

The Soldier as Satirist

A study of Black Humor in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and
Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*

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Introduction

Jonathan Swift once wrote: "I have been assured . . . That a young healthy child, well-nursed, is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or broiled; and I make no doubt in that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout"¹. The year was 1729, and the topic addressed was the indifference toward the Irish crisis of overpopulation and hunger. Nearly 250 years later a proposed new mode of fiction came to be in 1960's America. Many of its components had been worked before, but there was a slight variation to be seen, something critics and theoreticians alike have been unable to explain thoroughly. Like Swift, these authors posited concrete aspects of society's folly to satirize, and they did it in the manner of an artistic yet conscientious social critique. Could it be that the dark and grotesque humor that in layman's terms is known as black humor actually served a greater satiric purpose? This phenomenon seemed to include a diverse variety of authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Terry Southern, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, James Purdy and William Burroughs, but they did not view themselves as a movement at all. Bruce Jay Friedman made an anthology of Black Humor and as Vonnegut puts it, "critics picked up the term because it was handy . . . It was a form of short hand"². What was it then that motivated writers from all corners of the United States to produce satiric texts that would earn them the label Black Humorists?

The notion of Black Humor and the novels of the latest literary "movement" were subject to an array of analyses during the late sixties and early seventies, and several decades on the debate of core issues, philosophical vision, literary style and matter of origin does not seem quite settled. Black humor has for many come to imply a "predominantly American

¹ Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal," in *Anthology of Black Humor*, ed. André Breton (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 11.

²"Playboy Interview," *Playboy* 1973. In Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon: <Opinions>* (Boston: Delacorte Press, 1974), 257.

phenomenon of the sixties”³, as Max Schulz proposes, however, as Conrad Knickerbocker states, it is only a new concept in American literature. Even this notion might be inaccurate as Ambrose Bierce and Mark Twain’s works of the late 19th century bear many resemblances to the works published in the 1960’s. Knickerbocker makes an important point when he writes that “Black humor has been part of the response of wiser peoples in other times. Its (re)appearance in American fiction may signal the end of certain innocences”⁴. In *The Fabulators* Robert Scholes traces the lineage of Black Humor to

the intellectual comedy of Aristophanes, the flourishing satire of imperial Rome, the humanistic allegories and anatomies of the later middle ages, the picaresque narratives of the Renaissance, the metaphysical poems and satires of the seventeenth century and the great satiric fictions of the Age of Reason⁵.

And indeed, the works of the sixties are frequently compared to and analyzed as “angry” satire in the tradition of Roman satirist Juvenal, and they share many similarities with the satires of British 16th century pamphleteer Thomas Nashe who bore the nickname “young Juvenal” in his time. The works of Nashe’s contemporary William Shakespeare are also frequently mentioned in the analysis of Black Humor works, one of the most prominent being the effect of *King Lear* on Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. The darkness of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” has already been mentioned and even *Gulliver’s Travels* ends on the disturbing note that all humans are “Yahoos”. A similar conclusion seems to be drawn at the end of Mark Twain’s masterpiece *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as the young protagonist “can’t stand” the thought of being “civilized” and decides to run away. Black Humor as an exact term was however not applied until the publishing of French surrealist André Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir* in 1939. It contained a broad spectrum of authors such as

³ Max F. Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1973), 15.

⁴ Konrad Knickerbocker, "Humor with a Mortal Sting," *New York Times Book Review*, September 27 1964, 3. In Douglas M. Davis, ed. *The World of Black Humor: An Introductory Anthology of Selections and Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1967), 299.

⁵ Robert E. Scholes, *The Fabulators* (New York,: Oxford University Press, 1967), 38.

Jonathan Swift, Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll, Franz Kafka and Friedrich Nietzsche. It was however Bruce Jay Friedman that first published an American anthology in 1965, and as such “initiating” the American “movement”. These authors seemed to be as varied a collection as Breton’s; yet they happened to be writing in the same age, and it seemed it was the age itself that darkened its writers. It was the absurd spirit of the early sixties which caused Friedman to state that the journalist has taken the role of the satirist: “The journalist who, in the year 1964, must cover the ecumenical debate on whether Jews, on the one hand, are still to be known as Christ-killers, or, on the other hand are to be let off the hook, is certainly today’s satirist”⁶. The author or satirist, who is writing to “serve his society”⁷ as Vonnegut states, must then find new territory in order to affect the reader. This causes Friedman to advocate the discovery of new land and a “new set of filters”, claiming that the satirist “has had to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire and I think this is what is meant by black humor”⁸.

