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# For the Boys: Masculinity, Gray Comedy, and the Vietnam War in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

*Peter C. Kunze*

A noticeable trend in postwar American literature was black humor fiction, in which war, sexuality, death, and other traditionally serious topics received irreverent treatment as authors attempted to depict the irrationality of modern life. A generation of American writers working in this mode—John Barth, Donald Barthelme, J.P. Donleavy, Thomas Pynchon, among others—emerged in the early 1960s; they were predominantly white, middle class males, sometimes Jewish, often veterans. Conrad Knickerbocker, in a 1964 article in *The New York Times Book Review*, referred to them as "neo-Swiftian," launching "the glittering harpoons of Dr. Johnson's age" (3); James Purdy captured the sentiment of his fellow "black humorists" well when he said, "I am in the position of liking the roots, somehow, of America and loathing everything it stands for today. We live in the stupidest cultural era of American history. It is so stupid it inspires me" (qtd. in Knickerbocker 3). Though the *Time*'s piece on the black humorists contends these writers were more prone to jeers than jeremiads ("Black" 94), the latter was exactly their mode, highlighting and lambasting the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the increasingly conformist, puritanical, restrictive character of American society in the 1960s. This stifling society threatened not only the integrity and freedom of the individual, but his or her very sanity.

Kurt Vonnegut was a late addition to these authors because, as Max F. Schulz explains, working in "multiple modes" fostered critical neglect (15). Yet, as several Vonnegut critics and scholars have noted (including Shields in this issue), "black humorist" does not suit Vonnegut well. While I agree black humor figures prominently in many of Vonnegut's novels and short stories, I find the term dissatisfying overall because Vonnegut is hopeful in a way that is noticeably—desperately, even—absent in the work of the other black humorists. Though often flabbergasted or bemused, he is never bitter or nihilistic. The cautious optimism one finds in Vonnegut's work sets him apart and perhaps explains his continuing popularity while many of the so-called "black humorists" have either largely fallen out of print (Peter De Vries, Warren Miller, James Purdy) or been primarily read in college classrooms (John Barth, Robert Coover).[1]

Broadly speaking, Vonnegut shares the black humorists' concern for

the individual in society, which may stem from the influence of William Blake on his work. Vonnegut admits in his *Paris Review* interview that he "went crazy" for Blake when he was 35 ("Kurt" 177), and he openly refers to Blake in his fiction: Eliot Rosewater quotes Blake in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, then identifies the mystical poet as his favorite in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Blake's most celebrated work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, addresses the eighteenth century philosophical concerns over how to properly educate children, whose interlocutors included John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by positing the titular binary of innocence and experience as a way to analyze the relationship between the child and socialization (Hilton 198). Northrop Frye, in his landmark 1949 study of Blake, views innocence as prelapsarian and those who live in the "unfallen world" are perceived by those in the "fallen world" as "somewhat naïve and childlike" (43). Frye asserts, "Children live in a protected world which has something, in epitome, of the intelligibility of the state of innocence, and they have an imaginative recklessness which derives from that" (43). D. G. Gillham advises, however, that "Blake's innocents are not always children and his children are not always innocent" (10). Using Gillham's interpretation, I argue that *Slaughterhouse-Five* embraces a Blakean binary of innocence and experience in which the former is applied to young soldiers who need to be preserved in the "imaginative" state of innocence and, consequently, protected from the inevitability of experience. Though Vonnegut uses black humor at times to explore this so-called masculinization and maturation, the text is not a black comedy because it rejects Pilgrim's quietism as a legitimate way to handle the absurdity of existence.

