

Jillian layne

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Jillian Layne 12/13/12 Intro to Politics Final Paper Vonnegut's Galapagos Kurt Vonnegut's novel Galapagos was written in 1985 and is written using addictive prose from an imaginative perspective. Like Vonnegut's earlier work, Galapagos is characterized by exaggerated characters, imaginative scenarios, and striking insights into the human condition. And while Galapagos paints an often unflattering picture of the human species, there is great humor and affection for the characters nonetheless. Galapagos takes place in the Ecuadorian city of Guayaquil in 1986 A. D, on the island of Santa Rosalia located in the Pacific Ocean. Through a random series of events — or twists of fate — a group of quirky characters find themselves fleeing war-torn Ecuador on the Bahia de Darwin, the name of the ship originally intended to take them on " the Nature Cruise of the Century" (Vonnegut, pg. 27). Their fate is to create a colony on Santa Rosalia that will continue the human race. Due to a plague of infertility that slowly wipes out Homo sapiens on the mainland, the fertile inhabitants of the Galapagos are burdened to be mankind's last chance for procreation on the planet. This story illustrates their journey on the island and their destiny to become the final progenitors of a new race, which resembles furry seal-like species. The story's narrator, Leon Trotsky Trout, plays a dead spirit who has been watching over the humans of Galapagos for the last million years. Prior to his death, he was a Vietnam War veteran who had been affected by the massacres in Vietnam, which makes his role in the novel all the more fitting. His father Kilgore Trout, also deceased, makes four significant appearances throughout the novel, urging his son to enter the " blue tunnel" that leads to the afterlife. After Leon refuses for the fourth time, Kilgore pledges that he and the blue

tunnel shall not return for one million years. Leon is therefore sentenced to observe the slow process of evolution that transforms the humans into aquatic mammals. A million years into the future, Trout reports that the laws of natural selection have reformed the human race into a group of beings with flippers, fur, and much smaller brains. After watching the progression of the human race for a million years, Trout often remembers the way humans once were. He expresses that the only true villain in his story--the oversized human brain, causes all the sorrows of humankind. " I remind myself that just about every adult human being back then had a brain weighing about three kilograms! There was no end to the evil schemes that a thought machine that oversized couldn't imagine and execute" (Vonnegut, pg. 9). Vonnegut is amazed by how evil and destructive human beings can be. The author writes about how human beings have the ability to be both good and evil; it is our own conscious decisions that guide our actions. He assumes that the reasons why tragedies occur in our society are due to " our big brains". What is unique about Vonnegut's writing is that his novel contains a large amount of quotations from famous authors. They are related to the story itself and are functionally inserted through Mandarax, a fictional voice that is able to provide quotations from literature and history. One author mentioned in particular is Anne Frank, and to open the novel, an epigraph from her book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, is shared with the readers. " In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart, " Anne writes, and this line holds great significance for Vonnegut himself. It foreshadows a story of human obsolescence due to the evils created by mankind. This epigraph helps us understand the context of interaction in the novel and the somber

tone Vonnegut tries to display. Anne Frank's battles with the Nazis occurred during the Holocaust due to the manipulations of a powerful leader. Hitler's defiant reign brainwashed a destructive party of followers, whose ultimate mission was to exterminate the Jewish race. Too much power given to a small number of people can bring disorder to a community. Anne Frank died due to the damage excessive power caused and her scarring experienced showed us just how vicious humankind could act if they so choose. In spite of this all, Anne still believes humans possess good within themselves, and because of the intellectual creatures we are by nature, humans have the ability to act rationally if they so wish. In this novel, Trout too witnesses the damage human beings create due to their own ignorance. The narrator spends a good deal of the story musing on the troubles "big brains" had gotten human beings into back in 1986 A. D. The idea of bumbling Homo sapiens — hindered rather than helped by minds that think too much — is at the heart of Vonnegut's writing and philosophy. Vonnegut writes, "This was a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains" (Vonnegut, pg. 9). Humans are no better or worse than any other animal, but they are slaves to the often crazy ideas of their big brains, and to the irresistible urge to experiment with those ideas in reality. The result is a species that will "have slaves fight each other to the death in the Colosseum, or burn people alive in the public square for holding opinions which were locally unpopular, or build factories whose only purpose was to kill people in industrial quantities, or to blow up whole cities, and on and on" (Vonnegut, pg. 266). While Trout's view of the human race and its future may be somewhat bleak, each character is drawn with tenderness and wit, while they may be awkward and disabled by

big brains. It seems that Vonnegut may have felt as Anne Frank once did. He analyzes the characters throughout the novel and concludes that "mother was right: even in the darkest times, there really was still hope for humankind." Humanity is filled with inhumane and vicious beings, but despite this all, they do have the ability to show compassion. Humans acting in their own self interest are acting rationally based on what they know about the situation. Because we can't predict the future, humans may harm others in the process, while this may not necessarily be the ultimate goal of their efforts. Because we are emotional beings, it is easy for others to manipulate these emotions, and cause us to make unjust decisions we may not make on our own. The author shows that despite the destructive, corruptive and immoral nature of our actions, in our hearts we do possess the desire for a more just society in which we live. The authors' ability to evoke emotion from its readers is remarkable. Vonnegut states that the value of humanity is based on our hearts and because our hearts are filled with hope, there will always be faith in a brighter future, regardless of how complex and dark the current situation may be. For example, the scene that James Wait lies dying and Mary Hepburn promises him that everything will be ok shows us that exhibiting compassion can give others the courage they need to get through difficult situations. Mary knew James was going to die but the love she had for him allowed her to put on a strong front so he could have the courage he needed to get through a scary and harrowing time. Vonnegut wants society's people to treat one another with more decency and respect overall, therefore possessing the ability to sympathize with one another is an admirable quality. The vulnerability of this scene helps remind us all just how

precious life is and to not take it for granted. Like all of Vonnegut's most popular novels, *Galapagos* expertly combines elements of philosophy, sadness, and satire to create both an entertaining and thought-provoking story. No matter how difficult the situation we may be plagued with is, humans have the ability to possess good and make selfless decisions that can help others. Humans are flawed beings by nature and because of this, it is easy to lose sight of what is truly important. Putting things into perspective and thinking of others can help us make difficult ethical decisions. Respecting others and treating people the way we want to be treated is a rule that should be made an example of in our everyday lives. Overall, taking the necessary steps to create a more promising future is what Vonnegut's novel hopes to achieve. When we go out of our way to help those who may be less fortunate, it reminds others to do the same, and for this we too shall be rewarded.