One of the first great practitioners of satire, Horace, provided some of the earliest pronouncements about the nature of good satire. In the Horatian tradition of satire, “the satirist, speaking out freely, seeks to laugh men out of their follies”⁹. According to modern formalist conventions, the satiric form has four central elements from by which it may be distinguished. Satire should be rhetorical, corrective and normative, and it should have a clear object of attack. The formalist interpretive strategy, according to Steven Weisenburger, was developed to “contain the great ages of Classical and Neoclassical satire”, and was thus believed to have transhistorical validity. Weisenburger opens his introduction to *Fables of Subversion, Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* by labeling the satire as defined by formalist critics as a “generative” model of satirical practice (as opposed to a “degenerative”

⁶Bruce Jay Friedman, "Foreward, Black Humor," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh)*: 1503
Garland Studies in Humor: 2 (New York: Garland, 1993), 22.

⁷ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*: <Opinions>, 273.

⁸ Friedman, "Foreward, Black Humor," 22.

⁹ Dustin H. Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 6-7.

mode). In this view, “readers have confidently understood satire as a rationalist discourse launched against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking.” The purpose of satire in the “generative” model is to “construct consensus, and to deploy irony in the work of stabilizing various cultural hierarchies”¹⁰. This view is echoed in most critical discussions of satire which often refer to works written in the 18th century, the “Age of Reason” also known as “the Golden Age of Satire”¹¹. This was an age with optimal conditions for political satire according to Matthew Hodgart. He claims that political satire requires four distinct conditions to gain strength, a certain degree of free speech, participation in political affairs by the educated classes, the writer must have confidence in his ability to influence the state of affairs and there must be a wide audience with an appreciation for “wit, imagination and the graces of literature”, and this audience must be sophisticated enough to “enjoy their application to serious topics”¹². In other words, political satire requires an audience who are not “Yahoos” in order to be effective in its attempt to reform. As such, the focus of satire was upon improvement, and the “normative and corrective” elements of satire thus often stem from a firm belief in satire’s ability to illustrate the vices of man and the manner in which he falls short of ‘the ideal’, and also to correct the error of his ways. The foundation of such views is the Lockean philosophy and its notion of human beings as reasoning creatures, and this is often seen as one of the main influences in the writing of central historical documents such as The Declaration of Independence. This document was approved by Congress July 4th, 1776, and still has an enormous impact on US society. On the rights of man it reads: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with

¹⁰ Steven Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 1.

¹¹ Jane Ogborn and Peter Buckroyd, *Satire*, Cambridge Contexts in Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15.

¹² Matthew John Caldwell Hodgart, *Satire : Origins and Principles*, Transaction ed. ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 77.

certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. Benjamin Franklin is often held as a symbol of this ideal; his writings are dominated by the “pursuit of Happiness”, of the ideal man and how to become one. However, ideas of “truth” present a head on collision with the spirit of the Black Humorists and (postmodern) satire which, along with contemporary philosophy, wants to discover “who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided¹³”. Michel Foucault comments on the very notion of “truth” and writes that

Truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth: the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true¹⁴.

The confusion of “truth” could be what is expressed and targeted in Black Humor fiction, and the above quote could serve as illustration of the first of Steven Weisenburger’s proposed three key benchmarks for Black Humor fiction of the sixties as: 1. an expression of the postmodern sensibility, 2. a satirical writing, for so it was received, covertly by those promoting and overtly by those attacking it, and 3. a challenge to then accepted modal conventions for satire, specifically to the formalist idea¹⁵. This indicates that by the removal of the normative and corrective elements as a result of postmodern sensibility, i.e. an expressed skepticism towards “all master narratives” and “self evident truths”, the text was

¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, Jean-Loup Thébaud, and Wlad Godzich, *Just Gaming* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 9. Qtd in Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 6.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. VB Leicht (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 1668.

¹⁵Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 89.

still understood as satire. Such notions presents an interesting challenge to the formalist analysis, indicating that the primary focus of satire was no longer on reform, but on targeting the vices of society.

Two of the most familiar names among the American Black Humor writers, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Joseph Heller, both served as soldiers in the Second World War, and they both went on to work as journalists and as “ad-men”¹⁶. This gave them primary knowledge of some of the most dominating industries of American postwar society; military, media and Public Relations. Their novels *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch 22* are satiric works where the soldier functions as the satirist. As a modern satirist, Kurt Vonnegut illustrates the new “filters” of Friedman’s notion and writes of his inspiration;

Where do I get my ideas from? You might as well have asked that of Beethoven. He was goofing around in Germany like everybody else, and all of a sudden this stuff came gushing out of him. It was music. I was goofing around like everybody else in Indiana, and all of a sudden this stuff came gushing out. It was disgust with civilization¹⁷.

