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Jacob Weiner April 18, 2012

Slaughterhouse-Five as Catharsis: How Vonnegut comes to terms with World War II, Vietnam, and the General Ominousness of the Atomic Age

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Abstract

Slaughterhouse-Five as Catharsis: How Vonnegut comes to terms with World War II, Vietnam, and the General Ominousness of the Atomic Age
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This text explores how the Vietnam War era affected representations of World War II in literature, with a focus on the Kurt Vonnegut novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. That novel, which is the story of the gratuitous Allied attack on a nonmilitary city, challenges the common conception that World War II is a "good war" by directly comparing it to the decidedly unpopular Vietnam War and by rendering Hemingwayan glamorizations of combat as absurd and barbaric. Since the Second World War was deemed a necessary war, those who fought in it often had to suppress their wartime traumas because they were expected to uphold the war's image as "good" and the veterans' reputation as "heroic." However, the ambiguity and unpopularity of the Vietnam War opened a window for veterans like Vonnegut to express publicly their grief through literature. The result was *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel that, despite its cynical tone, posits a wholly optimistic approach for wartime veterans to comprehend and cope with the traumas that they continue to experience well after the conclusion of the war.

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Introduction

Throughout the Vietnam War era, rhetoric spilled freely from American elected officials; yet not much was said. There was rhetoric about the war and rhetoric about peace. There was rhetoric about race, gender, sexuality, and the rectification of social injustice. There was even a substantial amount of rhetoric about rhetoric. Historian Peter Carroll writes that "it was a time when language itself became a subject for political discourse" and when all presidential rhetoric was interpreted as having a "credibility gap" (3). Perhaps better than most, Richard Nixon understood the delicacy of rhetoric during this time. Throughout his first presidential campaign, he promised to "bridge the great language barrier of the Johnson administration" by closing the gap between the rhetoric of the presidency and the rhetoric of the citizenry (Carroll 3). "We are entering an era of negotiation," he said in his first inaugural address.

> In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading. We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another -- until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices. For its part, government will listen.

However, the level of sensitivity that Nixon exhibited for rhetoric also reflected his skill at leaving much unsaid. Now, even today few will doubt that the intricacies of diplomacy require at least some shelter from public scrutiny -- especially with regard to military operations. Nixon shared this belief that secrecy was essential to political success. It is for this reason that he believed the Vietnam War would be "settled in private rather than in public" (Neilan 5).

However, often Nixon's secrecy extended far beyond the realm of diplomacy. Throughout his presidency, he used the power of rhetoric not only to distort the reality of Vietnam, but also to conceal it.

One particularly significant instance of concealment surrounded two televised speeches that were delivered by Nixon on the status of the Vietnam War. When Nixon took office on January 20, 1969, public support for the war had dropped from sixty percent in August 1965 to about thirty-nine percent. Further, a Gallup Poll showed that only twenty-six percent of the public approved of the Johnson administration's handling of Vietnam. Nixon had won the election on the promise that "new leadership would end the war in Vietnam" (qtd. in Carroll 4). His vision to accomplish this was revealed in November 1969: America would adopt a policy of "Vietnamization." This meant that the South Vietnamese troops would be trained to wage the ground war on their own, thus enabling the steady withdrawal of American forces. On April 20, 1970, Nixon gave a televised speech assuring the American public of the success of Vietnamization, and he further pledged to withdraw an additional 150,000 troops over the course of twelve months (Glass).

However, his second speech -- televised just ten days after the first -- announced a bold change in this policy. On April 30, 1970, President Nixon announced that although he had spoken publicly of curtailing American involvement in Vietnam, he had simultaneously authorized a secret carpet-bombing campaign in Cambodia (a neutral nation) in early 1969, thus expanding the war in Vietnam. Given the strength of the antiwar movement and his public promise to end American involvement in South East Asia, the attack on Cambodia required a high level of secrecy. The military accordingly developed a secret system of false reporting that

misinformed not only the general public about military campaigns, but also some high government and military officials as well (Carroll 10). Operation Menu thus reflected Nixon's unyielding belief that America could still prevail in Vietnam.

The ten-day period between these speeches is incredibly significant. After assuring the American public of the success of Vietnamization, Nixon spent ten days studying the Cambodian Crisis in secret. In evaluating his next course of action regarding the campaign, he consulted with trusted policy advisors, attended intelligence meetings, withdrew to Camp David for contemplation, and, presumably for reasons of spiritual comfort, he had several screenings of the movie *Patton*, a megalomanic war film that celebrates military toughness and high-risk attacks (Carroll 11). And while these screenings surely played at least some part in his decision to continue the bombing campaign, they also remind us that Nixon, like Lyndon Johnson and many other political leaders, was haunted by the myth of World War II -- a war where the cause was clear, the villains obvious, and the outcome encouraging. Especially when contrasted with Vietnam, the Second World War had become "the culminating myth of the American experience and national character" and was nostalgically labelled as the "last good war" by American officers in Vietnam (Isaacs 7).

Of course, those who experienced the Second World War first-hand understood that it could not be neatly summed up as clear-cut binaries like "good and evil" or "truth and propaganda." World War II was the single most destructive event in human history. Between the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and the formal surrender of Japan in 1945, more than fifty million people were killed. [1] And of this total, more than half were noncombatant deaths. Nevertheless, the nostalgic image of World War II prevailed through the Vietnam War era, due in

large part to the revival of glamorized war films like *Patton* and the John Wayne epic *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. When comparing World War II narratives with Vietnam narratives, Elaine Kendall of the *Los Angeles Times* writes: "How quaintly naive they now seem in comparison, with their obligatory rites of passage, intense philosophical discussions, poignant love affairs in the midst of battle; with cliche mix of ethnic backgrounds and personalities; the suffering, bravery and heroism followed by hilarious asides to relieve tensions and point up the ironies" (qtd. in Bryan 67). The films and novels about this period typically glamorized combat, depicting it as a means to glory, brotherhood, and manhood. And hence for those who had not served in the conflict, the Second World War acquired a sort of mythical status. America seemed to be an unstoppable economic and military force, and war appeared heroic and fun.

However, the 1950s and 1960s saw a major change in the way Second World was perceived, as many authors who served in the war began to reshape they way in which the war was delineated. The uncertainty surrounding the success of the American war effort in Vietnam began to erode glamorized war ideals, thus creating an opportunity for postmodernists like Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut to undermine the mythical status of World War II. Of course, there had already been some negative representations of the war through literature. However, many of these novels were published too close to the end of the war and were quickly drowned in postwar optimism and affluence (Russet 12, 17). By stripping war of its glamorized status in the American national conscience, Vietnam opened the door for important revisions of the "good war" -- revisions that showed that there are no "good" wars, no matter how just its cause or how great its spoils. Through the blurring of fantasy, fiction, and history, novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* offered two such important revisions: they addressed not only

the power of both historical and fictional war narratives to beget other wars, but also presented ideas on how to come to terms with the horrors of warfare through literary catharsis.

* * *

This thesis aims to explore how the Vietnam War era affected representations of World War II in literature, with a focus on the Kurt Vonnegut novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. That novel, of course, is the story of the gratuitous Allied air attack on Dresden, Germany on February 13, 1945, in which a cultural center and nonmilitary city was firebombed into ruin. Vonnegut went through that conflagration as a prisoner of war and was never quite able to shake the experience loose from his memory. Thus it is not my assertion that the Vietnam War changed Vonnegut's perception of World War II or war in general.[2] Long before the Vietnam War, Vonnegut believed that there is nothing honorable or romantic about war. Rather, I assert that the realization that World War II fictions had contributed to the engendering of the Vietnam War was a turning point in how Vonnegut decided to portray war in his Dresden book. Many of the atrocities of Vietnam mirrored those that were committed (and subsequently forgotten) in World War II. Thus, by viewing the novel through the prism of the era in which it was composed, I assert that Vonnegut sets out not only to fracture traditional war narratives about the "good war," but also to create a very different kind of war story -- one that will not inspire new conflicts (like the film *Patton* had done in the Vietnam War) nor one that will encourage young men and women to enlist (like *The Sands of Iwo Jima* had done before the Korean War). Rather, Vonnegut's story is one that will prepare the generation that will be crucified in the *next* war, and perhaps even help them cope with the actuality of wartime trauma.

The first chapter of this thesis creates a panorama of the historical and cultural context of the novel, examining both the mythical status of the Second World War and how it affected the decidedly unfavorable war in Vietnam. While the strong sense of patriotism that followed the commencement of World War II certainly had its advantages in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, its effects were disastrous in the 1960s and 1970s as the Cold War began to escalade. Especially due to a large output in propagandizing Hollywood war films, strong national pride and unprecedented economic prosperity gave way to blatant megalomania. American political leaders became overconfident in the power of the military and took advantage of a decidedly pro-war public. Thus it will be shown here that Mary O'Hare's indignation about Vonnegut's planned "war book" is correct: that wars are "partly encouraged by books and movies" (16).

This will lead into the second chapter, which examines how Vonnegut meticulously composes his war book so that it will not beget future conflicts. Of course, if Vonnegut did not want to engender more wars through literature he could have simply not written about the war. But by choosing to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut clearly sets out to write a very different kind of war novel, one that not only refuses to encourage new conflicts, but also one that destroys the glamorized understanding of the nature of war, thus weakening the impact of future war novels. He accomplishes this task in two ways. First, he mocks glory, brotherhood, and manhood in war by pointing out the absurdity of characters who strive for these ideals. And second, he undermines glamorized depictions of the Second World War by comparing it to the morally ambiguous and unpopular war in Vietnam. By destroying the way in which we nostalgically remember World War II, Vonnegut hopes to stop politicians like Nixon from using the war as a justification for starting new wars. And by doing so, Vonnegut, like many of his peer

authors, effectively shatters the myth of the "good war," instead categorizing World War II (along with all other wars) as a "bad" war.

The third and final chapter will examine of how Vonnegut is able to tell a "true war story" through the use of fantasy, fiction, and history, with an emphasis on his use of alternative time structures. After many years of trying and failing to write his Dresden novel, Vonnegut realized that realism about war can no longer express war as it had in the past. The Holocaust, the atomic bomb, and the general disregard for the combatant/noncombatant distinction destroyed the traditional understanding of war. And by the 1960s -- with so many uncovered horrors from World War II, so many new wars on the horizon, and such a continued widespread feeling of cynicism -- the wars all seemed to converge into simply War, anytime, anywhere. This overarching ominousness is the essence of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for although it is ostensibly about the Second World War, it is really about the "next war," the war that is not restrained by limits of time, space, capital, or manpower, a war that will not end until there is nobody left to fight it. Thus whether the scene is the firebombing of Dresden or the destruction of the universe at the hands of a Tralfamadorian test pilot, the problem that predominates *Slaughterhouse-Five* is essentially the same: How to come to terms with the terrors of an era so unreal, so unbelievably absurd, that the only way to do justice to reality is through fiction.

Chapter One: Historical Context

The way in which Americans remember the Second World War is radically different than the way they remember Vietnam, especially for those who did not experience either war directly. Popular accounts and even some academic treatments of the Second World War have designated it as the "Good War," in which the United States was attacked, fought against monstrously evil enemies, quickly rallied to the cause of protecting democracy, and came out the richest and most powerful country in the world. The war itself seemed decidedly straightforward, the outcome was encouraging, and hence its veterans returned home to parades, honorary ceremonies, and were called "heroes" regardless of their level of involvement. Those who fought in the Vietnam War, on the other hand, returned to a silent government and a growing antiwar movement, and were occasionally called "baby-killers." The publication of incidents like the My Lai massacre and the Cambodian bombings created the impression that Vietnam soldiers were committing atrocities against civilians, a stigma that had not characterized public impressions of soldiers in the Second World War. Even after knowledge of atrocities like the firebombing of Dresden, Tokyo, and other cities were released to the public after the war, the glorified image of World War II was upheld. Political and intellectual leaders were still eager to whitewash or forget that World War II was the most destructive event in human history.

