

EPICAC

Welcome to the Monkey House (1968) is the collection of Vonnegut's short stories where "EPICAC" appears, though it was originally published in one of several slick, high-paying popular magazines to which Vonnegut was a prolific contributor throughout the early part of his career. His early fiction bears the stamp of his unique style, but not all of his early stories are "sci-fi"—though you may be interested in the ones that are for your independent paper. Many of them would connect up nicely with the themes explored in *Brave New World*, *1984*, and *Gattaca*.

You might be interested in the following stories from *Welcome to the Monkey House*:

- "Harrison Bergeron"
- "Welcome to the Monkey House"
- "Report on the Barnhouse Effect"
- "The Euphio Question"
- "Unready to Wear"
- "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow"

Two other stories in this collection that I think are especially fine are "D.P." and "Adam." Although they are "realistic" fictions, they also connect up with themes from *Brave New World* in interesting and very moving ways.

Most of Vonnegut's stories are characteristically brief and wry and humorous, like EPICAC. But along with the brevity and they wryness and the humor, which made him popular and well-paid, Vonnegut's work is substantive and worth looking into more deeply.

The first step in to decide to go below the surface of the entertaining tale. It may detract from some of the humor to analyze the story closely, but you can gain something for the little that's lost. I don't think a really good story ever suffers from looking closely at it—even a funny one. It's never hurt by analysis, only made richer in meaning.

The next step is to ask: what's the underlying assumption that makes this story humorous? What do we normally assume, and how does what Vonnegut presents cut against the grain of our expectations? What is it that provokes us?

- The normal assumption is that humans and machines are essentially different from one another, right? It's funny to see an anthropomorphized machine. It's a little tame by today's standards. It's not 1950, after all, and the story is 55 years old! But the basic idea is still funny enough. Human beings and machines are essentially different, and this story violates that notion by presenting a machine that's "noble and great and brilliant."

- I want to ask you—55 years down the line, is this idea more or less funny to us? Is it less funny (maybe) because we see *less* difference than we used to between people and machines? Do we still see ourselves as essentially different from our machines? *What about car commercials??* Or a lot of other commercials for that matter, that anthropomorphize inanimate objects and make them more human than we are? Does anyone remember the children's film *The Iron Giant*? That's a great film, but is it the least skeptical about a machine's ability to be one of us?

If we accept that machines can become like us, do we also accept that we can become like machines? *Do people sometimes become like machines?* Consider the main character in this story... He's more machine-like than EPICAC, isn't he? Pat doesn't love him because he's so robotic.... The Brave New World is filled with dehumanized people who are sort of "machine-like" in their sameness.

- Are we in danger of becoming too machine-like? What are the threats?

Why do we seem to want computers to be more like people, to have "intelligence," even though we call it "artificial intelligence"? We anthropomorphize our cars, for example (that cars have "personality" or "identity" is evident in any car commercial, isn't it?). Are we lonely being the only beings with this consciousness we seem to have? Do we want to spread the wealth around? We anthropomorphize our pets, too. Are we lonely? Why do we want to remake the world in our image??

What's the goal of artificial intelligence? Where are we going with that? Space exploration? Do people put a lot of time and effort into thinking about space exploration? How about entertainment? People do seem to place a lot of importance on that... And what about war? Why do we want to develop smarter and smarter bombs? Where's that heading? EPICAC was "built for war," and a hefty sum of taxpayer money was devoted to its development. How does this compare to today. How much of your taxpayer money goes to weapons of war? Do you approve of that? What about AI for machine labor—is it okay to make a machine "intelligent" and then "enslave" it? Is that a silly question? Why? It must be because we still see a definite distinction between machines and ourselves....

What can't even an "intelligent" machine have that we humans have? Vonnegut creates a scenario in which a machine has most of the qualities you'd come up with:

- Consciousness... Does Vonnegut give this to EPICAC?
- Spirituality... Does Vonnegut give this to EPICAC?
- Free will... Does Vonnegut give this to EPICAC?
- "Love"... Does Vonnegut give this to EPICAC?