Vonnegut seems to imply that the product of an artist reflects his experiences and surroundings. What came “gushing” out of Beethoven was the musical representation of his reality, and similarly the literary outrage of US postwar Zeitgeist came “gushing” out of Vonnegut. America in the 1960’s could be seen as an example of how the entire culture of a nation is based on recent and ongoing industrialized warfare (mostly) on foreign soil, a far cry from the American Revolution and the satirical “golden age”. A generation of young men and women participated directly and indirectly in the war, and the US Army under Franklin Delano Roosevelt grew rapidly as the conflict in Europe accelerated in the late 1930’s. In addition followed an enormous industry built upon the war effort, millions of men and women

¹⁶ Judith Ruderman, *Joseph Heller, Literature and Life Series* (New York: Continuum, 1991). Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon: <Opinions>*.

¹⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, *Armageddon in Retrospect* (Random House, 2008), 233.

went to work in factories converted to produce weapons and machinery for war. “The Good War”, referring to the battle against Nazi-Germany and its allies, was later replaced by wars in Korea and Vietnam, and an ideological fight against communism. What had started as an alliance would in a decade evolve into a race for power and a military upgrade of immense proportions, climaxing in a nuclear crisis where the entire world held its breath. The “clear cut” image of World War II would serve as an image of the US army for decades, however as the highly controversial war in Vietnam seemed to spiral out of control, and “body count” became part of the daily news, photographers and film crews were in the jungle documenting it all. Satire and Black humor as a mode of satire work to survey contemporary norms, and in a society war-driven society, the Black Humorists would use recent and ongoing wars to lampoon the human condition. The message was, according to Alan Pratt, that “human beings are helpless when confronting an absurd reality”¹⁸.

Black Humor literature of the 1960’s was often linked to and compared with the literature of existentialism, and it is similar in that it begins with the same assumption - that the world is absurd. Several critics such as Pratt and Janoff support this view. Numasawa claims Black Humor kinship with existentialist “negative cosmology”¹⁹, while Feldman claims that “Black Humor Americanizes existentialism into merciless anarchism”²⁰. Kurt Vonnegut quotes French existentialist and World War I soldier Louis-Ferdinand Celine in his novel, claiming that “no art is possible without a dance with death”²¹. According to

¹⁸ Alan R. Pratt, "'People Are Equally Wretched Everywhere': Candide, Black Humor and the Existential Absurd," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh)*: 1503

Garland Studies in Humor: 2 (New York: Garland, 1993), 185.

¹⁹ Kōji Numasawa, "Black Humor: An American Aspect," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh)*: 1503

Garland Studies in Humor: 2 (New York: Garland, 1993), 43.

²⁰ Burton Feldman, "Anatomy of Black Humor," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh)*: 1503

Garland Studies in Humor: 2 (New York: Garland, 1993), 105.

²¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* (New York: Dial Press, 2009), 27.

Weisenburger, “a post existentialist suspicion of any received structures”²² runs through most definitions of postmodern works, and Janoff refers to Camus’ definition of the absurd, “man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his *longing for happiness and for reason*. The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world”²³. The longing for liberal humanism and a new “age of reason” is literally expressed in this notion, but it seems impossible after conflicts such as the 20th century World Wars. World War II was the deadliest conflict in history; approximately 60 million people are believed to have lost their lives. In the aftermath of actions such as the Holocaust, the notion of absurdity is more or less taken for granted. However, the view of the Black Humorists differs from that of the existentialist, rather than “stoic resignation” or “heroic struggle”, according to Pratt, “the black humorists try to wrest laughter from our cosmic plight”²⁴. As Bruce Janoff puts it: “Insofar as they can be categorized philosophically, the black humorists subscribe to an irrationalist metaphysic that borders on nihilism in contradiction to the French existential system which is characterized by human involvement and the ideal of service”²⁵. According to Janoff, the black humorists “see everything external to the individual mind as irrational” as they are unable to locate any “positive correspondence between reasoning man and an indifferent world”. Man will always lose in this relationship, and the only chance for dignity lies in losing “gracefully, grudgingly and comically”²⁶.

Steven Weisenburger claims the “absurd reality” represented in many Black Humor novels acts as a reflection of the postmodernist “final breaking of the mirror”. This includes a “radical doubt towards representation” such as Lyotard’s “master narratives”, focusing in particular on the “enabling and legitimizing myths of (for example) enlightenment or

²²Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 84.

²³ Bruce Janoff, "Black Humor, Existentialism, and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh): 1503*. Emphasis added. *Garland Studies in Humor: 2* (New York: Garland, 1993), 31-32.

²⁴ Alan R. Pratt, *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1993), xvii-xviii.

