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DEADEYE DICK AND THE AESTHETICS OF ACCESSIBILITY

In a September 1979 review of Kurt Vonnegut's *Jailbird* in *The New Republic*, novelist John Irving wrote a vigorous defense of his former teacher at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, attacking critics who dismissed Vonnegut's work as "easy." Critic Roger Sale came under particular fire for a *New York Review of Books* piece accusing Vonnegut of writing for the "minimally intelligent young."

"Why is 'readable' such a bad thing?" Irving wrote. "It is the childlike availability of his prose, its fast and easy to read surfaces, that seems to be so troublesome to Vonnegut's critics." Irving praised Vonnegut's work for its imaginative approach to serious themes and expressed gratitude for "a writer who has accepted the enormous effort necessary to make writing clear."

Throughout his career Vonnegut strived to create a aesthetics of accessibility, using specific strategies to achieve his famous "easy to read" effect. Through a close reading of his 1982 novel *Deadeye Dick* we see these strategies in action. Fiction writers eager to develop their own techniques can learn much by following Vonnegut's two-pronged approach, with its focus on "fast and easy surfaces" and an adherence to classic story structures.

Deadeye Dick features a first-person narrator, Rudy Waltz, who, at age twelve, fires a rifle into the sky, accidentally killing a pregnant woman. The novel includes what the back cover copy describes as "a true Vonnegutian host of horrors—a double murder, a fatal dose of radioactivity, a decapitation, an annihilation of an entire city by a neutron bomb." In his book *The Vonnegut Effect*, long-time Vonnegut scholar Jerome Klinkowitz identifies in *Deadeye Dick* themes of Eurocentrism and the fading away of the European-centric values of the generation of Vonnegut's parents. As John Irving warned, one needs to "think carefully" to appreciate these themes, but Vonnegut, trained in journalism and commercial fiction and sympathetic toward the reader's difficult work, eases the reader's journey through the lucidity of his language and his use of classic story patterns.

Fast and Easy Surfaces

Vonnegut's "fast and easy surfaces" are no accident, his prose style forged during college while working for Cornell University's *Daily Sun*.

"Their strategy was primarily visual—that is, short paragraphs, often one-sentence paragraphs," Vonnegut told Charles Reilly in a 1980 interview. "It seemed to work very well, seemed to serve me and the readers, so I stayed with it when I decided to make a living as a fiction writer."

Unlike writers nurtured in the artistic bubble of a university writing program, Vonnegut's initial training was in the commercial realm of journalism and public relations. When he switched to writing fiction his aims remained commercial—to sell short stories to popular magazines like *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post,* and he readily accepted the advice of literary agent Kenneth Littaeur on how to craft fiction that could satisfy "uncritical readers of magazines." While this phrase might seem

dismissive, Vonnegut is always cognizant of the physical and mental effort required of the reader, “making sense of idiosyncratic arrangements, in horizontal lines, of nothing but twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten Arabic numerals, and perhaps eight punctuation marks…”

“We must acknowledge that the reader is doing something quite difficult for him, and the reason you don’t change point of view too often is so he won’t get lost, and the reason you paragraph so often is so that his eyes won’t get tired, so you get him without him knowing it by making his job easy for him,” Vonnegut remarked in a 1974 interview. These aesthetics of accessibility allow Vonnegut to “get” his readers, leading them through dark and often despairing themes with language rooted in what critic James Wood calls “familiar American simplicity.”

