

Soon We'll Be Living in the Future: The Examined Life

Vonnegut notes that he wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* “somewhat” in the Tralfamadorian style. One can describe *The Fountain’s* structure in similar terms. The same is true of your *Down the Memory Hole*. ...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* has a similarly convoluted format, one that only makes sense once you truly grasp the structure’s meaning – the reason for its existence. This can only be done once you look at the whole...but you cannot see the whole until you see the smaller moments for what they are. That’s what *Down the Memory Hole* really does, or at least was designed to let you do: you give your audience access to disparate, unrelated memories (the parts), and thus allow them to see *you* (the whole) in a new light. Your thoughts’ order displays itself on the page, regardless of whether you intend to show it; even the most apparently random arrangement reveals something about its creator.

It’s a great but difficult skill to master: to read flexibly, to instinctively seek the patterns in seemingly small things. I strongly believe it’s a skill that helps you live more effectively. After all, Socrates stated that the unexamined life is not worth living. While Twain believed that a life that’s been too closely examined hasn’t been lived, I fall more on Socrates’s side. I agree with Twain’s assertion that obsessive self-study can be myopic, but there are too many wonderful things about life that I would miss if I didn’t stop to reconsider them. In short, I’d rather err on the side of reflection.

Over the course of the year, I’ve structured my work much the way the works themselves are structured. *1984’s* assignments tended to be fact-based and hyper-detailed, emphasizing the importance of cooperation, connection, and ethical behavior (i.e., don’t leave your partners hanging). *Slaughterhouse-Five’s* assignments tie in with *The Fountain*: forcing you to consider the things we create that can spiral out of control (countries, relationships, and war), to grapple with concepts large enough to seem overwhelming, to try describing things that can’t always be shared (just as wisdom can’t really be captured with words alone).

But more than anything else, both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Fountain* urge you to go out and feel alive, to appreciate every moment because, in the end, those moments are what we keep. (Think of the *After Life* scenario.) You may not feel the same way, but it’s the same feeling I get once I think about *1984*. I want to go explore and experience all that I can, all there is to know about life, the universe, and everything. All three allow us to treasure transcendent moments in largely miserable universes, those bits where everything is beautiful and nothing hurts. (I don’t think our existences are largely miserable.)

Then there’s ...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, the Tomás Rivera masterpiece you’ll begin reading soon. The book helped define the shape of Chicano literature in the twentieth century’s latter half, partly because it spoke to exactly those concerns that I mentioned above: connection, ethics, creativity, mystery, struggle, fear, and, ultimately, hope for something better.

I feel that same rush I alluded to earlier when I read Rivera’s work. I didn’t when I read his first page; it confused the heck out of me. But I decided to turn the page instead of turn out the light, and when I read the second story – **really** read it, repeating those three simple sentences over and over again – I was astonished by what I thought he was attempting. Every story that followed just left me more amazed; I had never known anyone could write like that. And when the final piece finally confirmed my interpretations, it did so with a virtuoso move that rammed every one of Rivera’s

messages home. The book's final tale cemented its reputation, but only because the author painstakingly built a deeply creative structure over the twenty-six earlier stories.

I think creative art helps us appreciate our own lives because we tend to value things more once that art calls our attention to them. Three years ago, a student named Jackie Huynh made, of her own volition, a short film with her fellow seniors honoring the times they'd shared together. It was a quick montage of a harmless senior prank: taking messages and Post-it notes and just *covering* the campus with them. (I finally understood why I found a few stray pink Post-its attached to my car one night.)

When I watched the film, I suddenly realized just how fundamentally – and swiftly – my life had already changed since I was her age. I realized I would never again have what Jackie had captured with her camera: that time when your whole life seems to be opening up before you, when every considered possibility remains, well, possible.

I found I couldn't even remember what that had felt like.

It's neither easier nor more difficult to examine something once it's concluded: it's just *different*. You only have six more weeks to contemplate this life you've led. After that, it/you will change forever, and you won't reflect on this time without separation (temporal and geographical) distorting your recollections. (If you don't believe me, ask those kindergarten teachers you remember so faithfully.)

So while you still have time, I want you to **examine your life**. Specifically, I want you to put a Tralfamadorian spin on things: concentrate on all of the **positive things** and **treasured moments** that you can, and write what you find as Vonnegut writes – in a structure that makes sense to you, and that you can explain to others around you. And yes, you can include some of the hardships as well...but I feel like I've given you plenty of opportunities for those already. This project, simply put, is meant to be a celebration.

I want you, and as many friends/teammates/peers as you can muster, to carry on in Jackie's footsteps, to make something transcendent and beautiful that captures your time together here. Whoever you work with should be someone who's close to you, regardless of whether they're in the class or not. (By close, I mean **genuinely** close – no marriages of convenience for the sake of reducing your responsibilities.)

The Examined Life Festival takes place on Wednesday, June 6th, and Thursday, June 7th. On those days, anyone who wishes to present their work should do so. Your presentation can take on any form (I suggest something other than a PowerPoint, since the Senior Project will give you your fill of those), and just as Jackie made her film because she wanted to, it should be the form that fits best for your purposes. After all, some of you needed help understanding *The Fountain*; if I'm going to need similar help, I'd appreciate the assistance!

Examine the things that brought you here. Celebrate them before they pass, fade, or change. Remember, one last time, before you have a chance to forget...for soon we'll be living in the future.