A more accurate term for what Vonnegut often does in his fiction would be "gray comedy," a blend of absurdist black humor with guarded sense of hope. A light exists at the end of the tunnel—or, at least, a belief in it exists. We also often see "gray comedy" in mainstream cinema, where many films with black humor ultimately yield to a more promising, somewhat light-hearted conclusion. For example, Hal Ashby's 1971 film *Harold and Maude* chronicles Harold's mock suicides with a darkly comic tone, but the suicide of Maude triggers his rebirth. In the end, he sends his hearse-like car off a cliff, then skips away while playing the cheerful song "If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out" on his banjo. These gray comedies, in part, reveal a commercial hesitation to end on a sour note, but they also evince an optimism that aims to uplift, even encourage, the audience. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* (and even *Harold and Maude*), this combination of black humor and cautious optimism work together to demonstrate not only the absurdity of war, but the need to realize what young boys are

being subjected to and protect them from it. War does not make boys into men; it devastates, corrupts, destroys, and (obviously) kills. These texts superimpose the innocent/experience binary onto boyhood/manhood to show that this experience does not masculinize, but rather mentally and emotionally stunts these young soldiers. While humor cannot prevent this result, it can draw the audience's attention to the ongoing problem in the hopes that they will actively resist its perpetuation by resisting the war.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* appeared in 1969 as dissent toward the Vietnam War began to peak; Jerome Klinkowitz observes, "An antiwar novel would not have done so well much earlier—not until the Tet Offensive of 1968 showed Americans how badly the war in Vietnam was going" (62). A postmodernist tour-de-force, the novel chronicles the misadventures of Billy Pilgrim, a reluctant time traveler ricocheted between his experiences in World War II, his captivity on the planet Tralfamadore, and his postwar ennui in the fictional city of Ilium. Initially the novel received mixed reviews: Robert Scholes and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt separately gave the novel positive reviews in *The New York Times*, while Alfred Kazin chided the novel's "impishly sentimental humor" (qtd. in Shields 255). It is this humor, however, that performs the noble effort of unsettling the reader and drawing attention to the plight of young male soldiers overseas—boys much like Vonnegut (and the fictional Billy Pilgrim) some twenty-five years later.

Vonnegut's effectiveness fueled his popularity among teenagers and college students, who catapulted him into the national spotlight from the damning obscurity afforded to those miscategorized as genre writers (in Vonnegut's case, science fiction). A photo caption accompanying a *Newsweek* article just prior to *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s publication deemed Vonnegut "A Campus Orwell" (qtd. in Shields 247). Indeed influential literary critic Leslie Fiedler read Vonnegut's work at the insistence of his young son (5). The acclaim heaped on the novel as an antiwar statement, a playful formal experiment, and a jeremiad against human indifference led critic William Rodney Allen to observe, in 1996, "Perhaps not since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a work of fiction so deeply affected the public's perception of an ongoing American war" (ix). Allen boldly contends that *Slaughterhouse-Five* "helped get the United States out of Vietnam" (ix). This claim is undoubtedly exaggerated (after all, the war persisted until 1975), but attests to the novel's powerful denunciation of American militarism, not only for its ideological implications, but for the trauma it exposes American boys to in the name of vague abstractions like freedom, honor, and valor. Vonnegut was writing about World War II, not Vietnam, but his target remains clear despite the change in the geographical and historical context. By employing

black humor, Vonnegut was able to underscore these issues and disturb his audience into paying attention and even into a new consciousness.

The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, is a middle-class optometrist, a fitting occupation for someone "to give Earthlings corrected vision" (78), as Todd F. Davis notes. Coincidentally, Vonnegut "distorts" a vision of Vietnam by using World War II as his context. The novel does, however, re-envision American perceptions of World War II, the global conflict that ushered in what Henry Luce famously called "the American century" and established the United States as the dominant world superpower. Although several literary works, such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), had previously challenged popular notions about the glory and gallantry of war, popular cinema continued to perpetuate those mythologizing narratives through films like *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *To Hell and Back* (1955), and *The Green Berets* (1968). These films performed the crucial cultural work of establishing the "proper" popular historical accounts (and perceptions) of the war, avoiding critical examination in favor of self-righteous celebration, laying the framework for public discussions of World War II and the United States's "noble" role in it. Vonnegut complicates these inhibiting legends by engaging and revising them, not so much to defame the American participation as to show the dehumanizing (rather than masculinizing) effects of war on those who fought. To this end, Vonnegut lobbies on behalf of the boys who now follow in his footsteps, invoking his own experience to demystify the false values and unfair pressures that compel them to service.