Before the intricacies of these two conflicts can be further explored, it must be understood that *all wars* create the same psychological trauma in soldiers (Shehan 55). Although the motives, goals, landscapes, and enemies change between wars, the realities of combat remain the same. As Vietnam veteran and novelist Jack Fuller once wrote: "When somebody is shooting at you and you are shooting back, all wars are pretty much the same" (qtd. in Isaacs 12-3) This

truth was also professed by President Lyndon Johnson on January 12, 1966 in his State of the Union address, although he was admittedly trying to convince the American electorate and the public that war in Vietnam was a necessary and unavoidable conflict:

> How many men who listen to me tonight have served their Nation in other wars? How very many are not here to listen? The war in Vietnam is not like these other wars. Yet, finally, war is always the same. It is young men dying in the fullness of their promise. It is trying to kill a man that you do not even know well enough to hate. Therefore, to know war is to know that there is still madness in this world… Yet as long as others will challenge America's security and test the clearness of our beliefs with fire and steel, then we must stand or see the promise of two centuries tremble.

At the conclusion of the address, President Johnson makes an implicit appeal to the glamorized memories of the Second World War, the First World War, the American Revolution, and other "good" wars that have been mythologized as a defense of basic human freedoms and the democratic way of life. And of these young men who enlisted with dreams of defending democracy and capitalism, many did not have a realistic picture of what war actually encompasses. Robert Rasmus, a veteran of the Second World War, describes: "In September of '39 when the Germans invaded Poland, I was fourteen years old. I remember my mother saying, 'Bob, you'll be in it.' I was hoping she'd be right. At that age, you look forward to the glamour and have no ideas of the horrors" (38). No matter how noble the cause or how great its spoils, war is hell. No amount of courage can keep you alive in war, and no amount of heroic feats will combat the mental suffering and anxieties that veterans inevitably bring home.

There is a broad sense in contemporary accounts of the Second World War that it was a necessary war.[3] America did not seek the war; instead it responded to the duty and challenge of a great and decidedly malicious power. The war was ostensibly fought to preserve democracy; yet, there was also the larger responsibility of humanitarianism. The international aggression by European and Asian dictators brought an unfathomable misery to their victims: in Europe, Nazi aggression included a policy of genocide against those deemed unfit to live under the Third Reich, and in Asia the militant Japanese government committed genocide on millions of Asian civilians and Allied prisoners of War. This aggression surely had to be stopped. And after many years of fighting, the end of the war fulfilled its aim: German fascism and Japanese militarism were crushed, and after the war American magnanimity lifted those nations from ruin and encouraged them to resume roles of world responsibility. Less than ten years after the war, Japan and Germany were allies of the United States.

Over time, the memory of the Second World War as a necessary war was transformed into the Good War. Especially as the world became more complex, its problems more ambiguous, and its villains less obvious, the 1940s were mythologized as a simpler time when issues were clearer and everyone knew where they stood. President Lyndon Johnson often spoke nostalgically of this earlier age, when "people didn’t wake up with Vietnam or have the problems of Santo Domingo with lunch and those of the Congo with dinner" (Adams 3). It was a constant point of reference in George Bush’s 1988 presidential campaign, during which he and Senator Robert Dole called upon their experiences in the Second World War as giving them "a sense of moral certainty" (Thomas and McDaniel 31). And when Lloyd Bentson, having lost the vice-presidency on the Democratic ticket, responded to George Bush’s first address to Congress he

invoked their wartime experiences as a bond that forever joined them, despite their ideological differences (Roeder 3). And except for a few books published shortly after the war and quickly forgotten, this orthodoxy was largely unchallenged. Michael C.C. Adams correctly observes: "such a process happened with World War II, which has been converted over time from a complex, problematic event, full of nuance and debating meaning, to a simple, shining legend of the Good War. For many…the war years have become America's golden age" (Adams xiii).

At this point one must ask: Why does this particular war hold such a revered place in our national consciousness? Why continue to dwell, often nostalgically, on a war that took the lives of more than fifty million people? Adams believes that the Second World War retained this "golden" image because it is simply easier to remember a horrific war as a good time; it is *nicer* to remember a war as it should have been rather than how it actually was (1). Now, all societies tend to reinvent their past *to some degree*. Simply too much has happened for it to all be retained within popular memory. However, the generation that lived through the Second World War did not tend to remember the most important events; they remembered the most positive events, often to the neglect of the more negative ones. Those who followed the war at home did not want to see the particular horrors that war produced. William Manchester, a veteran of the Second World War, explains in his memoir that when the Pentagon began to release photographs of American corpses to the press after the Battle for Tarawa, it received a rather vicious backlash of citizens demanding that the obscene disclosure of American deaths be stopped (242). People did not want to think the GIs were anything but happy warriors who never died and who were occasionally wounded (but not severely, of course) through their heroic conquest around Europe and the Pacific. These candid photographs of American corpses were concealed in a file known

as the "Chamber of Horrors" and were not released to the public until well after the war (Roeder 1). Appropriately, during this time period the brass monkey ornaments that say" See No Evil, Hear No Evil, and Speak No Evil" were in high demand (Adams 11), a symbolic representation of what had become a common approach to life in the postwar era.

The self-selective process by which Americans mentally blocked out negative aspects of the war was further reflected in the media, leading to one of the most censored eras in modern history. For example, no American newspaper carried any reports of atrocities committed by the United States military -- only those committed by enemy combatants (Adams 9). In fact, the United States military reviewed all reports that were sent from the front, and those journalists who did not portray the war in a positive light were sent home. One correspondent of the war said of the reporters: "We were cheerleaders." Another, writer Fletcher Pratt, agreed: "The official censors pretty well succeeded in putting over the legend that the war was on without a single mistake by a command consisting exclusively of geniuses" (qtd. in Adams 9). The result was a cosmetically enhanced vision of reality that was ultimately lapped up by the American public. During this time, magazines like *Reader's Digest* and *Life* had enormous subscription spikes due in part to their short, easily digested stories and optimistic distortions about the war (Roeder 4). Gloomy endings, ominousness, and skepticism did not make it to the print anymore.

The revival of the war film genre following the conclusion of the Second World War also contributed to its mythical status. By the late 1930s, Hollywood had become a dominant force in world film production and the war film accounted for nearly thirty percent of its output (Jarvis 96). Further, by the 1940s, on average each American went to the cinema three times per month, with the moviegoing audience cutting across class, regional, and ethnic lines (Roeder 4).

Especially with the advent of sound in the 1920s, the film industry had an unrivaled capacity to produce films that both propagandized and entertained. This was most obviously reflected in war films, a genre ripe with heroic displays of patriotism. These films tended to chronicle young, hearty American boys who find courage, patriotism, manhood, and brotherhood through combat. American deaths were portrayed as quick and painless or happened off screen, while enemy combatants endured more grisly endings and severe wounds (Adams 11). And in the end, America always reigned victorious. Since most Americans never saw combat, the cinema served as the most realistic portrait of warfare that most Americans would ever experience.

The star most often associated with World War II is John Wayne, and with good reason. Although Wayne had never served in any war, his roles in numerous war films came to epitomize the Hollywood version of the war hero. In particular, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* was incredibly popular and eventually became one of the most effective recruiting tools in the history of the United States Marine Corps. In that film, John Wayne plays the tough-as-nails Sergeant Stryker who, despite his troubled marriage and surprising death, becomes a symbol for honor and manliness in war. Stryker shapes a group of young, naive boys into seasoned war heroes and mature adults, thus maintaining the ideals of glory, brotherhood, and manhood into combat. Following the general release of the film in 1950, the Marine Corps would set up recruiting booths in the lobbies of cinemas, where young men would enthusiastically enlist before exiting the theater (Jarvis 97). Many of these men would go on to serve in Vietnam.

Soldiers of the Vietnam War have declared John Wayne as an inspiration behind either their enlistment or their choice to serve (i.e. not to dodge the draft). When Michael Salevouris

speaks of the reemergence of the "war is glorious" ideal in the late 1980s, he speaks extensively of the John Wayne epics:

> Films have been extremely influential in establishing popular images of war. In his book on American war movies, Lawrence Suid argues that "sixty years of war movies have profoundly influenced the nation's ideas about the military and the American combat experience." John Wayne's influence on the Vietnam generation is a case in point. Wayne, who never served in the military, became the archetypal American war hero in the years after World War II, and his screen persona certainly had an effect. (342)

The result was that many young men enthusiastically left for Vietnam to follow in the footsteps of silver-screen heroes like John Wayne. In his memoir *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo wrote that as he enlisted in the Marines he "saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest" (6). Jim Coyne Jr., an Army communications lieutenant in Vietnam, recalls: "We grew up with John Wayne, *Sands of Iwo Jima*. I was brought up to understand that what we as Americans do is right" (qtd. in Takiff 3). Ron Kovic, a soldier who was partially paralyzed in Vietnam, said that *The Sands of Iwo Jima* so moved him in his youth that he cried every time he heard the music from it: "Wayne became one of my heroes" (Kovic 53-55). Another veteran said he went to Vietnam to "kill a Commie for Jesus and John Wayne" (McCloud 87). Even after the Vietnam War, many continued to think of the films as the way war really was in the 1940s and blamed themselves for having fought a "bad war" in Vietnam.

The advent of "John Wayne Syndrome," as Vietnam veteran Tobey Herzog calls it, also turned the veterans of the Second World War into heroes by proxy. The heroism displayed by John Wayne in his films spread to encompass all World War II veterans within an umbrella of honor. Hence many young men fought in the Vietnam War not only to be John Wayne, but also to be their fathers who served in the Second World War. "Before I went into the service," says Vince Way, an Army intelligence sergeant in Vietnam, "World War II was huge. It was ingrained in us that it was a grand and heroic thing and that our country did and our fathers did. Military service was grand and heroic -- if the country needed you, you went off to war" (quoted in Takiff 2). Another veteran Bill Ehrhard, a private during Vietnam, talks about why he enlisted in the documentary *Vietnam: A Television History:*

> I had been accepted into several colleges, four college my senior years. And then, I just decided, "No, I'm going to join the Marines." And I had to spend a lot of time talking to my parents about it, because of course at seventeen I would not have been allowed to sign an enlistment contract in my own right. They had to sign it too. And really what, I think what, tipped the scales in the discussion was that at one point after talking for a long time, I said, "Is this the way you raised me? To let other mothers' sons fight in America's wars?" And they were young people during World War II. They believed in their country. And that was it. They hadn't raised me that way.

These young men had been raised on World War II -- by their parents, their teachers, their classmates, and their neighbors. And if their fathers withheld the details of combat (as many did), Hollywood was there to fill in the blanks.

This sense of duty, of serving one's fellow Americans in a time of need, and of national pride certainly had its advantages in the postwar era, a time of unprecedented patriotism, economic prosperity, and military supremacy. However, its effects were utterly disastrous in the wake of the Vietnam War. Following the Allied victory in World War II, the country's political and military leaders took their vision of American supremacy for granted: "the elite of America had become stupefied by too much money, too many material resources, too much power, and too much success" (Isaacs 7). The result was that when the first Marines landed in Danang, Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the country had forgotten it could possibly lose a war. High military officials in Vietnam assumed that they would prevail "simply because of who they were" (Isaacs 7). And the same could be said of American society as a whole.

