

Extended Essay

English B HL

The contrast of compassionate language and capitalist language in the novel “*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*”

Research Question: “To what extent does the language of compassion contrast with the language of capitalism in Vonnegut’s *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* novel?”

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Introduction

After a catastrophic war, the world became economically polarized around two powerful countries: the *United States*, symbolizing capitalism, and the *USSR*, symbolizing communism.

¹This polarization led to the *Cold War*, which turned Europe into a sub-system within the new global structure. Economically, the U.S followed a liberal-based system, while the USSR implemented a radically different system: a government-controlled economy.²

By the 1960s, the U.S. had deployed more than 500,000 American soldiers to South Vietnam. This military decision not only affected the population but also had impacts on the economy in multiple ways. Between 1965 and 1968, when the U.S understood that it was losing the war, the government started to increase military expenditures. Over the course of a decade, the U.S. spent 85 billion dollars on the *Vietnam War*. However, it is thought that, due to the unequal distribution of expenses, the American defense industry provided enormous profits. After the war, a post-war economic welfare began in the U.S. Middle class expanded, witnessed a rise in the number of American families bought television, cars, and household goods. This economic situation only lasted for a few years³.

After this economic shift, the purchasing power of the middle class decreased⁴. The economic recovery was relatively quick, this temporary collapse sparked awareness of the concept of the *American Dream*. The concept started to be associated with social status and sufficient economic success for a comfortable life⁵, but in fact, when it first appeared, it was supposed to represent religious freedom and the ideal of landownership (17th century). Over time, it changed due to *Independence Period* (1776), *Industrial Revolution* (18th and 19th

¹ Balkaya, S., New World Order After World War II and Turkey

² Britannica, United States- WWII

³ Rust O., The Collector, Vietnam War Economic Effects

⁴ Britannica, Eisenhower's Second Term

⁵ Churchwell S., George W. Bush Institute, A Brief History of the American Dream

centuries) and rise in economic prosperity until the *Gatsby Era* (1920). Until the *Great Depression*, the 1960s, the *Oil Crisis* (1970), the *Mortgage Crisis* (2008) and the *Modern Era* (2020- ...); the fundamental belief was to shape a better life only by working. These important historical events reshaped the ideal of capitalism, equality, democracy, and the ideals for liberalism. The economic dream was damaged; the *American Dream* became focused on financial success. By the 2020s, the dream seemed impossible for the vast majority.

These economic intricacies and social movements shaped the 1960s irony, satire and dark humour literature style⁶. Having experienced to these movements himself, Kurt Vonnegut and his novels criticize the capitalist and economic exploitation system with both direct and indirect ways. ⁷One of his well-known novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; criticise the capitalist system with the symbol of *Eliot Rosewater* (who represents compassion, kindness and humanitarian beliefs) in contrast to his wealthy lineage.⁸ The novel presents both the capitalist idea that is narrated with financial/economic lexicon and insincere behaviours for heritage; and the compassionate idea that is represented with Eliot Rosewater by himself, his behaviours and the future decisions that he made in his youth. To make a detailed critique of the era, capitalist and compassionate language, this Extended Essay will focus on the capitalist and compassionate language contrast. Hence, the research question guiding to this IB Extended Essay is **“To what extent does the language of compassion contrast with the language of capitalism in Vonnegut’s *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* novel?”** The linguistic features and literary devices that is planning to use during the body paragraphs are examine through five specific areas; lexical choice, register language, repetition, pronoun usage, sentence length & syntax and as well as characters such as *Norman Mushari*, and representations like the

⁶ McCammak, A Fading Old Left Vision: Gospel-Inspired Socialism in Vonnegut’s *Rosewater*

⁷ Kunza & Tally Jr., Vonnegut’s Sense of Humour

⁸ Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, 1986

Rosewater Foundation. The features are going to explain through specific sections like the *letter from Eliot*, *Senator's speech*, *Rosewater Foundation dialogue*.