²⁵ Janoff, "Black Humor, Existentialism, and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion," 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

emancipation, plots by which the modernist seeks to westernize and totalize all of history”²⁷. Mirroring Camus and such critics as Janoff, these sentiments ultimately state the” longing” for “reason” while acknowledging that the world is absurd. The Black Humorists thus express skepticism towards social, political and historic narratives, and as such suggest a certain paranoia or “panic” towards ideological consumption of enlightenment narratives. According to Fredric Jameson,

the western enlightenment may be grasped as part of a properly bourgeois cultural revolution, in which the values and the discourses, the habits and the daily space, of the Ancien Regime were systematically dismantled so that in their place could be set the new conceptualities, habits and life forms of a capitalist market society²⁸.

In Weisenburger’s opinion, the expectations of satirists were to “sustain the dominance of ideal over merely commodified being”²⁹ in the rise of modern capitalism, and “to retell the fable of a utopian, transcendental goal for capitalist production”³⁰. The notion of the liberal individual seemed to be one of the core ideas of the capitalist society of corporate America and thus ironically of the creation of the “one dimensional” “organization man”. It seemed these ideals were put to use for ideological purposes, causing a catch-22 “situation” where “the signified” representation of “enlightenment” values was only one of many motivating impulses put to use on either end of the political scale. According to Pratt, the Black Humorists react to the notion of human beings being reduced to the functional by the “pressures of a disintegrating world”, and they express life as tolerable if one could accumulate the indifference of a machine³¹. In combination with an indication that humans are more and more motivated by external impulses, and the growing suspicion that most

²⁷Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 4.

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious : Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002), 81.

²⁹Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

³¹ Pratt, "People Are Equally Wretched Everywhere': Candide, Black Humor and the Existential Absurd," 188.

sociopolitical narratives are ideological constructs, the suggestion that reality has reached a level of absurdity which demands machinelike indifference served to create anxieties coined as “agency panic” by Timothy Melley in *Empire of Conspiracy the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Melley defines agency panic as an “intense anxiety about apparent loss of autonomy and self-control - the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been “constructed” by powerful external agents”³². The two main features of agency panic manifest themselves as 1. “A nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action. This fear sometime manifests itself in a belief that the world is full of “programmed” or “brainwashed” subjects, addicts, automatons, or “mass-produced” persons”, 2. An anxiety consisting “of a character’s fear that he or she has been personally manipulated by powerful external controls”³³. But while postmodern theory rejects the notion of the liberal individual in the claim that “identity is constructed from without, repeatedly shaped through performance”, the notion of agency panic rejects postmodern subjectivity³⁴. The fact that the Black Humorists continued their satiric activity would seem to indicate agency panic rather than blind acceptance of the postmodern notion of the individual. The validity of enlightenment values were questioned and challenged by authors such as Vonnegut and Heller, not because they held them to be untrue, but because the notion itself could actually pose a threat to the individual in a society dominated by “programmed” or “brainwashed” subjects, and could be applied by everyone to serve almost any cause. Such a challenge could also be posed to any set of values issued by those “claiming” to be “your country” or “your God” as both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five* satirically illustrates. One could from this move to view the American society during and following World War II, in Louis Althusser’s terms, as an expanding capitalistic society whose main concern was in fact the reproduction of

³² Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy : The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

the productive forces and the existing relations of production established during the war, and if so, enlightenment notions were, according to Jameson, being applied as part of the ruling ideology.

In Althusser's social theory, the most important feature of (repressive) state apparatuses such as the army is to ensure the "subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'. All agents of production...must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'"³⁵. Althusser also put strong emphasis on the Ideological State Apparatus, the part of the state apparatus which enters the private domain and consists of religious, educational, family, legal, political, trade-union, communications (press, radio, television etc) and cultural (literature, arts, sports etc.) apparatuses³⁶. For while the ruling class controls the Repressive State Apparatus, "no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatuses"³⁷. To live in ideology would imply to live "in a determinate (religious, ethical, etc) representation of the world whose imaginary distortion depends on their imaginary relation to their conditions of existence"³⁸. Althusser's "duplicate mirror structure of ideology" expresses ultimately that living in ideology demands that individuals are interpellated as 'subjects', that they subject to 'the Subject', the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, subjects of each other and the subject of himself and finally "the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right"³⁹.

Althusser claims that as a result:

³⁵ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. VB Leicht (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2001), 1485. Emphasis added

³⁶Ibid., 1490.

³⁷ Ibid., 1491.

³⁸ Ibid., 1500. Emphasis added.

³⁹ Ibid., 1507.

Caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects ‘work by themselves’ in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the ‘bad subjects’ who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State apparatus. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right ‘all by themselves’, i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs. They ‘recognize’ the existing state of affairs, that ‘it is really true that it is so and not otherwise’, and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’, etc. Their concrete material behavior is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: ‘Amen-So be it’⁴⁰.