Perhaps it was because it was such a reversal of the prevailing image of World War II that Vietnam was so extraordinarily destructive to the American spirit. Although around sixty percent of Americans supported going to war in Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin Incident -- a clear majority -- after the Tet Offensive in 1968 nearly fifty percent of Americans thought the Vietnam War was a mistake. The popularization of television in this era certainly contributed to this negative perception of the war; after all, the Vietnam War was the first war to be televised. Lyndon Johnson even went so far as to believe that the United States lost the war in Vietnam *because* it was televised. On April 1, 1968, he announced to a the National Association of Broadcasters:

> As I say in my office last evening, waiting to speak, I thought of the many times each week when television brings the war into the American home. No one can say exactly what the effect of these vivid scenes have on American opinion.

> Historians must only guess at the effect that television would have had during earlier conflicts on the future of this Nation: during the Korean war, for example, at that time when our forces were pushed back there to Pusan; or World War II, the Battle of the Bulge, or when our men were slugging it out in Europe or when most of our Air Force was shot down that day in June 1942 off Australia. (qtd. in Mandelbaum 157)

The President's meaning was clear: the regular exposure to the realities of combat had turned the public against the war, forcing the withdrawal of American troops and ultimately allowing for a clear communist victory. Further, he alludes to the absence of television in the Second World War as a reason for its lack of unpopularity. Thus to the American public, this war was different from all the other wars before it simply because they did not have to listen to or witness accounts of atrocities prior to Vietnam. But by the middle of the 1960s, surveys of their habits showed that Americans were watching a great deal of television. Thus the Vietnam War was brought into the living room of nearly every household in America. [4] Further, at this time reporters at the front were allowed to send home graphic stories of American atrocities committed against enemy combatants and civilians. And while this media innovation certainly contributed to the negative perception of the Vietnam War, it also misled the public because it tended to mythologize the memories of World War II to an even greater extent. In reality, the Vietnam War was not uniquely gruesome or "bad" in most respects. All wars are bad.

Given the nostalgic memory of the Second World War as the "good war" and of Vietnam as the "bad war," comparisons between the two were inevitable. There were, of course, atrocities in both wars. The secret bombing of Cambodia was eerily similar to the firebombings of Dresden

and Tokyo. The My Lai massacre echoed the Canicatti and Dachau massacres. However, what made Vietnam and the Second World War so different was how the soldiers returned home. Now, the folklore that grew around soldiers being cursed and spit on after returning from Vietnam was largely exaggerated (Isaacs 10). But there was certainly a noticeable silence surrounding their return -- a silence that felt like shunning to many Vietnam veterans. One veteran, Pervis Crowe, who has has been diagnosed with severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, said that "If we'd come home in different circumstances than we did, my life wouldn't be the way it is now" (*Vietnam: Homecoming*). A former Army nurse named Kathy Gunson wrote: "I want to go back to Vietnam and make it different. I want to come home to a marching band and a red carpet. I want to hear a 'thank you.' I want to hear 'I'm sorry'" (qtd. in Isaacs 11). Another veteran, Jamie Bryant, remembered:

> It was the spookiest thing… In over ten years, there has really never been anybody who has asked me: "What happened to you over there? What was it like?" It's like having a whole year of your life that didn't exist. When you first get back, you don't think about it much. Then you begin to wonder why no one asks the questions. Then you begin to feel like maybe it really isn't something you should talk about.

It was a sense of alienation that separated Vietnam veterans from earlier conflicts. The men who served in World War II were certainly haunted by the same horrors of combat. But they did not return to a country that disapproved of the war or diminished the value of their service. As Arnold Isaacs observes, they did not return "as symbols of a great national failure" (12). Veterans of the Second World War did not have to agonize over these questions of whether the war was

properly conducted, whether the end outcome could have been better, or whether or not their effort had been in vain. Their country gave them the answer. They were heroes in a justified war -- a good war. However, even several decades after the war, many Vietnam veterans struggle with these questions about their effort. The war was brutal and the outcome discouraging. And their country was silent.

Psychologist and Marine Corps veteran Jack Smith speaks extensively of this phenomenon in his conversation with author Myra MacPherson: "In past wars, through cleansing acts, society shared the blame and responsibility with the soldiers. Victory banners, medals, and parades were ways of recognizing the tasks they did in the country's name" (qtd. in Isaacs 12). But the country refused to take responsibility for Vietnam. Veteran Stan Barker recalls:

> [Vietnam] wasn't even called a war. It was called a police action… When I come home from Vietnam I was asked to join the American Legion. I said "Sure." On the back of the American Legion card, you have the wars: World War I, World War II, the dates of these wars. The Korean War and its date. And then it said "The Vietnam Period." (*Vietnam: Homecoming*).

Unlike in past wars, the responsibility and the blame for Vietnam was ascribed to those who had fought in it. John Wilson, another psychologist, also explains the uniqueness of this phenomenon:

> All cultures recognize that when we send someone into battle, it's difficult psychologically…After the battle, most cultures also have a ritualized way of welcoming back the warrior and giving him a new identity and a new status in society. But we didn't do it for Vietnam veterans… Many men felt isolated after

> Vietnam. They had to create meaning and make sense of what they did in Vietnam -- and they had to do it alone.

The men who returned home from Vietnam were awarded medals like in other wars. However, the reception had a much different atmosphere. There were no ceremonies or parades or rituals of reconciliation of any sort. And as a result, many veterans threw away their decorations in protest.

However, one positive aspect (if you can even call it that) of the Vietnam veteran homecoming is that they were not required to suppress their feelings of anxiety and confusion about the war. The war was already considered a mistake by at least half of the American public, and the veterans had not received any sort of public commemoration for their services. As a result, they were able to publicly grieve about the acts they had seen and committed -- a luxury that the veterans of the Second World War had not been allotted. World War II veterans were forced to suppress their feelings because of the distorted sense of glamor that was associated with their war. They were heroes, like John Wayne. And heroes would surely not question their actions at war, nor would they grieve over all they had seen. Of course, the soldiers in World War II agonized over many of their war experiences. However, the public expected them to maintain their heroic status. And as a result they had no acceptable way to grieve. As such, the Vietnam War was a very important time for veterans of the Second World War. With the glamorized ideal of war in general finally being undermined in society, World War II veterans were able to express the painful aspects of their wartime experiences, which had lurked unvoiced in their memories for decades.

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* emerged during this revisionist period. The novel is ostensibly about the Second World War, yet it derives much of its power from the era in

which it was composed. William Allen correctly observes that "a major reason Slaughterhouse-Five had the enormous impact it did was because it was published at the height of the conflict in Vietnam, and so delivered its antiwar message to a most receptive audience" (qtd. in Shaw 100). Alfred Kazin agrees, writing: "Vonnegut's total horror of war has endeared him to the young, who find it hard to believe that even World War II had a purpose, and who see themselves as belonging to the universe at large rather than the country which sends them to fight in Asia" (89). When the novel was published in early 1969, public support for the war in Vietnam had been cut nearly in half. The previous year had been the deadliest of the war to date, and the My Lai massacre had just become public knowledge. As soldiers returned to a silent America, many turned to writing war literature as a form of catharsis; as a means to understand the role they placed in a confusing and ineffective war.

The Second World War had not awarded its veterans the luxury of catharsis. Of course the they had seen and committed wrongful acts. However, the postwar world was not ready to act witness to these atrocities. Political alignments shifted after the war, with the newly democratized Germany and Japan becoming allies of the Untied States while a former ally, the Soviet Union, took on an adversarial role. Further, the bombing of Dresden was classified as "top secret" for many years and was ultimately whitewashed in the official Air Force histories that were released during the Cold War. As a result, Kurt Vonnegut experienced a silence similar to the experience of returning Vietnam soldiers when broaching the topic of Dresden and other Allied atrocities after the war: as an anthropological graduate student at the University of Chicago, he found his professors unwilling to discuss any negative aspects of the war beyond the Holocaust (Klinkowitz 3). Thus soldiers like Vonnegut were forced back into the traditional

American middle-class lifestyles that they had experienced before the war. They were expected to uphold glamorized the glamorized image of the Second World War, and hence had no appropriate way to express their their grief. Thus out of the carnage of Vietnam came one positive aspect: the freedom for veterans to publicly and collectively grieve about their war trauma.

Chapter Two: Undermining the Myth of World War II

Vonnegut begins his "famous Dresden book" by describing the events leading up to its composition (4). His credentials for writing the novel, of course, are that he was there; he had been an American prisoner of war in Dresden on February 14 and February 15, 1945 and survived the conflagration in a powerfully-built underground slaughterhouse. As a result the novel, which is actually a modification of his actual experience, starts on the bitterly quiescent note of a man who cannot shake loose the terror of the bombing but at the same time cannot put it into words. In an interview published in *Conversations With Kurt Vonnegut*, for example, he says: "It seemed a categorical imperative that I write about Dresden, the firebombing of Dresden, since it was the largest massacre in the history of Europe and I…had been present. I *had* to say something about it. And it took me a long time and it was painful. The most difficult thing about it was that I had forgotten about it" (230). For nearly a quarter of a century he struggled to make a novel out of the experience, a difficulty that was touched upon in the novel's autobiographical first chapter:

> I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen… But not many words about Dresden came to mind -- not enough of them to make a book, anyway. (2-3)

Back then, Vonnegut was interested in writing about the firebombing of Dresden because he thought "that it would be a masterpiece or at least make [him] a lot of money, since the subject was so big" (3). This vision was nearly realized when he received a three-book contract from a

business man named Seymour Lawrence, the first of which was supposed to be about Dresden. However, his inability to find something "intelligent" to say about massacre left him frustrated in his early attempts: "I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and *wrote about it*, and WROTE ABOUT IT." (qtd. in Sumner). Even with the help of his old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare, Vonnegut could not remember enough to structure a full narrative; they could only recall seemingly unconnected fragments and ironies. As a result, he "kept writing crap."

Vonnegut's reconciliation of this difficulty comes from O'Hare's wife, Mary, to whom the novel is dedicated. Mary effectively destroys not only Vonnegut's dignity, but also his hackneyed dream of "two leather chairs near a fire in a paneled room where two old soldiers could drink and talk" by making them sit in the kitchen -- an "operating room" (16) Her indignation against war reminiscing is powerful and sincere:

> You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs. (18)

The narrator goes on to clarify Mary's connection between war fiction and actual wars: "she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies" (19). By referencing John Wayne and Frank Sinatra, Mary is clearly condemning the revival of propagandizing war films like the *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, a film that encouraged many young men to enlist in the armed forces. The power of her indignation is significant for Vonnegut, and it represents a turning point in the way he decides to represent World War II in his novel. Before Vonnegut had spoken to Mary, he did not recognize the power that war stories possess to engender more conflicts. He was planning

to exploit the popularity of the war genre by writing a redundant war novel, ripe with heroism, masculinity, and flag waving. In his essay collection *A Man Without A Country*, Vonnegut writes: "I was a writer in 1968. I was a hack. I'd write anything to make money, you know. And what the hell, I'd seen this thing, I'd been through it, and so I was going to write a hack book about Dresden. You know, the kind that would be made into a movie and where Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra and the others would play us" (18). However, following his meeting with Bernard and Mary, Vonnegut understands the importance of *how* he depicts the war -- not just *that* he depicts it. Just as Mary destroys his image of the two leather chairs, she destroys his dream of having John Wayne play the protagonist of his memoir. He promises Mary that his book will not have a part in it for John Wayne or Frank Sinatra, and hence will not be responsible for the engendering of future conflicts.