Vonnegut establishes the boy/man binary early in the novel during his tense confrontation with Mary O'Hare, one of the novel's two dedicatees. Mary is the wife of Vonnegut's war buddy, Bernard, whom he has gone to visit in the hopes of triggering his memory of Dresden. This scene may, in part, explain why Vonnegut embraces a novelistic framework as opposed to the more "legitimate" memoir or history: he is reconstructing his past, creating a narrative, much in the same way history and popular culture work to create explanatory narratives about the past. Vonnegut's friend Loree Rackstraw recalls that when the writer visited his war buddies, "Nobody had the same story or could remember details" (30). This difficulty led Vonnegut to consider having the pages become increasingly darker, until the Dresden scenes, at which point the novel's pages would entirely darken (30). While Vonnegut was wrestling with how to depict the climactic event, Mary O'Hare brings attention to the level of character; arguably, she functions as the moral core of the novel, compelling Vonnegut to remember how young and innocent he and Bernard were during the war:

> You were just babies in the war—like ones upstairs! . . . 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).

Mary is not only one of the few women in the novel, but also the voice of reason. Susan E. Farrell suggests that, as a nurse, Mary serves as Vonnegut's assistant in the dissection of the Dresden bombing that will become the book itself (100). Mary disrupts Vonnegut's intentions as a self-proclaimed "trafficker in climaxes, and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontation" (6), to capitalize on the book he imagines either "would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big" (2-3). Vonnegut genders sensitivity and compassion; the benevolent Mary guides Vonnegut into being a more reflective and considerate craftsman. He realizes, with Mary's stern condemnation, that the novel he was about to write would contribute to the same cultural mythology that perpetuates wars and young boys' desire to participate in them. He admits to himself, "We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood" (18), humorously highlighting their ignorance and innocence. Sent off to fight for their country, their virginity accentuates how inexperienced and ignorant they were, an irony Vonnegut sees as heartbreaking yet revealing about their lack of preparation as men, both mentally and emotionally. He consequently subtitles the novel "The Children's Crusade," invoking a Romantic notion of the child as innocent in order to appeal emotionally to the readership to have sympathy for the soldiers. The implications for the current conflict in Vietnam are obvious, particularly in the novel's concluding chapter, where the writer reflects on the recent assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom were advocating an American withdrawal from Vietnam by 1967.

The Children's Crusade—the thirteenth century campaign that manipulated youth to fight on behalf of Christianity, tragically ending in shipwreck or slavery—is a fitting metaphor for both World War II and Vietnam War as thousands of young men were compelled to fight for a cause that ultimately left them alienated and adrift. Vonnegut quotes from Charles Mackay's 1841 history of the event: "They were no doubt idle and deserted children who generally swarm in great cities, nurtured on vice and

daring, and ready for anything" (20). Mackay alludes to both the bravery and naïveté of the children, and this account will resonate later in the novel with the hubristic machismo of Roland Weary, staid courage of Edgar Derby, and bemused indifference of Billy Pilgrim. Mackay draws a line between "history" and "literature" (especially romance): the former reveals that the Crusaders, specifically the adults, were "ignorant and savage men," while the latter "portrays . . . their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity" (20). History records, Mackay affirms, while literature embellishes; as Mary suggests, these embellishments have dangerous social implications for those who read and live by these romances' virtues. Vonnegut returns to this claim later in the text, when Roland Weary proclaims himself one of the "Three Musketeers," an allusion to Alexandre Dumas's historical novel celebrating honor and valor. By adopting this moniker, Weary and friends embrace and superimpose the ideals of these fictions onto their current situation, and in Vonnegut's eyes, dangerously delude themselves. Vonnegut, word for word, repeats Mackay's analysis of how romance handles Crusaders as the narrator tells of Roland Weary speaking "unintelligibly of the sacrifices he had made on Billy's behalf" (64). This re-appropriation simultaneously aligns Crusaders with soldiers in both World War II and the Vietnam War, suggesting that all three were sent off on quixotic ideological quests and are unfortunately ill-fated. But Vonnegut does not condemn Weary for his invocation of the Three Musketeers; rather, it shows the extremes soldiers went to in their efforts to appropriate fictions of noble masculinity that would both help to explain their predicament and provide guidance for how to navigate themselves through and out of it. Although Weary is one of the more unlikeable "listless playthings" in the text, he is sympathetic; his status as a self-appointed Musketeer is a coping mechanism. After all, he is only eighteen years old when he is shipped halfway around the world to battle for his country, his values, and his life.

