

Good essay about the secret of kurt vonneguts heritage

[Countries](#), [Germany](#)



Growing up in an anti-German society would be difficult for any patriotic American with German heritage. In the prologue to his book, *Slapstick*, Kurt Vonnegut talked about the fall of his family's pride in their culture and traditions, and how it left him without a sense of belonging (8). The history of his blood was hushed and dismissed, and he had a blank slate to fill with the skewed histories and realities of his books. His parents raised him in ignorance of all things German, things they had always loved and had always been a part of their lives (Vonnegut 7). Vonnegut had no place to call home as all of his previous and numerous relatives had (7). This led him to a humanistic outlook on life and it showed in his approach to storytelling. The lack of family traditions and societal belonging changed his life from what it would have been before the war, and possibly allowed his humor and talented writing to develop. The forced schism with his heritage affected Kurt Vonnegut's educational interests and negative views of society, and consequently his writing.

Vonnegut was born in Indiana a few years after World War I ended to parents of German descent, and during this time anything and anyone German was hated and considered suspicious (Boomhower). WWI destroyed his parents' world, and they decided to forsake their heritage and raise him without knowing about his roots as a way of proving their patriotism. Vonnegut said he learned to love joke-telling because of his parents, but that they also taught him a profound sadness (Boomhower). This mix of humor and sadness he inherited from his upbringing can be seen in Vonnegut's books which tell tragic stories in humorous ways.

Many of Vonnegut's main characters, like himself, must overcome trials they

are born with, and overcome distinctions they have no control over.

Vonnegut said that all of the appreciation of Germany his older relatives were raised with was deliberately left out of his childhood, and that he and his brother and sister “lost thousands of years in a very short time” (p. 7). They must have realized the inconsistency at some point because all of their older relatives and their parents spoke German, and yet they were deprived of anything to do with the country. They stood out from their own family the way the siblings in *Slapstick* stood out in their society.

Vonnegut went to college and wanted to be an architect like his father and grandfather, but even this heritage was denied him (Boomhower). His father was still bitter about the destitution his career had left him with during the Great Depression, and persuaded Vonnegut to study something more useful like the physical sciences. When he returned from fighting in World War II he pursued anthropology (Boomhower). This is suggestive of the effects of being denied claim to his heritage since anthropology is the study of cultural origins and development. He was also writing as a reporter at the time, and he left school to work as a publicist for General Electric (Boomhower). He began publishing his own stories and swore he would never again have a job like the one he had with GE. Vonnegut always had a love for writing, and he claimed that studying different sciences rather than English had always allowed him to write only for his own amusement and pleasure (Boomhower). This wandering life and his wandering interests from subject to subject may have been a result of no clear direction or foundation in his youth.

Vonnegut saw the financial changes his family endured as well as cultural

changes, and this always made him feel separate from upper class society (Boomhower). Unlike his older siblings, he never attended private school and his mother was always distressed about him attending public school and assured him he would not be there for long. He said the thought of leaving his public school was terrible, and this shows he was more comfortable with his family's recent fallen status they would ever be. His mother had been the daughter of a millionaire and she eventually committed suicide while Vonnegut was fighting in WWII. She never recovered from her fall from fortune and became increasingly depressed at her failure to rebuild it (Boomhower). Yet Vonnegut preferred the life that included his friends rather than the life that his family had lived for generations, and this could have been because he never had the ties of heritage to attach him to his family's past life.

One aspect of his heritage and family tradition did get passed down to him, and that was his rejection of common religious beliefs and organizations (Friedman). He was deprived of his German heritage, but he was still raised by a family of freethinkers. Vonnegut's great-grandfather helped found the Freethinkers Society of Indianapolis, and was its first president (Friedman). Vonnegut's humanistic views translated through his writing as cynicism of religion, and stories of people who were not necessarily created in God's image the way the Bible teaches.

Vonnegut's experience with the oppressiveness of society, and how it affected his parents and life showed in his writing. He wrote about disasters, about people struggling with their troubles. " He said the villains in his books were never individuals, but culture, society and history, which he said were

making a mess of the planet” (Friedman). His books showed his disappointment in humanity, and resignation with human nature and what life has to offer (Grossman). This is not surprising since he grew up seeing his family’s disappointment and disinterest in itself after the effects of WWI (Vonnegut 7). Vonnegut’s sense of humor and lack of conventionality contributed greatly to his success, and Grossman wrote in Time after Vonnegut died that his writing had “ a mixture of tar-black humor and deep despair.” This alludes to his claim mentioned previously about the two things his parents passed on to him. The theft of his culture and traditions left him with sadness and resignation which he approached with humor and realism. Vonnegut said he left his world behind when he left Indianapolis, and his family could not find a reason for him to return (p. 7). He had no place where he felt that he belonged, and was raised by parents who were ashamed of their heritage because of a war they had no control over. Then he was captured in WWII and experienced his own devastation as a prisoner of war (Boomhower). His life was repeatedly shaped by war and it is no wonder that he felt a disappointment in human nature when it could not live in peace during his lifetime. The people he loved fell into despair and he carried dead women and children who were killed by a war that was not of their making (Boomhower). His books portrayed hypocrisy in culture, and this hypocrisy was initially shown to him at an early age. His family was patriotic, and yet they had always loved their German culture. It was a part of who they were just as the other sects of cultures who came to America held to their own heritage as a part of their identity. Yet after WWI German was no longer taught in schools, German restaurants were renamed, and everything

associated with Germans was rejected. Japanese Americans endured similar persecution during WWII. Due to the prejudice and paranoia of society against their own people his family had to give up who they were, and raise him as someone else. This endowed Kurt Vonnegut and his books with a curious combination of resigned disappointment and hilarity at the ridiculousness of humanity.

Works Cited

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