Vonnegut is able to accomplish this task in two important ways. First, he mocks the ideals of heroism and honor in war by rendering those characters who strive to embody these ideals as either pathetic or absurd. This is expressly achieved in a scene involving a group of effeminate English officers in a concentration camp for Russians, where war is treated as a sport that can be mastered like tennis or croquet, and in scenes involving the "Three Musketeers," in which the pathetically unlikeable Roland Weary is unable to realize his inflated expectations of finding glory, manhood, and brotherhood in war. Secondly, Vonnegut undermines the glamorized memory of the Second World War by comparing it to the Vietnam War, an engagement that is commonly viewed as a mistake. In destroying the way in which we nostalgically remember World War II, Vonnegut hopes to stop politicians like Nixon from using it as a justification for starting more wars and to stop young men from enlisting to fight in them. And by exhibiting how

World War II and Vietnam are inextricably connected, Vonnegut effectively supports his contention that no war is good, no matter what its purpose or its spoils.

* * *

In *Fates Worse than Death*, Kurt Vonnegut recounts a speech that he gave to a group of Hemingway scholars in Boise, Idaho. He explained that the main reason he and Hemingway were natural adversaries was because the way in which they depicted war was so radically different. While writers like Joseph Heller, James Jones, and Vonnegut himself viewed war as absurdly barbaric, Vonnegut saw Hemingway's treatment of war as relatively naive and unanalytical, being corrupted by the same attraction to violence that glamorizes hunting and bullfighting: "Conservation and humane treatment of animals and contempt for the so-called arts of war rank high on most of our agendas nowadays" (62). We know now that there is nothing romantic about war; it is the "meaningless butchery" of ordinary people. Even the Axis leaders were nothing other than ordinary human beings exactly like the Allies. With Hemingway's "ignominious suicide" and notions of "honorable death" in mind, Vonnegut explains that our present understanding of the nature of war is uncompromisingly "repulsive, stupid, and dehumanizing" and that the "Ladies' Auxiliary for Men Engaged in Blood Sports has been disbanded for quite some time." As a result, authors like he and Heller have learned to prefer life over death, even at the expense of being dishonored.

This comparison of war and sport is one that Vonnegut clearly mocks in a scene involving British officers at a concentration camp for Russian prisoners of war. The officers view war as a game that can be mastered, like "checkers and chess and bridge and cribbage and dominoes and anagrams and charades and Ping-Pong and billiards," and hence embody the ideals that Vonnegut

so raucously criticizes in the fiction of Ernest Hemingway (119). The narrator explains that the officers "were adored by the Germans who thought they were exactly what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun" (120). At this point in the war, supplies were sparse and people all over Europe -- especially the Russians -- were starving to death. Conversely, the Englishmen were "among the wealthiest people in Europe, in terms of food" (119). Due to a clerical error early in the war, the international Red Cross was shipping them five hundred parcels of supplies every month instead of the intended fifty. Given the abundance of this valuable commodity, the Englishmen are able to bribe the Germans for expanded living quarters and supplies, effectively turning the concentration camp into an English summer camp. In their half battle and half tennis dress, they spend their days engaged in sport and weight lifting, their nights "with many blather and brotherly rodomontades" (121). These instances of male camaraderie certainly parallel their romanticized vision of war, and their physical figures reinforce this ostensible masculinity: "Their bellies were like washboards. The muscles of their calves and upper arms were like cannonballs" (121).

However, while the Englishmen appear to have procured honor and manhood through their service, Vonnegut renders them absurd through their unwitting participation in a wholly effeminate game: house. The game of house, or "playing house," is a traditional children's game where participants take on the roles of the nuclear family -- the father, the mother, and the children -- in an imaginary domestic environment that often includes props (Andberg). In this spirit, after the Englishmen receive word that American "guests" will be forced into the camp, they "went to work like darling elves, sweeping, mopping, cooking, baking -- making mattresses of straw and burlap bags, setting tables, putting party favors at each place" (120). These men

have not seen a woman in over four years, and hence seem to have acquiesced the domestic duties that, during the 1940s, would have certainly been a strictly feminine chore. The effeminate imagery continues after the dinner party when the officers dress like women and fairies to put on a performance of *Cinderella*, which throws Billy into a hysterical fit of laughter (122).

Throughout the novel, Billy serves as a constant reminder of the absurdly barbaric nature of war. Although the officers display a plethora of effeminate qualities, they are convinced of their manliness by virtue of their service in the British army. The Germans respect them despite their effeminacy because they are "clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong," especially when contrasted with the starvation, suffering, and death that surrounds them. Billy, however, is a reverse mirror image of these men:

> Billy was preposterous -- six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches. He had no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots. On his feet were cheap, low-cut civilian shoes which he had brought for his father's funeral. Billy had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down… Wind and cold and violent exercise had turned his face crimson… He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo. (41-2)

The farcical spectacle created by Billy's inappropriate clothing underscores a central irony of war: such an absurd creature can survive the war while so many others with more appropriate attire and provisions perish. When Billy arrives at the concentration camp, the British ridicule his ridiculous appearance: "My God -- what have they done to you, lad? This isn't a man. It's a broken kite… Are you really an American?" (123-4). For the Englishmen, how one *appears* in war is just as important as how one actually fights in the war. That is an important rule in the

game. Thus even if they spend the entirety of the war living in plentitude at the concentration camp, they will still have served their country honorably, have created a strong fraternity of veterans, and hence have earned their right to manhood. And, by virtue of their still being alive, they will have mastered the game of war.

Roland Weary too succumbs to the glamorized accounts of warfare; through war he hopes to procure glory, manhood, and brotherhood. And his subsequent failure to master the war game is a symbol for the many veterans of the Second World War and the Vietnam War who were stunned when the realities of combat did not correspond to its glamorized cinematic depiction. Roland Weary is only eighteen when he enters the war, and is "at the end of an unhappy childhood" (44). He had been a very unpopular child in Pittsburgh and was constantly being "ditched" by people who, after spending an appropriate amount of time with him, did not want to be his friend. As a result, Weary has dreams of utilizing the war to make friends and to transition from childhood into manhood. However, right off the bat his experience diverges from World War II conventions. Instead of joining a group of soldiers in training and waiting for combat with them, Weary arrives at the front alone. He is sent to Germany as a replacement in a gun crew, which is swiftly destroyed due to a tactical blunder made by Weary. Paralleling his loneliness in Pittsburgh, Weary arrives at the war alone and, after the death of his gun crew, finds himself alone again behind enemy lines. As a result, he latches onto yet another group, consisting of the pathetic Billy Pilgrim and two scout snipers, all of whom all want nothing to do with him.

Echoing the hackneyed image of "two leather chairs near a fire in a paneled room where two old soldiers could drink and talk," Roland Weary also dreams about his glorious homecoming after the war. As he, Billy, and the scout snipers wander in the German woods, he

"was able to pretend that he was safe at home, having survived the war, and that he was telling his parents and his sister a true war story -- whereas the true war story was still going on" (53). His dreams of glory are inextricably intertwined with dreams of fraternity, so Roland Weary drafts the scout snipers into his postwar fantasy:

> Weary's vision of the true war story went like this: There was a big German attack, and Weary and his antitank buddies fought like hell until everybody was killed but Weary. So it goes. And then Weary tied in with two scouts, and they became close friends immediately, and they decided to fight their way back to their own lines. They were going to travel fast. They were damned if they'd surrender. They shook hands all around. They called themselves "The Three Musketeers. (53).

Here it becomes obvious that Weary has fallen victim to glamorized fictional accounts of combat. Like the characters in Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, Weary believes that his service will admit him to an inseparable fraternity of soldiers. However, this dream is shattered when he and Billy are ditched by the scout snipers. It becomes suddenly apparent to Weary that he is just as unpopular at the front as he was in Pittsburgh.

Further, although Weary enters the war at the end of his childhood, the war does not prove to be a catalyst for his transcendence into manhood. His physical features are rendered absurdly childish -- Vonnegut compares him to Tweedledee and Tweedledum, two fictional characters form an English nursing rhyme. He has a patent "baby face," which is concealed by "five layers of humid scarf from home," implying that his mother has dressed him for battle in the same way she used to bundle him up as a child before letting him play outside in the cold

Pittsburgh winters (60). Further, although he brings two condoms to the war ("For the Prevention of Disease Only!"), they remain unused until his death. Roland Weary, Billy Pilgrim, and even Kurt Vonnegut were "foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood" (18). Despite his expectations of glory, brotherhood, and manhood, Roland Weary's wartime experience is no different from that of the children who were sold and maltreated back in the Children's Crusade of 1213 on the pretext of the "great services they rendered to Christianity" (64).

Again in this scene, Billy Pilgrim represents a symbolic contrast to the glamorized ideals of warfare. In fact, his assigned position in the war renders it impossible for him to achieve glory, brotherhood, or manhood:

> Billy was a chaplain's assistant during the war. A chaplain's assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends. In fact, he had no friends. He was a valet to a preacher, expected no promotions or medals, bore no arms, and had a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid. (38)

His appointment as a chaplain's assistant makes him a running joke amongst the other soldiers in his training group, a role that he assumes throughout the entirety of the war. When he is captured by the Germans, they "found him to be one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War Two. They laughed and they laughed" (115). He is subsequently taken to a concentration camp as an American prisoner of war, where the Englishmen mock his coat and his shoes. And when the citizens of Dresden watch Billy enter the city in January 1945, they smiled, and then they laughed." Further, his lack of any sort of weapon renders him completely helpless to hurt others or even defend himself at war. As a result, there will conceivably be no acts of

heroism, courage, or leadership from Billy, and he will hence not be able to be promoted or commemorated for his service.

Billy Pilgrim, like Roland Weary, also embodies the theme of soldiers as "babies." For example, the way in which he observes the war from behind enemy lines has a hint childish flair: he describes people as nestling like spoons, torn brass buttons as flying like popcorn, and blood as turning the snow red like raspberry sherbet. Even his name is representative of this innocence, as there "weren't any other grown Billys around" (59). Here Billy clearly dispels the ideal of transcending childhood in war. He goes to war a helpless virgin, and has no desire to change that. Hence Billy Pilgrim is a symbol of how "repulsive, stupid, and dehumanizing" the glamorized understanding of warfare is. Billy does not have dreams of glory, manhood, or brotherhood while at war. He does not even have dreams of being dispelled honorably. He is willing to die behind enemy lines as long as it means he can leave the war.

* * *

Vonnegut begins his process of undermining the nostalgic memory of World War II as the "good war" by specifically linking it to the Vietnam War, a conflict that is considered by many Americans to have been a mistake. At first glance, the dispersed references to Vietnam in *Slaughterhouse-Five* appear to serve as vague reminders of yet another bloody conflict. Arnold Edelstein writes that references to Vietnam and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy "invite the application of political and sociological criteria rather than literary ones" to the analysis of the novel. Jerome Klinkowitz agrees, writing:

> Vonnegut draws upon the historical events of his time: not just World War II and Dresden, but such milestones as the Kennedy and King assassinations and such

> particulars as Ronald Reagan's 1968 campaign in the Republican primaries and the unique role the Green Berets played as special forces in Vietnam. Yet these events are never the central focus, nor does Vonnegut seek to colorize them with methods of traditional fiction. Instead, he uses them as complements to his own act of putting words on the page, so that the reader is reminded that the Kurt Vonnegut writing on Cape Cod on a June evening in 1968 is just as real as the Robert Kennedy who addressed a campaign rally in Los Angeles and then was shot and killed, a comment confirmed in historical time by the entire world's news media. (63)

For Edelstein and Klinkowitz, these references serve as reminders that the novel, despite its disjointed narrative and appeals to science fiction, is about real war and real atrocity. While this is certainly the case, these references to the 1960s also highlight important parallels between the Second World War and Vietnam. For example, just before Billy Pilgrim is sent to Dresden as an American prisoner of war, he examines the eyes of a young boy whose father had been killed in the battle for Hill 875 near Dakto, Vietnam. This is an overt reference to the Battle of Dak To, which was the bloodiest battle of the war to date when it was waged in 1967. And while on paper the battle was considered a victory for the United States military and their AVRN and CIDG allies, A.T. Lawrence notes in his memoir that he is "certain that the American soldiers who fought in the battles of the Ia Drang and Dak To did not think of these clashes as victories, even though they had inflicted considerable casualties upon the enemy" (101). Further, it was around this time that Defense Secretary Robert McNamara began to have doubts about the ability of the United States to win the war in Vietnam, and was becoming troubled by the continual escalation

of the conflict. Through the Battle of Dak To, "nearly eight hundred B-52 flights dropped twenty-two thousand tons of bombs as fighter-bombers and warships in the South China Sea also pummeled the area, reducing its gentle slopes to a bleak landscape of craters and charred tree stumps" (Karnow 551). This reference to the cratered jungle terrain can clearly be connected to Dresden after the firebombing, which Billy Pilgrim describes as looking "like the surface of the moon" (75).

