The pages of Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, Mother Night are fastened together with the idea that war and morality are entrenched in ambiguity. It is through a startling use of irony that Vonnegut shows the reader just how difficult it can be to unblur the lines drawn by the ambiguous nature of morality.

One of the great, underlying ironies of the novel, is that Campbell is an American spy and, at the same time, a valuable member of the Nazi Party’s *German Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda*. He has a radio show that he uses to transmit coded messages out of Germany into the ears of the Allies. His radio show is also used, with as much effectiveness, to transmit anti-semetic propaganda all over the world. So, despite the feeble half-truth that he was on the side of “right (the winners)” during the war, he served the side of “wrong (the losers)” just as effectively.

He suffers the consequences for his secret service to America and his not-so-secret service to the Nazi regime and anti-Semitic propaganda. In chapter twenty-six, Campbell is attacked by a man who is out for vengeance in the name of Private Buchanon and others who died in World War II. Vonnegut makes the reader take a look at what might be called “justifiable” rage. Each time the man hits Campbell, he tells him who the beating is for. It is blatantly ironic that Campbell was one of the greater tools of the Allies, that on the surface, he was on the side of Private Buchanon and those others.

Campbell contrasts himself with Reverend Doctor Lionel J.D. Jones, D.D.S., D.D, who becomes a great admirer of Howard Campbell, the anti-Semite. He says that Jones was a “race-baiter who is ignorant and insane.” Campbell says of himself, “I am neither ignorant nor insane.” Campbell almost makes an excuse for Jones’ actions and his hate. He further vilifies himself by admitting that he carried out orders in Germany from people that were as ignorant as Jones. He says, “God help me, I carried out their instructions anyway.” (69)

Howard Campbell, Jr., American spy, Nazi patriot, and German playwright draws a clear line of blur for his reader. Reverend Jones, who is so racist and thoroughly saturated with hate, did not, in all his published experience, have a fraction of the effect that Campbell, the actor, had for the rise and propagation of anti-Semitism.

Vonnegut uses more than Campbell as a conduit for war’s moral vagueness

The fruits of Campbell’s labors are what Vonnegut is really trying to point out to us. He shows us that war is an ambiguous creature and the business of war can be destructive, despite our stated intent. And when we mix this natural moral confusion found in war with a character who is naturally morally ambiguous, we reap terrible results. War took the moral uncertainty in Howard Campbell and utilized it grotesquely. He says he feels “like a pig that’s been taken apart, who’s had experts find a use for every part. By God- I think they even found a use for my squeal! The part of me that wanted to tell the truth got turned into an expert liar! The lover in me got turned into a pornographer! The artist in me got turned into ugliness such as the world has rarely seen before.” (206)

War uses moral uncertainty. War uses a people to allow certain things to happen in the name of justice; war uses people to kill other people to advance a cause, war uses pilots to drop bombs and explode other people to stop pilots from dropping bombs and exploding other people, war uses unimaginable violence, war uses the instantaneous deaths of hundreds of thousands at Hiroshima and Nagasaki to create peace. War used Howard W. Campbell, Jr., to be anti-Semitic and advance Nazi propaganda to kill anti-Semitism and stop the advance of the Nazi regime.

Vonnegut does not completely dismiss the terrible necessity of war; rather, he want us to look at *why* we fight, and the zeal with which we undertake that fighting. “There are plenty of good reasons for fighting…but no good reason ever to hate without reservations, to imagine that God Almighty Himself hate with you, too. Where’s evil? It’s that large part of every man that wants to hate without limit, that wants to hate with God on its side. It’s the part of every man that finds all kinds of ugliness so attractive.

“It’s that part of an imbecile…that punishes and vilifies and makes war gladly.”(251)

Vonnegut, through Campbell, says that we should take a hard look at why and how we fight. It’s so easy for us to thoroughly vilify our enemies, so easy to be sure that we are so firmly on the side of right, he can easily end up like Howard W. Campbell, Jr., serving the enemy as well as our allies just as faithfully. By questioning the ambiguity of war and morality, Vonnegut makes us truly contemplate how we go about conducting business of the side of *right*. These great questions linger today and likely will not leave us soon.