In the self-reflexive first chapter, the narrative representation of Kurt Vonnegut discusses the difficulty he had writing the book, which was over twenty years in the making, because of the solemnity and extremity of the Dresden firebombing as well as the unreliability of his own memory. He tells his editor, Seymour Lawrence, "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (24). Indeed, the novel's terse sentences, fragmentations, and experiments in temporality have been hailed as hallmarks of its artistic accomplishment. His style—marked by concision and "plain English"—evokes Ernest Hemingway's efforts to write "one true sentence" (12), paring away an excess of adjectives,

sentiment, and verbosity in favor of an attempt to achieve an accurate representation of reality—in Vonnegut's case, a horrific reality that defies explanation.[2] One may in fact wonder why a novel that is so seemingly simple (at least, at the sentence-level) and an admitted "failure" could have taken so long. Of course, the latter claim by Vonnegut—that the novel fails and has to fail—is false modesty. Reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt rebukes this claim in his 1969 review in *The New York Times*: "He's wrong and he knows it" (35); indeed Lehmann-Haupt was right, and in his 1981 "autobiographical collage" *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut himself graded *Slaughterhouse-Five* an "A-plus" (284). Rather, the difficulty Vonnegut faced, in part, was depicting the narrative of the Dresden firebombing in a way that could reach a wide audience without "explaining away" or shamelessly exploiting it for financial gains and literary recognition. Furthermore, wary of his faulty memory, Vonnegut draws attention to his concern that he will distort or romanticize the events. By bringing these issues to the forefront, he anticipates derisive criticism and admits the inherent difficulties in rendering the story honestly and without ulterior motives.

The writer's struggle with the inherent limitations of language is not the sole reason for Vonnegut's accessible, straightforward prose style. As in his next book, *Breakfast of Champions*, a didactic quality, similar almost to a primer, characterizes the narrative voice of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut is aware that, as a survivor, he bears the burden of memory: a responsibility to the perished to tell what happened and "set the record straight." Looking back upon Dresden may render Vonnegut a pillar of salt, but Vonnegut is fully aware his soul is at stake, for reflecting on the loss of life, even when one has survived, is an incredibly human and *humane* act—a necessary reflection. To this end, *Slaughterhouse-Five* teaches the reader of what happened at Dresden, but also the need to resist this form of atrocity as well as simple unkindness. "God damn it, you've got to be kind" (129), Eliot Rosewater proclaims in the 1965 novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; Vonnegut carries on this message in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. But he is only able to do so after years of reflection and struggle with the story; a young man, innocent and ignorant, could not have rendered the tale or offered the kind of perspective Vonnegut offers in the novel. The young Vonnegut would have capitalized off the narrative, aware of the novel's powerful drama, but the older Vonnegut sees the tragedy of the event, the trauma it induced, and its relative obscurity in histories of the war; consequently, he uses the occasion to warn the future of the threat of human indifference and ignorance. In a 1969 interview, Vonnegut mused that powerful *men* do not read large books, so he writes short ones so he can reach that audience (Bryan BR2). If *Slaughterhouse-*

*Five* is too simple or too accessible, it is because the target audience may be youth themselves. If Vonnegut can appeal to the readership before they grow up and assume the reins over the government and the military and the world at large, he knows he can "*poison their minds with humanity*" (qtd. in Bryan B2). The antiwar message of *Slaughterhouse-Five* may be as purposeful as being "anti-glacier" (4), but it functions on two levels: appeal on behalf of the young men who are fighting, in this case in Vietnam, but also *to* the young men who fight and ignite the wars of tomorrow. The book, therefore, consciously addresses the present and the future simultaneously.