The scene in which Billy Pilgrim is driving to a luncheon at the Lions Club is perhaps one of Vonnegut's greatest statements about the similarities between the Vietnam War and World War II, as well as one of his greatest statements about war in general. As Billy drives his Cadillac through through changing neighborhoods to get to the Lions Club, his experience is connected to the 1960s several times. The scene is set as Billy finds himself simultaneously being captured by the Germans in World War II and riding in his Cadillac in 1967: "he was simultaneously on foot in Germany in 1944 and riding his Cadillac in 1967" (74). Not only are the wars connected through Billy being unstuck in time, however; they are also connected through the narrative. Throughout this scene, the narrative descriptions of the Vietnam War era are interrupted by allusions to World War II, hence creating a new narrative where the events of Vietnam and the Second World War flow directly into one another. As Billy continues driving to the luncheon: "He was stopped by a signal in the middle of Illium's black ghetto. The people who lived there hated it so much that they burned down a lot of it a month before." While serving as a clear allusion to the race riots of the 1960s, this scene also "reminded Billy of some towns he had seen in the war" because the curbs and sidewalks were crushed by National Guard tanks. He proceeds and soon drives through a scene of even greater desolation, reminding him again of Dresden

"after it was firebombed -- like the surface of the moon" (75). The scene climaxes when Billy finally arrives at the luncheon, where he listens to the keynote address:

> The speaker at the Lions Club meeting was a major in the Marines. He said that Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries. The major had been there on two separate tours of duty. He told of the many terrible and many wonderful things he had seen. He was in favor of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason.

Christina Jarvis correctly observes here that the speaker is a clear reference to Curtis LeMay, a United States Air Force general during World War II and Vietnam (99). Vonnegut mentions LeMay in *Fates Worse Than Death*, indicating that it was LeMay who originally "wanted to bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age" (109). LeMay is well known for his massive incendiary attacks against Japanese cities during the Second World War, including the devastating firebombing of Tokyo. On March 9, 1945, reporter W.H. Lawrence wrote that the bombing of Tokyo "marked the first all-out effort to burn down a great city and destroy its people" (Ross 20) In a period of less than one month, American B-29 bombers flew 215 missions and dropped about 159,000 tons of bombs and mines on sixty-four Japanese cities. In the Tokyo raid alone, 334 B-29s destroyed sixteen square miles of the city, killing 83,000 people and injuring 41,000 more. The destruction was so effective that LeMay quickly ran out of cities to incinerate; by June 1945 nearly all major cities in Japan had been reduced to rubble. Moreover,

LeMay played a part in selecting the cities on which to drop the atomic bomb, and later advocated the use of nuclear weapons as a means of escalating the war in Vietnam.

Thus, perhaps more than any other wartime figure, General Curtis LeMay symbolized the dramatic reversal in United States military policy regarding the bombing of civilians. Although President Roosevelt condemned this policy at the beginning of the Second World War, by 1944 the United States had embraced the British policy of allowing the "indiscriminate" bombing of nonmilitary cities (Ross 20). The result was that civilian casualties comprised about forty-four percent of war deaths in the Second World War (up from five percent in World War I) and about ninety-one percent of casualties in the Vietnam War (Jarvis 100). Thus Curtis LeMay is the perfect symbol for Vonnegut's venture to undermine the myth of American humanitarianism during the Second World War. Further, by connecting LeMay's suggestion to "bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age" with his actual bombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities, the atrocities of the Second World War become connected with those of Vietnam, thus somewhat demythicizing the former.

* * *

The inclusion of Curtis LeMay in *Slaughterhouse-Five* also serves as a reminder that the Second World War hurtled us into the atomic age. Although nuclear science existed before the bombing of Hiroshima, the use of nuclear weaponry in warfare ushered profound changes in socio-political thinking and forever altered the way in which we understand war. Immediately following the Second World War, the tension between the Eastern and Western Bloc created a worldwide fear of global destruction, referred to as the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. It ultimately resulted in large increases in the number of nuclear weapons on both

sides, as the United States and the Soviet Union each sought to ensure that they possessed enough firepower to destroy the other in the case of a perceived threat. The possibility of mutually assured destruction lived to haunt the United States and the rest of the world throughout the Cold War era, and its possibility still often lurk on the shoulders of political leaders worldwide. The atomic bomb, combined with the newly adopted military doctrine that makes civilians acceptable targets in war, led to a perpetual state of fear.

Vonnegut engages the issues of the atomic age in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by looking at the future of war fought with nuclear weapons. After surviving a terrible airplane crash, Billy awakens in a hospital next to a Harvard historian named Betram Copeland Rumfoord, who is recovering from a skiing accident. Rumfoord is the official Air Force historian, and he is working on a condensed history of the United States Army Air Corps during the Second World War. He asks his wife to read him a copy of President Harry S. Truman's announcement to the world that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima:

> *With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production, and even more powerful forms are in development… We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city*, said Harry Truman. *We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war.*

President Truman obviously believed that the advent of the atomic bomb would be the end of war; that the synonymousness of war and obliteration would make countries stop waging war. With one bomb the United States could completely destroy a county's capacity to wage war, rendering them utterly defenseless. The actualization of this destruction -- when the United States detonated atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- was supposed to bring about peace by halting the Japanese aggression, and the very possibility of nuclear annihilation was supposed to deter the aggression of other militant states. However, Vonnegut believes that it accomplished the opposite. In his depiction of 1976, he describes that "the United States of America has been Balkanized, has been divided into twenty petty nations so it will never again be a threat to world peace. Chicago has been hydrogen-bombed by angry Chinamen. So it goes. It is all brand new" (142). This cynical representation of the future visualizes the impact of the very existence of these bombs by asserting that the atomic bomb has served as a greater threat to world peace than militant regimes. Thus although the bomb certainly ended the war in the Pacific, it created a continuing state of political and military tension that will not end until either all countries give up their weapons, or until there is nobody left alive to use them.

Hence for Kurt Vonnegut, the threat of mutually assured destruction represents a turning point in how he thinks about war in general. This turning point is allegorically presented through the conception of Robert Pilgrim, Billy's son. After consummating their marriage on their honeymoon, Valencia tells Billy: "I am *proud* you were a soldier" and asks him to tell her stories from the war. The narrator, explaining Valencia's fascination with war, says, "It was a simple-minded thing for a female Earthling to do, to associate sex and glamour with war" (121). Billy begrudgingly tells Valencia about the execution of Edgar Derby, and all the while in "a tiny

cavity of her great body she was assembling the materials for a Green Beret" (155). Here Vonnegut seems to be implying that either Billy's war stories or Valencia's fascination with war stories is at least partially responsible for Robert becoming a Green Beret in the Vietnam War. But besides alluding to the reality that many Vietnam soldiers had fathers who served in World War II, this scene also represents an important shift in the way Vonnegut views the future of warfare. Christina Jarvis points out that in 1967 -- around the same time Robert went to Vietnam -- Valencia is described as not having "ovaries or a uterus anymore." By breaking the cycle of begetting more wars, Vonnegut asserts that the advent of the Atomic Age has introduced a new kind of war. Similar to the Cold War, it has created a constant state of political hostility between countries, characterized by threats, violent propaganda, subversive activities, and other measures just short of open warfare, but on the brink of worldwide annihilation. As a result, wars do not beget other wars anymore. The advent of the atomic bomb and Vietnam begat the last war: the war that is the continued experience of the twentieth-century man. As Alfred Kazin writes:

> The wars now go on forever, and no writer can be sure which war he is writing about even if he has been to one. Until Vietnam, Americans did not take fully take in Orwell's prophecy in *1984* that theirs, too, was a permanent war economy, totally bureaucratized for war, prepared to make war endlessly. In retrospect even the fiction of the "separate peace" about the first World War, based on aristocratic disdain for politicians and humanist protest against the slaughter of a whole generation, seems more political, more confident of choices, than those American stories and reports of Vietnam which made a veteran correspondent there finally

> say that "the war -- or wars -- has become as unreal and macabre as a bid trip in the East Village." (91)

In the nearly seventy years since the end of the Second World War, the world has never been free of conflict somewhere on the globe. The United States alone has found itself in two bloody Asian wars and multiple conflicts in the Middle East. As a result, the novel set forth by Vonnegut is not only about World War II or even Vietnam. It is a novel about a perpetual state of war, an idea that is referenced by several characters throughout the novel. In the slaughterhouse during the firebombing of Dresden, Howard W. Campbell tells his audience that they are "going to have to fight the Communists sooner or later… Why not get it over with now?" Even in 1967, Billy Pilgrim is said to have been "expecting World War Three at any time" (57). Having experienced the firebombing of Dresden, these characters do not believe that war will ever end. They are expecting to jump straight from World War II into Vietnam, and straight from Vietnam into World War Three. With so many new, unimaginably horrific wars on the horizon, specific wars have just become War in general; war as the defining characteristic of the twentieth century.

Chapter Three: Literary Catharsis Through Fiction

Since the conclusion of the Second World War, the study of postwar effects on soldiers has greatly expanded. The effects of traumatic experiences had been documented for centuries, but is was not until the 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder became an established diagnosis. Sparked by extensive research with Vietnam veterans, the *Manual* provided psychiatrists with both a name and criteria for assessing the effects of traumatic experiences and finally laid to rest a variety of earlier attempts at classifying traumatic effects on soldiers, including "combat neurosis" and "shell shock" (Vees-Gulani 176). The *Manual* says that in general, post-traumatic stress disorder stems from "an inadequate way of coping with extreme distress" (qtd. in Vees Gulani 177) which is defined as something that generally falls outside the range of usual human experience, and which, as a result, evokes significant symptoms of distress. Examples of these traumatic stressors include plane crashes and automobile accidents, natural disasters like hurricanes, and violent personal experiences such as rape or combat. Constance Shehan explains that there are four aspects of combat experience that makes the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder particularly common in soldiers (56). First, war is perceived as highly dangerous by the combatant, who fears for his own life as well as those of his comrades. Second, soldiers in combat experience a profound sense of loss, not just of lives, but also of youth and innocence. Third, soldiers have an overwhelming sense of helplessness when at war; they have no control over their own fate at any moment. And fourth, the soldiers constantly observe destruction and disruptions -- destroyed buildings, burned landscapes, and dead bodies. The exposure to such

trauma often results in symptoms such as persistently re-experiencing traumatic events in the form of distressing images, thoughts, perceptions, and dreams.