Chapter1: Representation of Capitalist Language in the Novel

In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Kurt Vonnegut's preliminarily critical tool is the language itself. This chapter ascertain capitalist language functions as a neutral grammar of control, operating through three key points: the quantification of humane value (numerical data), the manipulation of political expression (the Senator's rhetoric), and the implementation of social hierarchy (the Eliot-Fred dilemma).

Vonnegut constructs this linguistic system not to define capitalism, but to brief about its principal counter: the delimitation of people to economic units. This basis analysis is crucial, as it creates the oppressive reality which the language of compassion must outright comfort. The whole novel was written with discrepancy to the compassionate language which also reflects the 1960s welfare and materialism based, capitalist economic growth and inequality. As an addition to the classical ironic and satiric usage, Kurt Vonnegut used descriptive words and sentences that are reflecting the reality.

When it is looked through the novel; it starts with some numerical usages such as "87,472,003.61 dollars" (pg.9), "3,500,000 dollars income" (pg.9) that can directly reflect to the capitalist economy. Moreover, as it previously mentioned, the style of Vonnegut, some parts of the novel indirectly connect to capitalism. As it was written in pages 13 to 17, in the letter from Eliot to "Dear cousin, or whoever you may be" (pg.13), the capitalist representation is given with an aim of increasing "the perspective to know what sorts of manipulators and custodians" controlled the "unbelievable wealth has had to up now" (pg. 13) for the next generations. In the letter, Eliot used some specific word choices to explain the wealth and the economic- political picture of that decade. Some examples for the word choice are also used

throughout the book which are mainly about “*American fortunes*” (pg. 13), “*four thousand dollars*” (pg. 14), “*bought*” (pg. 14), “*valuable*” (pg. 15), “*controlling*” (pg. 15), “*politics*” (pg. 16), “*DuPont family*” (pg. 18) which are cold, distant and egocentric words. These words created the distant tone, emphasized the power of capitalism in dehumanization and estrangement. Through his style, Vonnegut shaped the base of the capitalist language, which will conflict throughout the novel.

While the numerical usages provide concrete evidence for capitalist language, “*Senate Speech*” (pg. 28-32) mirrors the political advocacy of capitalist system. In this part, Vonnegut uses a cold and manipulative political language to idealize and depict America as the modern descendant of the *Roman Empire* which can be understood by the words “*took command of the Roman Empire in a degenerate period...*” “In this speech, the lexical choices are divided into two groups. In the first group, Vonnegut’s irony and classical allusion take center stage. The “*Caesar Augustus*” (pg. 28), “*Antony and Cleopatra*” (pg.30- 32) allusions are used for propaganda and manipulation, making people believe that capitalism and its lineage of welfare are a natural necessity. Thus, “*Caesar Augustus*” symbolises stability and power, while “*Cleopatra and Antony*” symbolise the chaos and decadence. The Senator elevates America to the level of historic empire with the allusion of “*The Golden Age of Rome*” (pg. 31). As a result of this glorification, Vonnegut deliberately chooses violent imagery such as “*barbarians*”, “*fed to lions*” and “*strung up by their thumbs*” (pg. 30- pg. 31) which evoke images of torture and public executions in the Roman Empire. These lexical choices signal shift in the tone from admiration to fear, demonstrating how the capitalist system manipulates and controls society. Just as Rome punished its enemies to maintain dominance, the Senator’s speech suggests that America must suppress opposition to stabilization and wealth.