Examining Vonnegut’s prose style, we find specific choices made by the author to enhance readability. The first is chapter length. *Deadeye Dick*’s 271 pages are divided into twenty-seven chapters and a chapter-length epilogue, the average chapter length being just over nine and a half pages. The earliest chapters are even shorter; the first four chapters total 26 pages, an average of 6.5 pages per chapter. In these chapters, Vonnegut “opens the peephole” of Rudy’s mother and father and introduces Otto Waltz’s relationship with the young Adolf Hitler. In terms of narrative coherence, these four chapters could have easily been one. None of the chapter breaks involve significant changes in time or place, and while chapter two ends with some foreshadowing, none of them conclude with a “what happens next?” cliffhanger to pull the reader forward. The short chapters are designed to let the reader rest, whether the “rest” consists of simply putting the book down for a second or leaving it on the shelf for another day. Few people

read a novel in one sitting, and by breaking so often, particularly at the beginning, Vonnegut structures his narrative so it fits within the rhythm of busy lives. Short chapters encourage the reader to keep going. Picture a reader with another ten minutes before he or she must put down a book and switch activities. One is unlikely to keep reading if the next chapter is forty pages, whereas another ten pages would fit perfectly in the available time. And so we again watch Vonnegut "get" the reader, who tackles the next chapter and becomes further enmeshed in the narrative before putting down the book.

Within each individual chapter Vonnegut breaks often. Chapter One, six pages, includes five breaks, the sections separated by a trio of asterisks. Chapter Two includes six breaks in its six pages, Chapter Three, seven in six. Through written more than thirty years ago, Vonnegut anticipates the bite-sized messaging of status updates and Tweets, providing the reader a series of small passages within each larger one.

FLOW

In his essay "What We Talk About When We Talk About Flow," writer David Jauss examines that elusive term "flow," which he describes as being driven by cadence and paragraph structure. Probing further, Jauss identifies two principle elements of flow: variety of sentence structure and underlying rhythmic coherence.

"That sentence structure is related to flow is an obvious point," Jauss writes. "A variety of sentence structure—and therefore of sentence length—will give our prose a more flowing, and appealing, landscape." There are four basic types of sentence structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Yet within those four types are myriad variations. In her book *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style,* Virginia Tufte

defines innumerable ways to structure sentences, using left-, mid, and right-branching modifiers among other strategies. To achieve flow, one should deploy a variety of sentence types, as well as structural differences within type.

A casual reader of Vonnegut's work might suspect that his prose would fail to meet these standards, expecting his journalistic and commercial style, with its reliance on short sentences, to lack sentence variety. Yet few would argue that "flow" is not achieved when reading Vonnegut. So how does his prose stack up against this measure of flow?

Examining ten-sentence blocks of prose, excluding dialogue, at random points in the novel, shows the following sentence patterns:

Key: S=Simple, C=Complex, CD=Compound, CD-C=Compound-Complex

Page 1: C, S, S, C, S, S, S, CD, CD, CD (3 sentence types)

Page 51: C, S, C, C, S, S, CD-C, CD-C, CD, CD-C (4 sentence types)

Page 100: C, C, C, C, S, C, C, S, S, S (2 sentence types)

Page 150: S, C, C, S, C, S, C, C, S, S (2 sentence types)

Page 201: S, C, C, S, S, C, C, C, C, C (2 sentence types)

Page 250: C, C, CD-C, CD-C, C, S, C, C, C, CD-C (3 sentence types)

In these passages, Complex (29) is the most common type, followed by Simple (21), Compound-Complex (7), and Compound (3). As Virginia Tufte has noted, within these sentence types is a variety of structures. In the passages in which Vonnegut uses only two sentence types, he still offers the reader a variety of structure. For example, in the passage on Page 150, three of the Complex sentences are right-branched, while the other two are left-branched. Additionally, Vonnegut's use of sentence type is strategic. The passage from Page One, dominated by Simple sentences, is an introduction, the narrator

welcoming the reader and describing his plight. On Page 51, where we see four consecutive Compound-Complex sentences, the narrator is describing the panicked mental state of Felix's Prom date, Celia Hoover. Later in this essay we'll see how Vonnegut relies on short Simple sentences for moments of maximum emotional impact.