Curiously, in the wake of any war, literary communities tend to saturate with novels, poems, articles, memoirs, and other attempts at expressing the experience of combat. What is it about the literary experience that prompts veterans to want to share their trauma, especially with the masses? Can trauma be fully written out? And can writing provide closure to trauma since the written page opens the issue every time it is read? Writing about war undeniably provides catharsis to the authors, and is often used as a substituted for actually verbalizing trauma. Many veterans are reluctant to speak about their war experiences, even with other veterans. In a sociological study conducted by S. Kirson Weinberg in a veteran's hospital during the Second World War, Weinberg writes that "one common and implicit agreement among [veterans], which is like a stringent taboo, is the restraint upon questioning another patient about his episode of breakdown. The patients may discuss various other features of their military life, but this particular event is avoided" (472). Literature provides an easier outlet for veterans to communicate traumatic experiences because it removes the listener from view; instead of speaking face-to-face, the writer is able to express his invisible scars to others without the pain of publicly grieving. As a result, many veterans turn to writing literature as a means of catharsis.

Kurt Vonnegut published *Slaughterhouse-Five* a quarter-century after experiencing the trauma of World War II, and hence he had been able to reflect on Dresden, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the fifty million dead, and the ultimate threat of universal nuclear annihilation. Of this war, as opposed to the glamorized silver-screen epics of John Wayne and Frank Sinatra, one can only say what Walt Whitman said of the Civil War: "the real war will never get into the

books" (qtd. in Kazin 81). No wartime experience as reported by literature could do justice to some of the worst atrocities in human history. Vietnam and subsequent wars have been so sickeningly covered by television cameramen at the front that any rational language about atrocity would diminish its magnitude.

The problem that Vonnegut faces in all his novels is essentially the same as the one expressed by Walt Whitman -- the increasing gap between the horrors of life and our imaginative ability to comprehend and cope with their actuality. Realism about war could no longer express war like it had in the past. Alfred Kazin remarks:

> This became the only serious and honest view of World War II as, by the Fifties, the liberal intellectual's image of it was so demolished by so many uncovered horrors, and so many new wars on the horizon, such a continued general ominousness, that "*the* war" soon became War anywhere, anytime -- War that has never ended, War as the continued experience of the twentieth century man. (82)

War as an event that literary realism could do justice to soon yielded to a general ominousness and the real possibility of the total destruction of humankind, thus making the world seem totally absurd. This very universal cynicism is the essence of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for although it is ostensibly about World War II, it is really about the next war, which will most likely bring about the mutually assured destruction of humankind. Thus whether the scene is the crystallization of the oceans or the firebombing of Dresden, the problem that predominates in the Vonnegut canon remains essentially the same: how to come to terms with the terrors or an era so unreal, so unbelievable, that the very term "fiction" seems no longer to have any currency.

* * *

The subtitle of *Slaughterhouse-Five* -- "The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance With Death" -- represents Vonnegut's two most serious statements about war and death. While the proper title of course refers to the pig slaughterhouse which housed Vonnegut during the incineration of Dresden, the second title shows how language falsifies war: "The Children's Crusade" transforms the brutality of the Children's Crusade of 1213 into sentimental heroism by romanticizing the savageness of the crusaders as magnanimity, as rendering heroic services to Christianity. The third title, "A Duty-Dance with Death," borrows from Céline to state that art must confront death frankly. War and death are certainly the most serious objects of Vonnegut's undertaking, for Vonnegut, like Billy Pilgrim, is perpetually a "bug trapped in amber" between his war experience and his impending death (97).

While the passage involving Céline is analogous to Vonnegut's dismal imprisonment in amber, it also introduces Vonnegut's fascination with time. Ostrovsky's passage reminds Vonnegut of a scene from *Death on the Installment Plan* where Céline wanted to stop the bustling of a street crowd, and thus "screams on paper, *Make them stop . . . don't let them freeze . . . once and for all! . . . So that they won't disappear anymore!*" (27). Céline wants everyone to be frozen like a "bug trapped in amber" so that they won't die anymore. This is a familiar feeling for Vonnegut, who has nothing to look back upon but the firebombing of Dresden, and nothing to look forward to but the finality of death. Vonnegut, like Céline, wishes he could alter time and make both disappear. In fact, his own time theory, which essentially says that all moments in time exist simultaneously, would seem to reconcile nicely with Céline's desire to stop death; in Vonnegut's theory, people never truly die, but bounce around to various moments of time ad infinitum.

Thus the basic question of every reader of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is becomes simply: how seriously should the reader take the Tralfamadorian theory of time? On first reading, the theory of the simultaneity of all time and its implication that man is incapable of changing his condition seems to constitute an avoidance of moral responsibility, a passive acceptance of the atrocities that do unspeakable harm to human beings, perhaps lending to Vonnegut's reputation as a "conscienceless escapist" (Tilton 25). It would also seemingly undermine the assertion of the previous chapter: that Vonnegut utilizes his novel to weaken the mythical status of World War II in the American conscience. If Vonnegut were seriously asserting the cyclical nature of time, his novels would simply be a series of metaphysical horror stories whereby vain attempts to free mankind from the inevitability of death lead to the evasive Tralfamadorian principle of "ignor[ing] the awful times, and concentrat[ing] on the good ones" (150). However, although there are many critics who take this theory very seriously,[5] there is overwhelming evidence throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* that every element of Billy's science fiction fantasy can be explained in realistic, psychological terms. To investigate the possibility of Tralfamadorian time theory is the object of the present undertaking, for I intend to prove that Billy's fantasy provides him with the hard-won escape from the horrors of death and the trauma of his experiences at war. Furthermore, I assert that Vonnegut subscribes to this defensive behavior by appealing to the imagination to reinvent himself, thus creating a new optimistic perspective on history.

* * *

Kurt Vonnegut has attempted to explain his theory of time on many occasions. In a 1970 *New York Times* interview, for instance, he states that "nothing in this world is ever final -- no one ever ends -- we keep on bouncing back and forth in time, we go on and on ad infinitum."

Although the theory of eternal recurrence does not originate with Vonnegut, erratic random movement in time is his own contribution to cyclical cosmology (Rubens 64). He has admitted, on occasion, that he owes a debt for the crux of his ideas to several philosophers of popular time theory. Shortly after writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut wrote an article for the *New York Times* in which he quoted from another book arranged along the lines of a trip into space: Guy Murchie's popularization of the great body of science, *The Music of the Spheres*. In this article, Vonnegut writes "I had lifted a comment Murchie made about time for a book of my own," presumably *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The quotation from Murchie that Vonnegut recites occurs at the end of "Of Space, Of Time," a chapter on relativity (the part omitted by Vonnegut has been placed in brackets):

> I sometimes wonder whether humanity has missed the real point in raising the issue of mortality and immortality [-- whether perhaps the seemingly limited time span of an earthly life is actually unlimited and eternal --] in other words, whether mortality itself may be a finite illusion, being actually immortality and, even though constructed of just a few "years," that those few years are all the time there really is, so that, in fact, they can never cease. (589)

Although Vonnegut does not quote further, Murchie goes on to ask, "Indeed, if time is the relation between things and themselves, how can time end while things exist? Or how can time have ever begun, since either a beginning or an end would logically and almost inevitably frame time in more of itself?" Both Vonnegut's concept of time and the Murchie passage from which it is probably lifted imply a kind of cyclical return, where everything that has already happened in the universe, and everything that is happening in the present, and everything that will happen in

the future, has already happened and will happen again infinitely many times. Each of these cycles is exactly identical with every other; there will be no variations. Everything that we are now doing, we have already done in the past and we will do again exactly as we are doing now, infinitely many times. Vonnegut experiments most extensively with this notion of time in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In the former, he creates a symbol, the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, to express his view of time; in the latter, he reforms this symbol and produces a new optimistic perspective on history.

The Sirens of Titan is Vonnegut's first serious look at alternate time structures, in which he deliberately juxtaposes his newly formulated theories of determinism against that of conventional punctual time. His protagonist, Malachi Constant, articulates the latter position very early in the novel: "Constant smiled at that -- the warning to be punctual. To be punctual meant to exist as a point, meant that as well as to arrive somewhere on time. Constant existed as a point -- could not imagine what it would be like to exist in any other way" (7). Malachi does not ever learn any other way of viewing time, nor does his son, Chrono, who functions as a symbol of punctual time: Chronus, or Chrono, is the Greek god of time -- punctual time, or a series of "countable" points perceived in an "unremitting movement of succession" (Somer 188-9). Chrono, then, represents the view of mankind trapped in linear deterministic universe. He is representative of how Tralfamadore has tinkered with man's perception of time, which was imposed upon men to accomplish certain ends. Thus it is little wonder that Chrono, the representative of punctual time, is responsible for completing mankind's historical purpose -- the delivery of a spare part to a grounded Tralfamadorian space ship on Titan. Even after he hands over the spare part, Chrono still cannot break out of punctual time; he wanders about Titan

making shrines that depict his vision of the universe, measuring in a punctual way the movements of the universe about him.

Vonnegut graphically illustrates the dichotomy between punctual time and his own theoretical determinism through the character of Winston Niles Rumfoord, who can view all of time, all of history simultaneously:

> "Look," said Rumfoord, "life for a punctual person is like a roller coaster...All kinds of things are going to happen to you! Sure," he said, "I can see the whole roller coaster you're on. And sure -- I could give you a piece of paper that would tell you about every dip and turn, warn you about every bogeyman that was going to pop out at you in the tunnels. But that wouldn't help you any… because you'd *still* have to take the roller-coaster ride… I didn't design the roller coaster, don't own it, and I don't say who rides and who doesn't. I just know what it's shaped like." (54)

Rumfoord has this unique vision of time because he is trapped in the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, which essentially makes him everywhere at once and yet nowhere at all. The very nature of the chrono-synclastic infundibula is to curve back upon itself in a circular way, as defined in Dr. Cyril Hall's children's encyclopedia: "Chrono (kroh-no) means time. Synclastic (sin-classtick) means curved toward the same side in all directions, like the skin of an orange. Infundibulum (in-fun-dib-u-lum) is what the ancient Romans like Julius Caesar and Nero called a funnel" (9). These kinds of time warps are hidden or concealed within linear time structures as small pockets, converting linear time into something like a minefield, with fractures and ruptures that perfectly normal people can fall through on any ordinary day. In the chrono-synclastic

infundibulum, Rumfoord can see that "everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been" (26). Thus for Rumfoord, time continues to repeat itself to infinity. Even as he faces possible oblivion, Rumfoord is comforted by this thought. He urges Malachi, Beatrice, and Chrono not to worry about his condition:

> I am not dying… In the grand, in the timeless, in the chrono-synclastic infundibulated way of looking at things, I shall always be here. I shall always be wherever I've been. I'm honeymooning with you still, Beatrice… I'm talking to you still in a little room under the stairway in Newport, Mr. Constant. Yes -- and playing peek-a-boo in the caves of Mercury with you and Boaz. And Chrono… I'm watching you still as you play German batball so well on the iron playground of Mars… Whatever we've said, friends, we're saying still -- such as it was, such as it is, such as it will be. (301)

No event, then, is unique and occurs only once. The same individuals have appeared, appear, and will reappear with each and every return of the cycle. But even with this comforting thought, Rumfoord is disturbed as he prepares to be blasted into another universe. He demands of Salo, the stranded Tralfamadorian messenger, an answer to Vonnegut's favorite question: "I should like to know just what the main point of this Solar System episode has been" (292-3).