Vonnegut's examination of the Dresden firebombing is not the novel's only critique of the American military's actions in World War II. Another subtle, yet key critique in the novel is the case of Private Eddie D. Slovik, the first soldier to be executed for desertion since the American Civil War. Slovik's death, by firing squad in 1945, had been ordered by Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces Dwight D. Eisenhower himself as a warning to potential deserters about the consequences. The case was uncovered in a William Bradford Huie's 1954 book, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, which Billy reads in the novel.[3] To execute Slovik, from Vonnegut's perspective, seems more a matter of protocol than justice; as he writes, its purpose was "to maintain that discipline upon which alone an army can succeed" (57). Slovik's personhood is stripped of him in the name of the cause. But mentioning Slovik in passing conversely highlights his case—a case President Eisenhower tried to suppress when Huie's book was published—and humanizes the war. Slovik's crime was not subverting American military action by revealing strategies or sabotaging their efforts; it was not wanting to serve, not wanting to fight, not wanting to die. The sadness of the situation—the sadness of a young man wanting to live his life on his own terms—humbles Vonnegut. But Slovik, like Billy Pilgrim, is a "listless plaything" (164), a pawn of a government's plans and an inevitable war. Vonnegut's opposition is not against war—that, he realizes, is futile—but against the treatment of men it incurs and the consequences for the young generations who are sent off, unaware and scared, to wage the battles manipulated by their elders.

Though the contributions of women on the battlefield and the homefront were invaluable, war in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a primarily masculine effort, characterized by misguided machismo and bloodthirstiness. Perhaps keeping in mind the hypermasculine rhetoric of President Johnson, Vonnegut uses humor to deride the "post-coital satisfaction" some war enthusiasts receive from what is colloquially known as "mopping up" (66). He associates this pleasure with the "orgasm of victory," again rendering

success in battle in terms of sexual intercourse to uncover the gendered understanding of war that aligns military and sexual conquests. Meanwhile, the dog being used by the procedure is alien to war, having "no idea what game was being played" (66). Named "Princess," the dog represents the innocence of the boys who find themselves pawns in a game they cannot comprehend—a game that defies such comprehension. In Vonnegut, innocence is feminized, but in a way that privileges the feminine as compassionate, rational, and preferable over the absurd cruelty perpetuated by masculinity.

An example of this wartime cruelty is when German soldiers find Roland Weary and Billy Pilgrim in a creek bed, where Roland is about to kick Billy in the spine. The Germans are confounded by the animosity of one American soldier toward another as well as Billy's reaction to the predicament: laughter. Explanation escapes them not because they do not understand the context, but because there is no explanation to be had. This moment encapsulates war—World War II and the Vietnam War—for Vonnegut: violent, ill-advised, and absurd. Leslie Fiedler wrote that the strength of the black humorists lies in their recognition that "[t]he only response to the world that's left is laughter" (qtd. in "Black" 94). Billy's laughter is a sign of comic relief in the face of such absurdity and the only response that seems rational. In moments such as these, it is clear that war fails in its efforts to make boys into men, instead showing the base animal instincts in humans—for survival, for violence, for anger.