Althusser’s theories on ideology and class struggles could be applied as a social explanation of many aspects portrayed in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. First of all, both novels presents protagonists who are “bad subjects” in a determinate ideological representation of the world, they do not “work by themselves” and they provoke detachments from the Repressive State Apparatus. But most importantly, these protagonists refuse to recognize the existing state of affairs, and do not believe that if they act accordingly everything will be all right, they refuse all master narratives as a part of ideology. They express “agency panic” in a society filled with “automatons”, or “subjects”, where the need to “reproduce the means of production” at the corporate rate necessitated by World War II and the Cold War ultimately seemed to be the reason for the “absurd reality” and “the notion of human beings being reduced to the functional”. The resigned concept of the Black Humorist stems from the implications that all others are steeped in ideology, and in a society of Yahoos, the satirist is unable to influence any state of affairs.

The black humor satirists seem to place themselves, not above, like the classic moral satirist, but as caught in the very system they set out to ridicule. Freud’s gallows humor, or

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1507.

what Kurt Vonnegut refers to as “Jewish humor”, is defined by Vonnegut as “humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations”⁴¹. This notion in an “absurd” and intolerable reality sheds interesting light on the psychology and tone of the Black Humor works of Heller and Vonnegut. Weisenburger explains Freud’s notion as a tradition where the subject (joker) and the object (the joked about) collapses into one. This occurs “not through an operation of reason, but through a free and contingent intelligence, wit”⁴². According to Conrad Knickerbocker, the Black Humorists “laugh in tune with the man on the gallows who asked “Are you sure this thing is safe?” because their social realities seem just as precarious”⁴³. Freud explains the admiration one feels in the presence of such wit; “something like magnanimity in this ‘blague’, in the man’s tenacious hold upon his customary self and his disregard of what might overthrow that self and drive it to despair”⁴⁴. The humorist refuses to “submit his intelligence to antagonistic realities” and instead “play out the petty customs of everyday reality in order to triumph over the hostile monolith of which they are now just emblematic parts”. As such, the “jokester” applies “customary concern to assert the pleasure principle – whose outward sign is laughter – at precisely that moment when its normative master, the reality principle, would seem in total command”⁴⁵. Gallows humor seems to be the overall tone of Vonnegut and Heller’s works, as they are writing in a world equally threatening as the gallows, similarly absurd and hopeless. Their characters express, often with irony, customary concern in life-threatening situations creating satire as the reader is made fully aware of the situation and its implications. Ideological narratives are as such clarified

⁴¹Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*: <Opinions>, 257.

⁴²Sigmund Freud et al., *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*; Translated under the General Editorship of James Strachey in Collaboration with Anna Freud, Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. [with a Portrait.] (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), 228-29. In Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 91.

⁴³ Knickerbocker, "Humor with a Mortal Sting." In Davis, ed. *The World of Black Humor: An Introductory Anthology of Selections and Criticism*, 300.

⁴⁴ Freud et al., *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*; Translated under the General Editorship of James Strachey in Collaboration with Anna Freud, Assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. [with a Portrait.], 228-29. In Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 91.

⁴⁵Ibid., 91.

and targeted as the irrational behavior of the characters creates humor. Another illustrative example of the humor of these novels could be seen as the nuclear bombs absurdly called “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing between 150 000 and 240 000 people⁴⁶. Similarly World War II sentiments are commented by Paul Fussell in *Waritme*, World War II troops were notorious for “verbal subversion and contempt”, and “especially” Americans were “fertile with insult and cynicism”. Women marines were known as “BAMS (broad-assed marines)” while soldiers were devising “SNAFU” whose “offspring TARFU (“Things are really fucked up”), FUBAR (“Fucked up beyond all recognition”)” and “FUBB (“Fucked up beyond belief”)”. This was not just a “gallows humor” approach to the, according to Fussell, “danger and fear . . . boredom and uncertainty and loneliness and deprivation”, this was a response to the

conviction that optimistic publicity and euphemism had rendered their experience so falsely that it would never be readily communicable. They knew that in its representation to the laity, what was happening to them was systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied⁴⁷.

Targeting such notions, Black Humor also rests on the incongruity principle, whose theory claims laughter to be the result of incongruity between knowledge or expectance and actual happenings, jokes could be seen as “a play upon form, where what is played with are the accepted structures of a given society and could thus have a “critical function”⁴⁸. Louis D. Rubin’s claims in his essay “the Great American Joke” that “the essence of comedy is incongruity” and that this “lies at the heart of American experience”⁴⁹. David Simmons claims

⁴⁶ District United States. Army. Corps of Engineers. Manhattan, *A-Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* ([Whitefish, MT]: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 20.

⁴⁷ Paul Fussell, *Waritme : Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 27.