Constant has already tried to answer this question. While undergoing a series of brain-washings on Mars, he writes a journal to enable him to fill his memory back up as quickly as possible; and it is here he records that "somebody made everything for some reason" (127). The somebodies who made everything are the Tralfamadorians, who have coerced man into accepting punctual time to produce a part for their messenger, Salo, who is stranded on Titan, a moon of

Saturn. Their power over man is so pervasive that many of the great and enigmatic wonders of the world become merely messages from Tralfamadore to Salo. As he watches on the viewer of his disabled spacecraft, landmark structures -- Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, the Golden House of the Roman Emperor Nero, the Kremlin, and the Palace of the League of Nations -- spread throughout world history are merely messages of reply to his call for help; they are status updates on the delivery of the spare part. The person directly responsible for delivering the part is Chrono, who carries in his pocket "the mysterious something that every Earthling was trying so desperately, so earnestly, so gropingly, so exhaustively to produce and deliver" (303). In such a world, events do not just as they happen; they happen in Bokononist terms, "as [they] are meant to happen" (121) Man, in this rather pessimistic view, is a "victim of a series of accidents" designed by superhuman forces for their own ends (233).

Tralfamadore achieves its ends because it has injected the concept of punctual time into man. Constant, Chrono, and Beatrice live in a world where they exist as a point in history. But, in the dilemma of Winston Niles Rumfoord, Vonnegut moves into a new concept of time, and hence a new method for viewing reality. Rumfoord, imprisoned in the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, sees all time -- past, present, and future. Unfortunately, he gives little evidence of being able to understand or control his ability; the only knowledge Rumfoord has gathered from his experience -- the deterministic nature of history -- is a rather pessimistic legacy for mankind. Subject to this harsh determinism, he finds that mankind, controlled by the will of an extraterrestrial race, serves no purpose other than to produce and deliver a part to Salo. Despite his efforts to disillusion himself of this fact, Rumfoord cannot help but find cynicism in the idea that the Tralfamadorians "reached into the Solar System, picked me up, and used me like a

handy-dandy potato peeler" (290). He believes that he is merely a puppet to the Tralfamadorians, who had injected into mankind the idea of punctuality to enslave him within the confines of linear time. As such, he develops an inherent cynicism toward mankind's ultimate purpose in the grand scheme of the universe, which he finds to be utterly meaningless. It also inherently leads to an avoidance of moral responsibility: Rumfoord knowingly massacres his Martian army for the higher purpose of uniting the people of the planet Earth, a dark variation on the question of whether the ends justify the means, and paralleling the destruction of Dresden, an event of seemingly meaningless destruction that the Allies believed was justified as a necessary step to end the Second World War. As a result, an overarching pessimism becomes intertwined with the radical determinism posited in *The Sirens of Titan*.

However, despite the seemingly gruesome effects of Vonnegut's temporal theory, his deterministic view of history and time can also be the basis of a wonderfully optimistic world view, one that Vonnegut creates in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut sets up Billy Pilgrim's story by introducing his modern variation on eternal recurrence, reforming his symbol of the chrono-synclastic infundibulum and adding his own contribution to time theory by proposing the concept of becoming "unstuck in time," which John Somer illustrates:

> [Vonnegut's] concept of time can be represented by a circle of dots. Normally souls caught in the circle move from dot to dot in a chronological order, but occasionally a character can come "unstuck in time" and ricochet throughout time, experiencing moments of his life in a random, schizophrenic order. As a result, he can even acquire a "memory of the future" as well as one of the past, a memory whose apex continually summons from this reservoir of events. (254)

What Vonnegut creates, in essence, is a universe where not only is man free to move at random through time, but also able to experience a progressive interiorization into memory. This departs from modern time theory by breaking the circular motion into dots, or by creating interaction between two cycles of repetition.

Billy Pilgrim's journey through time is similar to that of Winston Niles Rumfoord; and as a result, he acquires a new perspective toward the significance and tragedies of people who insist on living in an irreversible, linear history. Like Rumfoord, Billy has acquired a new overview of life, a memory both of the past and the future, and sees that everything and everyone from the beginning of the universe to the end exists in an eternal present. Billy learns this when he is kidnapped by a flying saucer and taken to Tralfamadore, where he is displayed naked in a zoo with former blue movie star Montana Wildhack. He ultimately posits this theory to the world during his impulsive trip to New York City, where he gets on a radio station and talks about Tralfamadorian time theory. As such, he is able to look past punctuality and death to view time as the Tralfamadorians do:

> The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that

> one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (33-4)

Here, *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to embody the same pessimistic legacy as that posited in *The Sirens of Titan*. Mankind is still a victim of punctual time, unconsciously being controlled by the harsh determinism that punctuality blinds them to. The Tralfamadorians believe that "every creature and plan in the Universe is a machine," unable to control its causes or its effects (196). As such, the Tralfamadorians set forth the idea that Billy should "concentrate on the happy moments of his life, and to ignore the unhappy ones -- to stare only at pretty things as eternity failed to go by" (249). This relieves humankind of the moral responsibilities dictated by ethics and religion, and thereby creates the same pessimistic view of history and time that Vonnegut posits in *The Sirens of Titan*. Therefore, taking Vonnegut's theory as a fictionalized but serious view of time will ultimately lead to the belief that mankind serves no purpose, is meaninglessness in its existence, and is not morally accountable for its actions, thus making Vonnegut a "consciousness escapist" who merely passively accepts human harm and death as being outside the realm of his control. In this regard, it would appear that Vonnegut's attempt to change the perception of World War II was in vain.

The kind of reading that takes Vonnegut's erratic time theory at face value is encouraged, at least partly, by the numerous similarities between Vonnegut's own experience during and after World War II and Billy Pilgrim's experience, as well as by the presence of Vonnegut's own voice in the novel. However, Vonnegut surely foresaw that his readers would attempt to identify him with Billy Pilgrim, and consequently he begins the second chapter of *Slaughterhou-Five* by asserting a narrative distance between himself and Billy Pilgrim by repeating the phrase "he

says," thus discounting the reader's natural inclination to believe that Billy's views are intertwined with those of Vonnegut: Billy has "seen his birth and death many times, *he says*, and pays random visits to all the events in between… He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says…" (29). Arnold Edelstein notes that Vonnegut maintains this narrative distance throughout the novel by means of a rather erratic narrative structure contains four different levels of narration: Vonnegut's present tense (the autobiographical first and last chapter), Billy's present tense (his trip to New York City), a novelistic past tense (the war experiences, Billy's eighteenth wedding anniversary and the plane crash), and Billy's travels in time and space, which contain both historical events and the Tralfamadorian episodes (generally woven throughout the war experiences). Only the narratives containing Tralfamadore raise any problems; however, most of these issues vanish when a chronological time-sequence is reconstructed from the staccato of information that Vonnegut gives us.[6] It is only then that the reader can discover that the references to time and Tralfamadore are actually just improvisations on Billy's past experiences.

The chronological reconstruction of the novel begins with the two most important events that throw the normal, linear pattern of Billy's life into disarray: his departure for basic training and the death of his father. After that, Billy is sent to Europe for the war, becomes separated from his unit, wanders helplessly behind enemy lines with the abusive Roland Weary, surrenders to a group of Germans and is sent to a concentration camp, and ultimately survives the Allied firebombing of Dresden. Despite this trauma, Billy shows displays little to no symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. And then, some three years after returning from the war, Billy suddenly breaks down and is committed to a veterans' hospital. It is here that Billy meets another patient, Eliot Rosewater, who introduces him to the author Kilgore Trout and gives him the novel *The*

Big Board, a science fiction novel "about an Earthling man and woman who are kidnapped by extra-terrestrials" and "put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212" (257). Clearly echoing Billy's supposed experience as a prisoner in a Tralfamadorian zoo, it seems here that the seeds for Billy's time and space travel fantasy were planted by the fictions of novelist Kilgore Trout.

Billy is later released from the hospital and lives an ordinary suburban life for many years: he marries, he buys a Cadillac, he joins the Lions Club, and he raises two children -- one of which will ultimately serve in Vietnam as a Green Beret. Through this time, the war seemingly leaves his consciousness -- that is, until the night of his eighteenth wedding anniversary, when the war makes an unexpected return. In the middle of a party being thrown for Billy and Valencia, he suddenly associates a singing barbershop quartet with the four German guards who survived also the conflagration of Dresden in the pig slaughterhouse below the city. Billy has a "powerful psychosomatic response" to the memory, and many guests believe he is having a heart attack (220). Kilgore Trout is actually in attendance at this party, and speculates that Billy has "suddenly saw the past or the future" through a time window (22). Although this is metaphorically the case, Billy takes Trout's theory seriously, hence adding a time-travel element to his phantasmagorical delusions.

After the anniversary party, Billy begins to experience more symptoms of psychological trauma. He begins to fall asleep constantly in his office while observing patients. For no apparent reason, he often finds himself weeping. When the thinly disguised Curtis LeMay gives a lecture at the Lions Club, Billy is left unaffected even though his son is serving in Vietnam. These

feelings of emptiness climax on the night after his daughter's weeding -- the night on which *chooses* to be abducted by the Tralfamadorians.

Some earlier scenes help to supplement an explanation for this feeling of emptiness, each of which are related to elderliness and the Second World War. In 1965, his mother, recuperating from pneumonia in a nursing home, asks him, "How did I get so *old*?" (47). Billy thinks that his mother is going to die from pneumonia. Here, death is associated with the Second World War as Billy flips through William Bradford Huie's nonfiction book *The Execution of Private Slovik*. Another important scene occurs when, at age sixteen, a man tells Billy: "I knew it was going to be bad getting old… I didn't know it was going to be this bad" (61). Billy recalls this story while discussing the firebombing of Dresden with Betram Copeland Rumfoord in the hospital. As an old man, Billy succumbs to similar feelings. One day in his office he notices the year on the license plate of his Cadillac and wonders: "Where have all the years gone?" (103). By 1967, Billy finds himself trapped in amber between the horrors of his past (Dresden) and his impending old age and death.

Soon after Billy's release from the hospital after surviving a horrific airplane crash, he sneaks off to New York City to announce to the world the existence of Tralfamadore and the true nature of time on a late-night radio program. However, before he arrives at the radio station, he enters a pornographic bookstore and becomes excited by the large selection of Kilgore Trout novels, one of which is *The Big Board*. While purchasing a novel about a man who travels back in time to watch the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and spots a pornographic magazine behind the cash register with the headline: "What really became of Montana Wildhack?" (261). Thus in this store, all the seeds for Billy's fantasy are represented. The novel *The Big Board* clearly implants

within him the idea of being imprisoned at an extraterrestrial zoo, and the pornographic headline adds Montana Wildhack to the mix. Further, the novel about the space traveler certainly contributes to his condition of being "unstuck in time."

The clearest indication that Vonnegut means for the reader to see Billy's condition of being unstuck in time as fantasy rather than reality is his repetition of phrases between the real world and Tralfamadore. For example, the message engraved on the outside of Montana Wildhack's locket while imprisoned in a Tralfamadorian zoo is the same as the prayer that hangs on the wall at Billy's optometry practice: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" (77, 267). Further, Arnold Edelstein points out that Vonnegut uses the same words to describe the photographs of Wildhack in the pornographic magazine cover and as well as to describe photograph of Wildhack's alcoholic mother that Billy sees while on Tralfamadore: "They were grainy things, soot and chalk. They could have been anybody" (262, 266). Thus it is clear that all the significant details of Billy’s fantasy life have origins in his real life.

Although Billy's daughter sees his fantasies about Tralfamadore as a cry for help, Arnold Edelstein asserts that "Billy is happy at the end of the novel, no matter what his daughter thinks" (132). The Tralfamadorian theory of time provides Billy with a way to make peace with the horrors of his wartime experience and with the horrors of death; they give his life meaning by essentially making him a prophet for the Tralfamadorian lifestyle. Now, his vision of old age and death is completely antithetical to the bitterness expressed by his mother and the old man. By withdrawing from reality into a pleasant fantasy, Billy is finally able to cope with the horrors of the past and his fear of the future, and also find meaning in both.

