

Exercises Inspired by Kurt Vonnegut

Prose: World-Building

The goal of this exercise is to create a sense of place within a very confined space. Kurt Vonnegut is pretty famous for small, short paragraphs, and within these paragraphs, he can illustrate an entire world as well as the characters that inhabit it. Take this example from “The Big Trip Up Yonder”:

Emerald and Lou, coming in from the balcony, where they had been seeking that 2185 A.D. rarity—privacy—were obliged to take seats in the back row, behind Lou's father and mother, brother and sister-in-law, son and daughter-in-law, grandson and wife, granddaughter and husband, great-grandson and wife, nephew and wife, grandnephew and wife, great-grandniece and husband, great-grandnephew and wife—and, of course, Gramps, who was in front of everybody. All save Gramps, who was somewhat withered and bent, seemed, by pre-anti-gerasone standards, to be about the same age—somewhere in their late twenties or early thirties. Gramps looked older because he had already reached 70 when anti-gerasone was invented. He had not aged in the 102 years since.

When we create a world, the larger concepts are apparent in the details. Notice how specific Vonnegut is, how he uses repetition for emphasis. Try to get the students to create a sense of the universe in very small details, using as few words as possible. Remember, whenever we learn something about a character or a place, we remember the small things: a teddy-bear pin on a suit jacket or an urn in the middle of the dining room table.

Poetry: Persona Poem

Vonnegut, in “Harrison Bergeron,” creates a fascinating set of characters by giving each individual a “handicap” or a hindrance. Try to imagine what it might be like to be one of the ballerinas with weights attached to their ankles, what it would feel like to wear a mask all the time to hide your beauty. Imagine what it would be like to be Harrison – to have so many handicaps so as to render him virtually unrecognizable.

Remember, here the details are also important. These poems should be extremely visual and visceral: a sense of visual imagery and tactile imagery will be necessary.

Perhaps, though, they might take a more ruminative approach. Try to place yourself in the mind of one of these characters and then reinterpret the world around you.