The Germans themselves are not immune from such mistreatment, as they cruelly deny the men of tolerable living conditions. While transporting the men, they are given very little clean water and food, and they are forced into close living quarters. In spite of this abuse, the men actually become *more* humane. They cooperate and help one another to ease the difficulty and demoralization of the experience. The Germans provide Billy with a coat that amounts to not much more than a "fur-collar vest" (115). Seeing him in this insufficient garb proves to be "one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War II" (115). The warfare becomes psychological here, as the Englishmen later point out to Billy when he is assigned to their bunker: "My God—what have they done to you, lad? This isn't a man. It's a broken kite" (124). The coat is an obvious insult, meant to feminize and therefore, in the theater of war, make Billy visually "unfit" for combat. Comic emasculation serves as a means of defeating the enemy. The English use humor to refute the German's demoralizing usage of it. "It was a deliberate attempt to humilate you," one Englishman advises Billy. "You mustn't let Jerry do things like that" (124). Described as "clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong" (119), the Englishmen are perhaps

the manliest of the soldiers. To the narrator, they embody the cultural mythology behind war because, after seeing them, war "look[ed] stylish and reasonable, and fun" (120). Yet they also subvert the desirable masculinity they initially perform, complicating understandings of what it means to be a "man" in times of war. They sing Gilbert and Sullivan and perform plays for the delight of all the men. This revelry should not be construed as a sign of their weakness, though: in fact, an English soldier portraying the Blue Fairy Godmother breaks Paul Lazzaro's arm as punishment for an attempted theft. Ultimately, the Englishmen show a different vision of masculinity on the front—one premised on both strength and sensitivity. Their humanity shines through their charity and fraternity in comparison to the Germans, who though equally broken and battered, continue to wage the war.

Worthy of note, however, in discussing the Germans is the absence of the term "Nazi" in the novel. It makes only one appearance by my count: when Howard W. Campbell, Jr. appears, the narrator mentions he was "an American who had become a Nazi" (206). This detail cannot be overlooked, but should be unpacked to discover how the novel handles gender and war. Early in the novel, Vonnegut's father laments that he never wrote a story with a villain in it; Vonnegut responds, "I told him that was one of the things I learned in college after the war" (10).[4] So although there are antagonists in *Slaughterhouse-Five*—Roland Weary, Paul Lazzaro, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., the Germans—there are no villains. For Campbell to *become* a Nazi indicates that Nazism is not an innate state of being, but rather an ideology in which one willingly participates. Vonnegut is fully aware of the connotation behind the word "Nazi," especially in American culture, and avoids invoking it because he wants to revise a historical narrative that equates the Allies with "pure good" and the Nazis with "pure evil." While he certainly does not condone the acts of the Nazis, he also refuses to see them as an exceptional case of non-humans or beasts. They were, in fact, individuals who subscribed to the ideology championed by Hitler, sacrificing their free choice in favor of a mob mentality. War does not make boys into men; more likely than not, it denies boys and men of their compassion, reason, and personhood. Campbell's "becoming," ironically, underscores his willful choice to surrender his ability to act willfully by surrendering to a Nazi narrative that explained the world's woes and how to cure them. By no means were Nazis alone, though, as many Americans supported a counter-narrative that served to validate all American military actions in the name of the just and right; this counter-narrative condones the Dresden firebombing, despite the city's military insignificance as an "open city." By discussing Dresden as an atrocious military action against

an "open city" populated solely by innocent civilians, Vonnegut's ultimate message here, then, is a humanistic plea in favor of individual thought and resisting attempts to deny any person's volition. Young men, as the unknowing pawns of these military efforts, function as the beneficiary of this antiwar satire, assuming the humor can properly mobilize the readership.