* * *

The way in which Billy withdraws from reality has a very specific pattern: he withdraws into a situation that is peaceful and provides all of his necessities. Strangely, however, these pleasant moments often include many of his most terrifying experiences. For example, when Billy was a little boy his father threw him into a pool to "learn to swim by the method of sink-or-swim" (55). Although the narrator describes the scenes as "like an execution," when Billy sinks to the bottom of the pool, the situation suddenly becomes very peaceful: "When he opened his eyes, he was at the bottom of the pool, and there was beautiful music everywhere. He lost consciousness, but the music went on. He dimly sensed that somebody was rescuing him. Billy resented that." A similar scene occurs when Billy is bathed at a delousing station, bringing back memories of him being bathed by his mother. However, these peaceful scenes are always interrupted by Billy being thrust back into reality. As a result, many critics have compared these experiences to the prenatal experience of being ripped from the womb and brought into the real world.[7]

The most explicit example of this pattern occurs in the destruction of Dresden and its aftermath. The American soldiers survive the firebombing because they are kept in the basement of a slaughterhouse. A few days later, Billy is sleeping in the back of a "coffin-shaped green wagon… He was happy. He was warm. There was food in the wagon, and wine…" (227). This, narrator says, is the happiest moment in Billy's life. As Billy is delivered from the wagon-womb, he cries like a child, and the horses drip blood. Once again, it appears that Billy is reborn from a womb-like near-death experience into a life that is filled with horror and actual death.

Each of these escapes from the horrors of reality is ultimately unsuccessful because Billy always returns to the real world. However, this is not the case in the scene in which Billy escapes to the Tralfamadorian zoo. It contains a lounge chair that acted as Billy's "cradle" throughout his trip from Earth to Tralfamadore (243). Further, Billy is naked while imprisoned on the zoo, and food is provided for him by the Tralfamadorian zoo patrons. But most importantly, Billy cannot escape form Tralfamadore even if he wants to: "the atmosphere outside the dome was cyanide, and Earth was 446,120,000,000,000,000 miles away" (142-3). His indoctrination with Tralfamadorian theories of time and morality permanently free him from his anxieties about the horrors of war and death on Earth: "On other days we have wars as horrible as you've ever seen or read about. There isn't anything we can do about them, so we simply don't look at them. We ignore them. We spend eternity looking at pleasant moments, like today at the zoo" (144). As a result, Billy Pilgrim reacts to the horrors of the world around him by withdrawing totally from reality. Harold Bloom notes that "Billy is not merely an ostrich who hides his head in the pleasant moments of his past rather than facing the difficulties of the present and the future; but one who crawls back into the egg himself" (122). Billy is certainly trying to escape from the horrors of reality, from memories of war, and from the reality of his impending old age and death.

Thus the question becomes: How does Vonnegut view the defensive behavior of Billy Pilgrim? Though it is clear that Vonnegut is attempting to create a narrative distance between himself and Billy Pilgrim, their similarities remain the most significant parallel between the opening autobiographical chapter and the rest of the novel. In that sense, the first chapter introduces themes, characters, and phrases that will reappear in Billy's part of the novel.

Vonnegut's and Billy's war experiences in Dresden are very similar, but there are many other parallels. Roland Weary, for example, is previewed by the newspaperwoman who tells Vonnegut to "get a statement" from the wife of a veteran who has just been crushed to death in an elevator. Vonnegut underscores the parallel by showing us the newspaper woman eating a "Three Musketeers Candy Bar" -- a reference to Weary's idealized relationship between the two scouts. Another parallel is between Rumfoord, the historian for the Air Force who has no combat experience, and Vonnegut's boss and General Electric, who "had become a lieutenant colonel in public relations in Baltimore" (8). And yet another occurs when Mary O'Hare accuses Vonnegut and Bernard of being "just babies during the war" (18), a reference that is paralleled by Billy's own desire to crawl back into the womb and become a baby again, as well as to Billy and Roland Weary's own virgin experiences in war. Thus it seems that Vonnegut uses *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the same way that Billy utilizes Tralfamadore: as a way to escape the horrors of Dresden, impending death, and the absolute consciousness of their meaningless existence.

Conclusion

Surely the biggest question asked in Vonnegut's fiction, and asked almost consistently in his novels, is: "What is the purpose of life?" Like any good existentialist, Vonnegut finally answers that question by affirming that man must arbitrarily make his own purpose in the world. Vonnegut and Billy "both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war" (128). As a result, they were trying to "re-invent themselves and their universe" through science fiction. Eliot Rosewater, who had introduced Billy to the works of Kilgore Trout, tells the psychiatrist, "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living." This forms the basis of many of Vonnegut's religious experiments throughout his canon, most prominently expounded in *Cat's Cradle* through a religion called Bokononism. This fictitious religion was founded by Bokonon and his partner, Earl McCabe, when all the duo's efforts to raise the standard of living on the island of San Lorenzo failed; it is a means to help the poor islanders escape their miserable reality by practicing a simple religion. The *Books of Bokonon*, which essentially serve as the bible for this theology, begins by telling its followers that they should "live by the *foma* [harmless untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (91). He believes that all religions, including Bokononism, are nothing but lies; thus for any religion to be useful, it must be founded on lies. As such, Bokononism attempts to create the best lies to live by.

Vonnegut's own religious background essentially parallels this (anti)religious sentiment. His ancestors immigrated to the United States as atheists, offering him no religious background upon which to base his beliefs. As such, he chose to follow in the footsteps of his grandparents and parents, who considered themselves freethinkers, or modern-day humanists. The doctrines of

humanism ask people to behave "as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as they can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in the afterlife" (*A Man Without A Country* 26). Vonnegut recognizes that religion makes many people happy because the lies they tell are comforting; that the greatest value in organized religion comes from:

> its useful, comforting sort of horseshit… That's what I object to about preachers. They don't say anything to make anybody any happier, when there are all these neat lies you can tell. And everything is a lie, because our brains are two-bit computers, and we can't get very high-grade truths out of them. But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That's what they were designed to do. And we do have the freedom to make up comforting lies. But we don't do enough of it. (qtd. from Playboy)

Vonnegut too tries to live by the "untruths that make him… happy." He believes that Alcoholics Anonymous is the most superior religion in the world, because it "gives you an extended family that's very close to a blood brotherhood, because everybody has endured the same catastrophe" (qtd. from Playboy). As such, the Serenity Prayer, which has been adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous, essentially embodies Vonnegut's "philosophy on life" because, unlike most organized religion, it recognizes the limitations of humankind (Lundquist 91).

Vonnegut cannot change his past -- he cannot change the fact of Dresden or Vietnam, or that wars will continue to beget wars. As a result, he is not trying to change the future in his novel. He knows that despite his efforts, there will still be more wars, and more babies will be crucified in them. However, what he offers is a way to survive it with sanity, through the use of the imagination. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut stresses that "our awareness is all that is

alive and maybe sacred in any of us" (241). Imagination beholds the immaterial core of all things, it is the "unwavering band of light" that the minimalist artist in that novel paints. Similarly, Vonnegut's television special "Between Time and Timbuktu" ended with a scene in heaven in which death (in the form of Hitler) fights the imagination and loses. The duel represents, in stark outline, the great theme of Vonnegut's work: one must make the best of the world given to him through the use of his imagination. He must follow the advice that the Tralfamadorians gave to Billy: "to concentrate on the happy moments of his life, and to ignore the awful ones -- to stare only at pretty things as eternity failed to go by" (249). Therefore, this philosophy no longer represents an avoidance of moral responsibility. Rather, it places a value on inventing ingenious variations of the past to show what a world of depth, power, and beauty exists in it. Only through this can man remove the shackles of determinism and create a new, optimistic perspective on life. Only through the imagination can man come to terms with the reality of twentieth century horror stories.

Slaughterhouse-Five concludes with a demonstration of Billy Pilgrim following the Tralfamadorians' advice. Instead of showing us the dead bodies in the ruins of Dresden, or the senseless execution of Edgar Derby, the novel's final scene begins a retelling of Billy's paradisiacal ride through the streets of Dresden -- the happiest moment in his life. Thus although there is overwhelming evidence that the Tralfamadorians are not real, that the years of Billy's life really are not the only time there is, and he is not going to live every moment over and over again, there is a pragmatic value to his vision -- it enables him to deal with the horror of Dresden and get around the "Why me?" that echoes through the novel. Thus *Slaughterhouse-Five*, shows

us how it is possible to gain a sense of purpose in life by doing what Billy Pilgrim does -- he re-invents himself and his universe.

The autobiographical first chapter of the novel, which offers the most explicit and serious account of Vonnegut's Dresden experience, concludes, appropriately, with an allusion to the destruction of the biblical cities Sodom and Gomorrah:

> I looked through the Gideon Bible in my motel room for tales of great destruction. *The sun was risen upon the Earth when Lot entered into Zo-ar*, I read. *Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.* (27)

Although he told his sons that they are "not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee" (24), he cannot help but acknowledge how people instinctively want to see these massacres: "Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human" (28). It is human to want to see massacre, but it is this curiosity that often leads to the death of the looker. Vonnegut concludes by noting that people are not supposed to look back, and he is not planning to do it anymore. By writing this novel, he has finally freed himself from the past, and intends to look toward the future: "I've finished my war book now. The next one I write is going to be fun" (28). This book, he notes, is a failure, but it had to be, because it was "written by a pillar of salt" (28).

Notes

[1] Most historians agree that the death toll was about 50 million (including wartime atrocities). However, others have estimated as much as 78 million deaths. For a thorough cataloguing of the estimates by several World War II historians, see Matthew White.

[2] This seems to be the central thesis of Christina Jarvis' essay "The Vietnamization of World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Although I agree with Jarvis that Vietnam "created a prism for reimagining and reconfiguring cultural narratives about masculinity and the Second World War," I disagree that the war in Vietnam was shaping representations of World War II. Vonnegut clearly developed his negative attitude toward war prior to Vietnam. Hence while the Vietnam era certainly gave Vonnegut an antiwar audience for his novel, the war in Vietnam did not critically alter his ideas of war or World War II.

[3] Some historians have questioned the veracity of this claim. Public opinion data from the 1940s certainly calls into question the nostalgia that surrounds the war effort. The American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) polled the public several times throughout the war using the question: "Do you have a clear idea of what the war was about?" As late as March 1944, fewer than sixty percent said they did -- a majority for sure, but hardly the universal understanding of the important stakes and vast benefits of the war. This seems to suggest that the perception of World War II as a "necessary" or "justified" or even "good" war are, for the most part, retrospective distortions. However, given that *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written during the Vietnam War era and derives much of its power from that era, it seems more appropriate to focus on retrospective myths of the war than on public opinion during the war. For more background on the myths surrounding public opinion in World War II, see Adam Berinsky's In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq.

[4] Michael Mandelbaum disagrees with this truism, noting that although television sets were running during this time, often it was utilized as background noise. Further he asserts that Americans may have learned less about Vietnam than they did about the Second World War because the latter required the public to read newspapers, which requires a higher quality of attention. Further, Mark Rawlinson suggests that "television did not bring Vietnam home to America but placed the war at a greater distance as it was acted out by six-inch high soldiers scaled to the living room" (382). I will discuss the implications of this more thoroughly in my Chapter Two discussion of war as sport.

[5] See Jack Richardson: "Easy Writer"; and Benjamin DeMott: "Vonnegut's Otherworldly Laughter."

[6] This has been reconstructed with the help of Jonathan Ausbel's "Slaughterhouse-Five: Partial Chronology with Chapter References" and Harold Bloom's "Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five."

7 See Arnold Edelstein: "Slaughterhouse-Five: Time Out of Joint"; and Jiannan Tang's "Innocence: A Bittersweet Medicine in Slaughterhouse-Five"

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