When discussing flow, one also considers what Jauss calls "musical unconsciousness," the ebb and flow of a piece, how the sentences fit the paragraphs, how the paragraphs serve the larger narrative. In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Foster wrote, "there appears to be no literary word" for this and so we "borrow from music and call it rhythm." Writer Stuart Dybek calls this "underlying rhythmic coherence." According to Foster, this is achieved through "repetition plus variation."

In *Deadeye Dick*, Vonnegut achieves this repetition by starting each chapter with a "fact,' a declarative sentence, often Simple in type, that sets the reader in a specific place and time, and then builds from that simple beginning to an often odd and comic occurrence. Vonnegut brings the reader back to "home base" before advancing his story, allowing the reader to re-enter the world of the story before progressing, a comforting strategy for readers who come and go from the world of the novel, sometimes staying away for days before returning. Vonnegut consistently eases the reader's transition back into his fiction.

Simplicity of Language

"Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred," Vonnegut wrote in *Palm Sunday*. His essay for a campaign by the International Paper Company provides a valuable glimpse of his aesthetic:

> Remember that two great masters of our language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. “To be or not to be?” asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long.

In the same essay he cites his favorite sentence from “Eveline” by James Joyce: “She was tired.” “At that point in the story,” Vonnegut wrote, “no other words could break the heart of a reader as those words do.”

In *Deadeye Dick* Vonnegut employs these short, almost childlike sentences for maximum effect. In the novel’s most emotional section, the murder of Eloise Metzger and the subsequent arrest of Rudy and Otto (Chapters 9 – 12), Vonnegut includes simple declarative sentences comprised of one and two syllable words, to “get” the reader’s attention and deliver the full impact of the moment.

“But I squeezed the trigger instead.” -- (End of Chapter 9, page 68)

‘I died. But I didn’t die.” -- (Chapter 10, page 72)

“I took a deep breath. That was for sure.” -- (End of Chapter 10, page 73)

“Oh, my Lord,’” she said, “—you done closed a peephole. That can’t feel good. That can’t feel good.” (Chapter 11, page 82)

“He should have seen me in my cage.” (Chapter 12, page 86)

“I have seen unhappiness in my time.” (End of Chapter 12, page 89)

In the Vonnegut formula, the more heightened the emotions, the simpler the language. “Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify,” he writes. Throughout *Deadeye Dick* Vonnegut demonstrates this aesthetic.

For Vonnegut, accessibility is not just a dramatic choice, it’s also political. “We are members of an egalitarian society, so there is no reason for us to write…as though we were classically educated aristocrats,” Vonnegut writes in *Palm Sunday,* championing the

clear, American prose of Indiana. Writing in the style that echoes the speech heard in childhood will be most natural, and so Vonnegut promotes a democratic "voice of the people" approach to style, the ultimate goal being to "become understandable—and therefore understood."

Adherence to Classic Story Structure

While prose style factors heavily in the aesthetics of accessibility, story structure also plays a critical role. In *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut famously graphed popular stories on a G-I axis, with G standing for Good Fortune, I for ill fortune. Based on work he had done for a master's thesis in Anthropology ultimately rejected by the University of Chicago, Vonnegut's story graphs became a comic highlight of his live appearances. Yet by graphing the structures of literature as varied as The Old Testament, Cinderella, and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, he shows how stories adhere to common structures, the reader's experience of a new story guided by his or her subconscious recognition of familiar patterns.

Efficient reading often includes the use of prediction strategies. In "The Influence of Prior Knowledge and Text Genre on Readers' Prediction Strategies," author Peter Afflerbach highlights prediction as "an integral part of a competent reader's metacognition strategy." According to Afflerbach, prediction strategies help the reader anticipate the meaning of the text, as readers use their language skills and world knowledge to identify clues within the text and place those clues in the context of their existing knowledge. By crafting narratives that connect to a reader's knowledge of familiar story structures, Vonnegut lessens the difficult job of "making sense of

idiosyncratic arrangements in horizontal lines" and "gets" the reader to follow him through complex thematic elements and challenging moral dilemmas.