⁴⁸ Simon Critchley, *On Humour, Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10.

⁴⁹ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "The Great American Joke," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 72(1973). Qtd in David Simmons, ""The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True": Negotiating the Reality of World War Ii in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*," in *Critical Insights: Slaughterhouse-Five*, ed. Leonard Mustazza (Pasadena: Salem Press,

that the humor of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five* is based on this incongruity, holding that “it is of central importance to understanding the comparable satirical impulses behind both Vonnegut’s and Heller’s novels”⁵⁰. This principle also serves in accordance with O’Neill’s theory of Black Humor as a result of the gap between the “real” and the “ideal”⁵¹.

According to Janoff, the protagonist of Black Humor novels are overwhelmed by an antagonistic reality where they, just as the existentialist, are “enraged and frustrated in coming to terms with their existential loneliness”, they are “overcome with the realization that their physical existence is qualitatively no different from that of the lower animals or even nonhuman matter”, and they are “aware of the self-delusion inherent in attributing satisfying meanings to aspects of reality which are either unintelligible or so threatening psychologically that they become unacceptable”⁵². Unlike the existentialist, as mentioned, their manner of resigning is one of humor. To attribute “satisfying meanings” could be attempts of establishing master narratives, or normatives, or merely to express customary concern in the face of the hopeless reality of which they are part, or as Weisenburger puts it; “the theme of everyday routines continuing in the face of virtually empty hope”⁵³. This seems to be the very foundation of Black Humor, so when it was criticized for the lack of identifiable targets the phrasing of a reply to such critique, according to Weisenburger, should have been something like the following:

Black humor was innovative in bringing new energies to the novel; further, the most important writers associated with Black humor had come to understand how one might satirically interrogate the “social and political world” by cross examining, not

2010). in Leonard Mustazza, *Slaughterhouse-Five, by Kurt Vonnegut*, Critical Insights (Pasadena, Calif.: Salem Press, 2011), 65.

⁵⁰ Simmons, ""The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True": Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*." In Mustazza, *Slaughterhouse-Five, by Kurt Vonnegut*, 65.

⁵¹ Patrick O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

⁵² Janoff, "Black Humor, Existentialism, and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion," 29.

⁵³ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 92.

extramural targets per se, but forms of social and political discourse used to construct ideas about that world⁵⁴.

This could be illustrated in Jean Baudrillard's theory of signs and simulacra, in his terms, just as a map representing an area of land, "a sign could refer to the depth of meaning . . . a sign could exchange for meaning". However, whereas a sign should serve as representation, which "starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent", Baudrillard claims that an image, or sign, has four successive stages, moving from the initial "reflection of a basic reality" through to masking and perverting reality, where one would find oneself in the realm of ideology, to thirdly, masking the absence of reality, and finally landing on the point where the image has "no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum"⁵⁵. This is the key element of Black Humor satire: Not to focus on the traditional normative element with the purpose of reform, but to illustrate representation and false imagery in itself. According to Linda Barnes, "whereas satire, being moralistic, aims to correct by holding within brackets a vision of what should be, Black humor does not tell us how to live; its concern is rather with perception (that is, with) forging through surface reality to present life as it is"⁵⁶. Black Humor effectively tears down historical and ideological edifices such as Cold War logic, economic necessity, political discourse, religion and even the manner in which death itself is viewed. It makes use of the grotesque in that it assaults

our very ways of signifying (on) being itself . . . Semantically, the grotesque style intermixes categories of being that the systems of language, and thus of representation normally keeps discrete . . . Grotesque art assaults, not existence, but the categorical imperatives through which we shape existence . . . Semantically the grotesque is an

⁵⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. VB Leicht (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 1736.

⁵⁶ Linda Horvay Barnes, *The Dialectics of Black Humor: Process and Product* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1978), 25.

atavistic disruptive game played with the differential order of signifiers. Pragmatically, it implicates the reader in that atavism⁵⁷.

Several episodes in the satiric novels of Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller make use of grotesque elements in order to question the very manner in which we view existence. The “metaphysics of multiplicity”, as Max Schulz labels it, is the disordered variety frequently found in black humor novels. It is the juxtaposing of “comic understatement” and “gut-wrenching realism” in mocking accounts followed by scenes which “occasion not laughter but revulsion”⁵⁸. Both authors use devices of traditional humor, described by Pratt in his introduction to *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, such as non sequitur, parody, travesty, burlesque, exaggeration and understatement⁵⁹. A recurring feature in these novels, especially in Vonnegut’s, are jokes, or “shticks”. According to Weisenburger, the black humorists based their narrative structure on the shtick, a “brief, narrative joke with a stable viewpoint and thematic links to adjacent jokes”⁶⁰. They rely on rapidly shifting narratives, and the boundaries between reality, hallucination and fantasy are hazy. Heller makes perfect use of the technique of polyphony, where

characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems. The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the fully weighted ideological conception of his own A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices . . .⁶¹

⁵⁷ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 24.