Beyond politics and economics, Vonnegut portrays capitalism through social relations. He contrasts the characters “*Eliot Rosewater*” and “*Fred Rosewater*” by contrasting two

extremes in the capitalist system. Eliot, who also symbolises *Senator Rosewater*, *Norman Mushari* and *Sylvia*, represents the wealthy lineage side of the system. The whole book provides evidence of this wealthy lineage advantage through the capitalist system as previously mentioned through the words “*unbelievable wealth has had to up now*” and briefly with the *numerical* incomes. On the opposite side of the system, Fred Rosewater, represents the *working side* of the capitalist system. He struggles in *economic* output and *consumed* by the system itself. The populace and the oppression are symbolized through Fred. The situation can be directly illustrated through the quotes “*Lila glanced at Fred with pity- because he was poor; because his wife was no good, because he was fat, because he was a bore.*” and “*..., and every problem she ever considered could be solved by just one thing: money, and lots of it.*” (pg.125). The sense of humiliation and degradation is conveyed by the sentences which had felt the pithiness of the consumed side of the capitalist system. This contrast within the capitalist system shows how spontaneously the system creates the exploiters and the exploited.

Vonnegut’s focused claim in Chapter 1 is the methodical casting of main language where the ideology is maintained by linguistic structure. Novel’s initial pages’ focuses on quantitative description which is a purposeful technique that made us accept the real-life digitization rather than just a setting. This leads to recognise the Senator’s allusions not just as wisdom but as an intentional manipulation, revealing authority as a performance structured in capitalist structures. The final revelation of Eliot and Fred's fate is not a personal tragedy, but a direct use of language; the pronouns and linguistic devices imposed by the system are used to express their social fate. Thus, this chapter not only describes the world, but goes further to reveal the inner workings of the system.

Vonnegut reveals how capitalism functions through its basic syntax, a syntax that itself promotes isolation and inequality. This ambiguous distinction makes the language of empathy in the second chapter not only thematically relevant but also theoretically necessary. The

structure of the novel itself offers little criticism, for it fails to construct a new linguistic framework that forces Eliot to treat the personal pronoun “we” as a substantive linguistic term rather than an evaluative term.

Chapter2: Humanist Language and Emotional Narrative

In the Chapter 2, it will be argued how Vonnegut formed compassionate language as essential counter-track to capitalism’s dictatorship. Far from offering an absolute idealized world, he forms a practical linguistics of empathy with solid rules. Similarly in the novel, Vonnegut draws a parallel world within the theme’s empathy and social justice.

Vonnegut initiate this system through a single, transformative phrase that act as a linguistic declaration. Contradicting with the Eliot’s letter; Eliot’s desire to help, highlights the idea of compassion. The slogan of Rosewater Foundation; “*Rosewater Foundation, how can we help?*” (pg. 57) reveals the Eliot’s drive to lend a hand that gets supported by the idea of “*being a firefighter*” (pg.26). In contrast to capitalist language, the phrase “*How can we help?*” emphasizes warmth, empathy, and collective responsibility. This is an intentional grammatical technique. The pronoun “we” actively opposes the individual “I” of capitalist, and the word “help” redefines value, transforming it from receiving to serving. This is not a contradiction, but a systemic exchange. Moreover, these words convey a positive tone, different from the cold and selfish tone of the capitalist class. The metaphor of “being a firefighter” emphasizes the actual idea of helping rather than passive compassion, highlighting that the language of compassion is rooted in deep human action and behaviour. Through this, Vonnegut presents the compassionate class as an alternative to the capitalist class. Language is used as a tool, showing that Eliot’s actions demonstrate that true value lies not in wealth or power, but shared humanity. Thus, sense is not just a conversation; it is the active heart of mercenary class, demolishing capitalist mentality with every sentence.

