing the machine instead of the man. The man is compared to ice, a comparison explored more in the later novel, and again, the machine itself, connects back to that census counting machine depicted in earlier _Collier’s_ stories.
The interplay between Vonnegut novels isn’t doubted. The interplay between the stories, their context, and their publication venue should not be either.
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