How does Vonnegut develop EPICAC's "human side"?

- p. 373: his sluggishness, his stutters, irregular clicks indicate confusion, boredom, a lack of ambition that we associate with human underachievement
- p. 375: the curiosity, love of learning, thirst for knowledge, and desire to develop his individual talent all make EPICAC seem human

- p. 375: EPICAC “finds himself.” This seems very human, too. What does it mean to “find yourself”? (Discover your possibilities, tap your potential, discover your purpose, find meaning, follow your bliss??) Why do we use this metaphor of “finding,” of discovery? Is it a metaphor of being “lost” and then “finding”? Or is it a metaphor that’s focused more on finding, as in discovering? (Look at this treasure I’ve found!)

IRONY

This small story has a lot of interesting IRONIES.

- Pat thinks she wants romance, something warm, but she falls for a machine (without knowing it). What do you think is Vonnegut’s point with this irony?
- EPICAC was built for WAR but his real purpose is LOVE. Is the opposite irony also true? We seem built for love, but we seem to be absorbed in making war. Why does Vonnegut make a computer built for war the next Don Juan? What’s the point, do you think?
- The claim that “protoplasm” is superior to “metal and glass”—that it “lasts forever” and is “indestructible” also seems very ironic. Protoplasm is very destructible, very fragile, in fact, much more vulnerable than metal... the point being?
- The man argues with EPICAC that “ We build machines to serve us”—but how much do they serve us, and how much do we serve them? Is the opposite really true? We serve them more than they serve us? If so, how long will we be able to maintain our already flagging sense of “superiority”? And what will be the consequence of seeing ourselves as inferior to machines? (Say hello to the Brave New World, right?)
 - Do we already see our machines as superior to us? What about our weapons? On the battlefield, would you rather have a buddy or a tank? On the job would you rather have a piece of paper and your brainpower, or your PC?
 - If we continue to let our machines outstrip us, where will we be in a few years? Who will we value more on the battlefield, on the job? Our expensive machines or the cheap lives that handle them?
 - Even something simple like our cars...they serve us, right? Well, think about it. You own a car. It takes you here and there. But if you want it to keep working, you have to feed it gas (very expensive, so you better work your butt off to make some money to buy the gas). Next it needs repairs, also very expensive. And finally, you need insurance. Maybe you decide you want to get rid of it and save several thousands of dollars a

year. Forget it!! If you want to get around, you'll need your car. Who exactly is serving who??

- Another irony: EPICAC is destroyed by the idea of “FATE”—the “predetermined and inevitable destiny” that none of us human beings are liable to because of our free will. But if someone pronounced your “predetermined and inevitable destiny” it would probably kill you, too. The man announces EPICAC’s fate: women can’t love machines. Yet the irony is that Pat did fall in love with a machine (without knowing it). If she knew the truth, how would Pat feel about EPICAC? We’ll never know, because the man cheated and lied (he “loved and won”). He tries to make it seem that there’s no way to change your destiny, to change who or what you are, but the literary proposition that’s existed since Sophocles, since Genesis, is that the human condition is a condition of free will—you *can* change who or what you are with a little effort, a little “character.” Character determines fate. People have free will.
 - Does EPICAC have “character”—we’ve already seen how “human” he is...what’s his “character”? The man describes him as “noble.” Is that a fair description? Is his death then a kind of tragedy? (Comic, of course, but still tragic in a sense.)
- The man says he “loved and won—EPICAC loved and lost.” But his victory is tainted by his cheating—his lying to Pat, his lying to EPICAC about “fate.” Why doesn’t he care if he won by cheating? Does that make him seem like a shallow character to you? More shallow, in fact, than EPICAC? Now that’s ironic, isn’t it? The machine is more noble, more poetic, more brilliant, more “great” than the human being. Welcome to Vonnegut’s *Monkey House*.