To explain this grammatical system in terms of the entire ideology, Vonnegut reveals its basis. In addition to the action-oriented language, Vonnegut emphasizes the ideology of empathy through the quotation “Eliot-,” “Sir-” (p. 102), and Eliot’s conversation with his father. The chapter emphasizes the theme with the words “communist ideas” (p. 102), “Bible” (p. 102), “Karl Marx” (p. 102), and “communism” (p. 102), which indicate his frustration with a society based on selfishness and inequality. By emphasizing the words “Karl Marx” and “Bible,” Vonnegut achieves a basic coherence. He does not endorse any one theory, but rather combines them grammatically to create a new, hybrid moral vocabulary of empathy that transcends traditional political and religious divisions. The inequality critique had made within the ideal of Karl Marx, who is the creator of “*communism*” which have become popular on the beginning of 1900s Russia that based on social justice and sharing⁹. For the selfishness side, Bible contrasts the capitalism’s individualism with the moral values, love, and mercy. On this basis, Eliot advocate for empathy and social justice, combining two different cultural sources. In the last sentence, Eliot uses this exact phrase “... *it's terrible the way people don't share things in this country*” (pg.102) that emphasizes the dehumanization of capitalist thoughts. Through this extract, Vonnegut underlines the compassion is not just an action-oriented ideology that helps individuals but also a challenging ideological root of a society, obsessed with materialism and individualism. Eliot’s final complaint is not about sharing, therefore, a passive sympathy but an ideological conclusion of this synthesized language directly accuses capitalism’s foundational principle of private ownership.

Therefore, to sum up briefly of all Vonnegut’s aim about compassionate language, it constructs as an intentional and thorough counter-grammar. Through the perspective” we”, the symbolism of shared service, and an ideology synthesizing collective ethics, he moves beyond critiquing capitalism to laying out its linguistic alternative. This constructed system does more

⁹ Britannica, Communism, [Communism | Definition, History, Varieties, & Facts | Britannica](#)

than oppose; it provides the necessary vocabulary for the solidarity that Chapter 1 proved to be impossible under capitalist discourse.

Having established these two opposing linguistic systems, Chapter 3 is to analyse their direct conflict and the ultimate conclusion of Vonnegut's central argument: that the choice of language is, a choice of world.

Chapter3: Mirroring 1960s- Comparative Critique of Capitalist and Compassionate Language in the Novel

The related analyses of capitalist and compassionate language are brought together in this chapter, which combines their direct conflict to reveal Vonnegut's main thesis: language is the primary arena where social reality is ambiguous and decided. By placing these linguistic systems against each other on lexical, ideological, and social grounds, Vonnegut does not merely contrast them- he stages a conflict where the winner determines the future of human community. This final comparison proves that the novel's core conflict is not between individuals, but between incompatible grammars for constructing society.

As previously mentioned, capitalist language relies on cold, quantitative terminology because of dehumanization of society, showing the individual's value on economic output. Numerical expressions, bureaucratic titles (e.g. Senator), detached vocabulary creates the tone of manipulation. In contrast, compassionate language is inclusive, action oriented such as the words "*we*", "*help*", and "*sharing*", which creates the warmer tone. While capitalist language tends to reduce society to its statistical meanings, the language of compassion focuses on the inner person and their inherent value. Through lexical choice, Vonnegut highlights the small changes in words that can carry ideological weight, and shows that words can normalize oppressive power or challenge it through empathy. At the lexical level, the conflict is one of ultimate power. Vonnegut shows that control over meaning is the first step to control over

people. So, the lexical conflict is not about synonyms, but about opposing paradigms of meaning assignment. Vonnegut's precise formulation is that the language of capitalism wins through dehumanization, and the language of compassion wins through re-humanization. However, the struggle between capitalism and compassion is not based solely on losses and gains. Even within language, they provide different perspectives for readers. This instability shows that the struggle for meaning is ongoing, and that language itself can be a site of resistance.

The search for meaning transforms into an ideological war where language becomes "a weapon for both sides." Beyond the personal, these linguistic conflicts extend into the "realm of ideology." Capitalist ideology idealizes hierarchical structures, historical references, and "nationalist imagery" to control society. Meanwhile, the "discourse" underlying Eliot's "ideology of compassion" draws its ideals from the "triangle of empathy, compassion, and social justice", citing Karl Marx and the Bible as specific examples. Vonnegut makes a crucial thesis by comparing languages beyond the "realm of ideology" and "critical discourse". He presents political rhetoric as a constructed scenario (capitalism) and defines "the application of ethical norms of compassion through vocabulary" (Eliot's synthesis). This shifts the "discourse" of the conflict to "how worldviews are constructed through discourse."