⁵⁸ Pratt, "People Are Equally Wretched Everywhere': Candide, Black Humor and the Existential Absurd," 184.

⁵⁹ Pratt, *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, xxii.

⁶⁰ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 91.

⁶¹ Michail Bachtin, Caryl Emerson, and Wayne C. Booth, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 5-6.

The play on language questions the accepted structures of not only the military but of language itself. No subject seems to be sacrosanct, and ideologies, philosophies, theologies, taboos and myths are blasphemed, twisted or lampooned⁶².

As previously discussed, Black Humor novels do not propose solutions, instead they focus both directly and indirectly on the entropy in “society’s social, political and economic systems”⁶³. Joseph Heller focuses on the absurd reality governed by principles such as the nonsensical *Catch-22*, “a world in which there is no relation between intention and result”⁶⁴, according to Richard Kostelanetz. This is further emphasized as some satirists view the world, as observed by several philosophers and authors, as an alien, an animal or a child would. Described by Gilles Deleuze as “deterritorialization” or “outlandishness”, the task is, according to Critchley, “to write from the place of the animal, to look at human affairs with a dog’s or beetle’s eye, as in Kafka’s stories”⁶⁵. Hodgart describes the effect as “the absurdity of social institutions” being “exposed when they are reduced to childish or primitive terms”⁶⁶. By revealing ideological terms these Black Humorists do not set out to pose as the typical moral satirist, they reduce themselves according to the ruling ideology just like they reduce their protagonist. According to Max F. Schulz, it is typical in Black Humor fiction that “the careful Jamesian distinction between narrator and author is blurred, allowing for the introduction of authorial responses to the narrator’s vision not verified by the narrative . . . Corollary to the narrational blur is the felt presence of the author throughout the novel”⁶⁷. Vonnegut even writes himself into the novel, where he diminishes himself to “an old fart with

⁶² Pratt, *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, xxii.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁶⁴ Richard Kostelanetz, "The American Absurd Novel," in *The World of Black Humor: An Introductory Anthology of Selections and Criticism*, ed. Douglas M. Davis (New York: Dutton, 1967), 307.

⁶⁵ Critchley, *On Humour*, 35.

⁶⁶ Hodgart, *Satire : Origins and Principles*, 124.

⁶⁷ Max F. Schulz, "Toward a Definition of Black Humor," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh): 1503* *Garland Studies in Humor: 2* (New York: Garland, 1993), 169-70.

his pall malls and his memories”⁶⁸. Billy Pilgrim and Yossarian are representative Black Humor protagonists, these are typically picaresque antiheroes, “caricatures of the innocent, inept, depraved, or insane”⁶⁹. Yossarian is described in such a manner that one will never fully understand whether he is the most sane or insane character of the lot. They function as contrasts to the young soldiers who are “steeped” in ideology, and illustrate how young lives are being taken as a result of the war, and how the influence of notions such as “your country” and cultural bodies causes them to do so willingly. With a clear reference to all wars, both recent and ongoing, Heller writes in *Catch-22*, “all over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their young lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind, least of all the boys who were laying down their young lives”⁷⁰.

In the end, satire is an exploration of humanity, both of human nature and of human culture. It seeks to convey the errors of man in many different shapes or forms, in the formalist tradition this is done with the purpose of reform. Satire could be found in countless forms of art, such as sermons, drawings, drama, novels and cartoons. Elements of black humor could be applied to regular satire; one would often label the use of grotesque elements or instances of gallows humor as black humor. It is the purpose of this thesis to survey Black Humor as a satiric mode in itself based on *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse 5* with the focus on certain elements that separates it from the formalist model of “reformatory” satire, most prominently the apparent lack of a normative standard and as such the targeting of the creation of such standards. This is done on the basis that Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Joseph Heller are recognized as two of the most prominent American Black Humorists and these novels are used as examples of Black Humor in countless definitions of the tradition. This thesis will not

⁶⁸ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 3.

⁶⁹ Pratt, *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, xxi.