One person who clearly demonstrates agency and humanity is Edgar Derby, a high school teacher who uses his political connections to enlist in the Army. Edgar represents a masculine ideal: he is older (and presumably wiser), he has one of the best bodies (105), and he is patriotic. He becomes a father figure for Billy, who as "a funny-looking youth—tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola" (30), was far from the hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Derby's greatest lesson to Billy comes as he stands up to Campbell and the Nazi propaganda. "Derby spoke movingly of the American form of government," the narrator recounts, "with freedom and justice and opportunities and fair play for all. He said there wasn't a man there who wouldn't gladly die for those ideals" (209). Derby transcends his confinement as a "listless plaything" to become a character, in Vonnegut's mind. But his impassioned speech—a rebuttal that asserts his masculinity, righteousness, and purpose—is interrupted by the moans of the air-raid sirens. Later, Derby is shot by a firing squad for stealing a teapot, a fact which Vonnegut reveals from the outset of the novel. This grimly humorous death invokes laughter as a form of desperation; it also calls into question any valorization of Derby. Is he honorable, or was he foolish to think he could triumph in these circumstances? A compromised meaning seems best here: Derby's willingness to stand up against propaganda was a celebration of one man over a political machine, but his death is a sign that life is indifferent to causes, beliefs, and actions—honorable though they may be. His death does not diminish his courageous confrontation; at the same time, it fails to cause any noticeable change. In war, even grown men are rendered children, underscoring their inability to control their own destinies, despite an articulation of masculinity that views one's ability to do just that as a hallmark of American manhood.

Even after the war, Billy is unable to enact an acceptable example of American masculinity. His very name suggests his childlike state: "Billy" as the diminutive of "William," while "Pilgrim" alludes to his disconnectedness from the world that leads him to travel between time and place. Believing himself to be an abductee, Billy frustrates his family, who perceives what today may be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as insanity. His daughter infantilizes him, sternly advising him, "If you're going to act like a child, maybe we'll just have to *treat* you like a

child" (167). One may be tempted to view this as a continuation of the emasculation he faced in the war, but then, is Billy Pilgrim ever a "man" according to social standards? Roland Weary, the Germans, and his daughter Barbara infantilize (and therefore emasculate) Billy, rendering him unable to effectively resist through actions or words. In the foreword to his 2000 collection, *Bagombo Snuff Box*, Kurt Vonnegut lists eight rules for writing a short story (which I believe can be adapted to the novel), including, "Be a Sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of" (10). This claim certainly applies to Billy Pilgrim, who endures ongoing humiliation with indifference, even laughter. But this stoicism does not reveal his admirable character as much as his bemused resignation from engaging in the world around him. Billy Pilgrim has been mistakenly understood as an Everyman and even a proxy for Vonnegut himself, but Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl correct this misreading: "One may sympathize with his attempt to make sense of things, but the fact remains that some men have greater resources than other. Indeed, some men are like Kurt Vonnegut. By intruding in his own tale, Vonnegut contrasts his personal position with that of his protagonist" (146). Vonnegut may be sympathetic to Billy, but he does not rally behind Billy's approach to the world. In fact, he positions Billy as the comic butt, encouraging the reader to interchangeably sympathize with and laugh at Billy. Parsing this separation is important to understanding Vonnegut's play with the Blakeian binary of innocence and experience. The "experience" of war does not make one mature; it does not allow one to "leave" a state of innocence. Rather, it traumatizes, brutalizes, and kills innocents. As a result, the readers must work to protect innocents like Billy Pilgrim and the thousands of boys like him from the danger of war. War might not be avoidable, but should it be the most innocent who fight it?

Billy Pilgrim knows when he will die. And he does not worry about it, because as he understands it, he will only be dead in that moment. The Tralfamadorians become demagogues of sorts; he yields to their philosophy and pledges allegiance to the notion that free will is an Earthling illusion. "Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim," they attest, "trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no *why*" (97). Consequently Billy allows himself to be tossed about, because there is no alternative in his mind. He admires Adam and Eve, because they were "naked . . . so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently" (68); in them, he sees the *desire* to be good and yet their failure to do so, a failure that, from a Tralfamadorian perspective, was fated and therefore inevitable. Billy aligns himself with this inability to act; by treating Billy as a comic butt, Vonnegut encourages the reader to resist such a passive

response to the world. One must act and act responsibly: Do not allow social pressures to restrict, stunt, and emasculate you, he seems to say. As we laugh at Billy, we must confront our own activity/passivity, challenging the narrator's damning evaluation of humans like Billy Pilgrim as "listless playthings."