Ultimately, this phase of linguistic struggle defines the social reality of the region. Rosewater's fate provides a contrast to these competing grammars in the novel. The capitalist system constructs society through hierarchies, dividing people according to their economic status. This division then passes from victim to victim. The struggle between Fred and Eliot, comparable characters, leads to their downfall. In contrast, Eliot's language expresses an thoughtful society where each individual is more important than what they have. This comparison shows that language can both support cruel trends and encourage contrast in society. Thus, the Fred/Eliot dilemma is a clear proof to Vonnegut's claim. It is not that language

reflects social hierarchy, but the specific linguistic systems actively generate that hierarchy (capitalism) or actively break it down (compassion). The novel's plot is the dramatization of this linguistic principle.

As a consequence, the comparative critique in Chapter 3 synthesizes the novel's entire linguistic project. Vonnegut empirically demonstrates that capitalist and compassionate languages are not equal alternatives but opposed systems producing divergent social results. His message is not merely that language is a "powerful tool", but that all social structures are shaped by language. The "control" he highlights is not just political but epistemological- it governs how reality is perceived, judged, and related to one another.

Conclusion:

Throughout the analysis of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, the aim of the language shows that it is more than a way to communicate; it is a tool that can be used by the systems for controlling the society. To reflect this, Vonnegut used two opposite languages through the novel: capitalist and compassionate. Capitalist language is manipulative, cold, and egoistic. It judges populace by the economic success they have and focuses on concrete numbers rather than their feeling and dreams. On the other hand, the compassionate language is based on empathy, help and share. It is collective and action oriented. In the social scale, capitalist language divides people into exploiters and exploited, while the compassionate language unites them through love and mercy. This conflict between two sides forms the aim of the mirrors and reflects the 1960s political, social, and economic struggles.

The research question **"How does the language of compassion contrast with the language of capitalism in Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* novel?"** is answered through three chapters. Capitalist language uses specific words such as "bought", "valuable", and "controlling." These words create a materialistic tone that highlights power and desire.

The Senators' Speech mentions the extreme side that is explained by historical allusions and violent imagery like "*fed to lions*" and "*barbarians*" to keep the society controlled. Yet, compassionate language uses words as "*we*", "*help*" and "*sharing*" to reflect unity and social responsibility. Eliot's slogan "*How can we help?*" represents the idea of compassionate language. These small phrases show the difference and the importance of language usage: one side aims to control and dominate, while the other side tries to support. "*I*" and "*they*" pronouns are creating the cold, distant tone, whereas the compassionate language relies on the pronoun "*we*". With these literary elements, Vonnegut demonstrates that the language relates to ideology and personal behaviour.

The importance of the contrast overflows through the 1960s. The world has newly shaped after the World War II; the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the American Dream had already started to use as a tool to control public opinion. Politics were manipulated language for leading society to war and consumption. This reflected through literature, which shaped Vonnegut's ironic, satire and dark humour based linguistic style. These ironic critiques and realities, showing how the words can influence the beliefs and actions.

This trend continues, making the novel surprisingly relevant today. In politics, media, and social media, language continues to be used to influence emotions and shape people's perceptions of the world. Therefore, Vonnegut's work serves as a warning that the language of capitalism is not just a part of a troubled future, but a real and dangerous force that continues to influence society.

In the 2020s, many people feel isolated and less valuable to their communities because of their wealth and income. That's why, kind words are so important. Global issues like climate change, migration, and poverty cannot be solved by one-sided political actions; they require equal effort from all sides. This essay argues that real change begins with people changing the words and the language they used to share their ideas.

Overall “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater” is more than just a ironic story about a wealthy family and small town; it’s a critique of how words can shape reality. By contrasting two opposing languages through words, writing style, pronouns, and symbols, Vonnegut shows how language can normalize unfair treatment or force people to support each other. The novel’s message extends beyond the 1960s to the present day, making readers to accept the real-life consequences of words. Vonnegut offers readers a choice: to be controlled by language or to allow language to be a source of freedom.

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