Using the G-I Index from the graphs of classic story structures, we find that *Deadeye Dick*, like so many other popular stories, falls within the traditional structures favored by readers. In the life story of Rudy Waltz, we see a variation of the "Man in Hole" structure. Born to affluent and eccentric parents, Rudy starts life in good straights only to plunge deep toward the Ill Fortune pole with the murder of Eloise Metzger. While he never quite shakes this tragic event, we do see Rudy rise when his play "Katmandu" is selected for performance in New York City, moving him back toward the G axis. The play is a dismal flop, dropping Rudy deep into the hole again, and he retreats to Midland City and his non-descript life as a pharmacist, neuter, and caretaker for his elderly parents. Yet once again Rudy rises from the hole, and the novel concludes with Rudy and his brother Felix, their hometown destroyed by a neutron bomb, living contentedly in Haiti as owners of the Grand Hotel Oloffson. At the novel's end Rudy has emerged from the hole, his life having reached a pleasant equilibrium.

The "Man in Hole" structure also appears in the stories of the two main supporting characters, Otto and Felix. Otto, born to a rich family, starts high on the Good Fortune axis only to fall into the hole of prison for his role in the Metzger homicide. He rises up, slightly, seemingly at peace at the end, albeit a peace partially driven by delusion. ("He died thinking he had once owned one of the ten greatest paintings in the world.") That painting, of course, is a watercolor by Hitler titled "The Minorite Church of Vienna"—the exact opposite of a great painting. Yet if Otto's story doesn't end in triumph, he is at least in a better place than earlier in the novel.

Felix, too, travels through his own "Man in Hole" arc. With his deep, beautiful voice bringing the respect of his peers, he starts relatively high on the Good Fortune axis, only to rise even higher, with a successful broadcasting career that leads to the presidency of NBC. Certainly Felix's hole represents the least traumatic drop, yet drop he does, as he's fired by NBC and, addicted to pills, a victim of "pharmaceutical buffoonery," suffers a form of breakdown at the funeral of his high school prom date, Celia Hoover. But as we would expect with any "Man in Hole" tale, Felix rises, becoming drug free and settling in with his brother as an innkeeper in Haiti. Throughout *Deadeye Dick*, Vonnegut provides the reader with a familiar structure, adhering to a classic storytelling pattern, allowing the reader to utilize the prediction strategies so important to a reader's comprehension.

Lessons for Fiction Writers

What lessons can fiction writers learn from Vonnegut's method? In *Deadeye Dick*, as in much of Vonnegut's work, the following strategies are used:

- Short chapters, particularly at the beginning
- Paragraph often
- Variety of Sentence Structure
- When using Complex sentences, provide differentiation of branching
- Provide a pattern to the structure of the chapters
- Simple language and short sentences for moments of maximum emotional/dramatic impact
- Adhere to classic story structure

For Vonnegut being "easy to read" is a political choice, and so he uses these strategies to "get" his readers to follow him through narratives filled with serious and often grim

thematic concerns. While "use short chapters" and "paragraph often" might seem elemental advice, the end result—accessible fiction with challenging themes—is far from easy to achieve. As John Irving wrote in a 1990 review of Vonnegut's work, "I think you have to be a writer yourself to know how hard it is to make something easy to read—or else you just have to be a little smart."

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The Aesthetic Movement developed in the last decades of the 19th century. Originating in France with ThÃ©ophile Gautier, it reflected the sense of frustration and uncertainty of the artist, his reaction against the materialism and the restrictive moral code of the bourgeoisie. The French artists â€˜escapedâ€™ into aesthetic isolation, into what Gautier defined â€˜Art for Artâ€™s Sakeâ€™ (Arte per amore dellâ€™Arte). The bohemian embodied his protest against the monotony and vulgarity of bourgeois life, leading an unconventional existence, pursuing sensation and excess, cultivating art and beauty.