In an age marked by blind patriotism and fierce activism, one hesitates to believe Vonnegut, a former solider and witness to Dresden, would advocate the former. Rather, as the first and last chapters of the novel clearly reveal, he seems to favor action over words, fundamentally aware that words are inadequate. Vonnegut is aware of the limitations of language; he does not dare to represent the firebombing itself. But the novel's true testament is to the power of both words and actions. Vonnegut's words do the cultural work of revising popular understandings of American involvement in World War II and, by proxy, in the Vietnam War. While Vonnegut frustrates many readers because he won't, as J. Michael Crichton observed, "choose sides, ascribing blame and penalty, identifying good guys and bad" (110), Vonnegut does succeed in showing that good and evil are not opposite states of being, but rather points on a continuum of human action, constantly in flux from moment-to-moment and decision-to-decision. Because of this shifting nature, it becomes important to constantly regulate one's behavior by confronting the universe, as manipulative and challenging as it may be.

Vonnegut speaks as an avuncular member of the older generation; this wisdom, legitimated by his war experiences, is tempered by his self-effacing humor. By crafting a metafictional narrative, he draws deliberate attention to the artifice of his creation as well as his intentions. In this way, Vonnegut refuses to invoke the authority extended to him as the author by revealing what goes on behind the curtain. This refusal is integral to his success as a countercultural writer; he talks to his readers, not *down* to his readers, and this respect for them, in turn, wins him their respect.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* and other "gray comedies" of the era such as the films *M*A*S*H* (Altman, 1970) and *Harold and Maude* (Ashby, 1971) presents a need to protect "boys," be it in age or in level of maturity, from the realities and horrors not just of war and hegemonic masculinity, but of life—to ease them into their birthright as leaders of the world by imbuing them with compassion, rationality, and a sense of obligation to the community that does not override the integrity of their individuality. In the process, they revise a fatal myth that war makes boys into men—that is, assuming they survive. *Slaughterhouse-Five* powerfully testifies that not only are boys not masculinized by war, but that war emasculates them, revealing their ultimate impotence in the face of death. This text, designed to appeal to youth, can be read as more than mere entertainment, but as a

humanistic endeavor to save this population from the disingenuous rhetoric of the American war machine as well as the dehumanizing effects war has on the individual subjected to its terrific reality. Humor alleviates this message, if only for a brief time, but it concurrently reveals that war is no laughing matter, though laughter may be the only sane response to it. The occasional use of black humor operates as a useful mode, since its style of procuring laughs is so unsettling and irreverent. This rupture of expectation attacks the fundamental irrationality of social organization, and, ideally, calls upon the reader/viewer to become free-thinking, resistant, and proactive. The religious charlatan Bokonon advises in *Cat's Cradle*, "Maturity . . . is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything" (198). But "gray comedies" such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* take the potential for struggle a step further, refusing to surrender in the face of life's seemingly ultimate absurdity. To this end, humor works to not only amuse, but to awaken and (ideally) mobilize the so-called "listless plaything" to resist the forces that work to deny the subject his or her agency.

## Notes

[1] This insistence to make sense of the world, despite its inherent absurdity, connects well with Robert T. Tally Jr.'s recent argument that Vonnegut uses a modernist aesthetic to create and understand a postmodern world (xii). As Tally explains, "Were Vonnegut a true *postmodernist*, he might be more apt to revel in the absurdity of one's situation, but Vonnegut always endeavors to make sense of it, even where he may doubt whether there is any meaning to be found" (78). This "endeavor," in my opinion, disqualifies Vonnegut from being a true "black humorist."
[2] Lawrence R. Broer's recent monograph, *Vonnegut and Hemingway: Writers at War*, offers an extensive comparative study of the two authors. Of particular interest is Chapter Three, "Duty Dance with Death," which discusses Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* alongside *Slaughterhouse-Five* (59-75).
[3]Coincidentally, Frank Sinatra had planned to direct and produce a film adaptation version in the early 1960s (Taraborelli 229). A made-for-television movie, starring Martin Sheen, aired in 1974, but Sinatra was not associated with the project.
[4] Vonnegut here is most likely referring to his training in anthropology at the University of Chicago.

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