⁷⁰ Joseph Heller and Howard Jacobson, *Catch-22*, Vintage Classics (London: Vintage, 2004), 18.

take into account more “chaotic” or “degenerative”⁷¹ novels of Black Humor; it will focus on more closely targeted novels that suggest that reform is necessary yet impossible. The focus will remain on Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut as they are quite similar in their tone of humor, and illustrative of the tone this thesis seeks to recognize as part of a larger satiric body. Swift expressed the same ironic distance in his proposal to eat babies, and in these days this tone is apparent among various stand-up comedians and in television comedy-shows. Vonnegut and Heller also share several other traits such as a military background, a Jewish heritage (Jewish humor) and a career in advertising. The focus of these novels is to explore the state of the world through war. According to most theories regarding satire, it should be on a mission to rectify readers into “right thinking” according to universal norms, but these novels instead attempt to depict the fallacies of society and convey a chaotic reality while proving most universal norms as nothing more than ideology. They do not fall completely into the realm of postmodernist satire and leave representation all together, instead they target most discourses that are created in order to make meaning and create structure and identity in a chaotic war-driven reality, a reality which includes the satirist himself. These satirists make use of most techniques of a traditional satirist, but they are distinguished in a few key traits:

1. The satirist expresses no explicit sense of superiority; he rather reduces himself and his protagonist according to the ruling ideology, creating an “innocent” narrative voice and an antihero protagonist.
2. He has no fantastic vision of the world reformed, instead he juxtaposes the grotesque with humor or indifference in order to challenge certain political and social constructs.
3. As a result, most attempts of establishing a “normative” of sorts are targeted.

⁷¹ For a definition of degenerative satire see Weisenburger pp. 7-8

4. He demonstrates complete lack of confidence in his own ability to influence the state of affairs in a world gone mad, thus the Black Humor texts of Vonnegut and Heller have no suggested solutions and illustrates that individual action is useless. All one is left with is laughter.

As a result, Black Humor in the works of Heller and Vonnegut could be seen as a “gallows humor” variety of the Black Humor tradition, they target above all the need to focus on customary concern in imminent peril, such as the use of ideology to disguise the reality of war. Their weakened ethos makes it seem impossible to propose serious solutions; instead they present themselves as typical ‘bad subjects’ according to the ideology they satirize. The confusing narratives and structure of Black Humor fiction seems to be a reflection of reality as the satirist sees it, and the lack of normative and corrective elements in the novels seems to reflect and target the lack of such elements in reality. The shared normative values assumed in earlier formalist approaches to satire are thus for the most part absent in these novels; yet the message seems to be that the next generation is undeniably worth protection and salvation.

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*

Joseph Heller (1923-1999) worked on *Catch-22* for eight years before its initial publication in 1961. The first chapter was first written in “longhand one morning in 1953, hunched over my desk at the advertising agency”⁷². This chapter was published in *New World Writing* #7 in 1955 under the title “Catch-18”, but at the publication of the novel the title was altered to avoid conflict with Leon Uri’s novel *Mila 18*⁷³.

In 1942, almost twenty years prior to the publication of *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller had enlisted in the Air Corps, he was nineteen at this point and served for three years during the Second World War. Some of this time was spent as a wing bombardier in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations where he was stationed on Corsica and flew sixty missions in B-25 “Mitchell” bombers⁷⁴. Several incidences and characters of *Catch-22* were inspired by Heller’s own experiences according to his autobiography *Now and Then*, he also reports of experiencing the same fear as the novel’s protagonist Yossarian. After an incident with a wounded top gunner who served as inspiration for the character ‘Snowden’ in the novel, Heller notes

I might have seemed a hero and been treated as something of a small hero for a short while, but I didn’t feel like one. They were trying to kill me, and I wanted to go home. That they were trying to kill all of us each time we went up was no consolation. They were trying to kill me. I was frightened on every mission after that one, even the certified milk runs⁷⁵.

Not many surveys have taken into account the influence of Heller’s own experience, Heller himself initially stated in 1970 and 1975 that *Catch-22* was “not really about World War Two”, it was targeting American society “during the Cold War . . . the Korean war and about

⁷² Joseph Heller, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 212.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

⁷⁴ Michael C. Scoggins, "Joseph Heller's Combat Experiences in *Catch-22*," *War, Literature & the Arts* 15(2003): 214.

⁷⁵ Heller, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*, 181.

the possibility of a Vietnam”⁷⁶. Many critics have instead attempted a traditional satiric analysis of *Catch-22*, and its style and structure has been discussed and revised since its publication. It functions to great extent in the realm of traditional satire, according to James Nagel it is “essentially a Juvenalian satire which functions within the historical patterns of that form”⁷⁷. However, Nagel locates the “normative standards” as “essentially opposed to war, capitalism, bureaucracy, and traditional religion and in favor of freedom, peace, agnosticism, sex and life”⁷⁸. While other critics faulted the novel for “it’s central evasiveness as regards war, for its not having a point of view, an awareness of what things should or should not be”⁷⁹. Heller stated in an interview that “it offended some people, during the Vietnam War, that I had not written a truly pacifist book . . . But I am not a true pacifist. World War Two was necessary at least to the extent that we were fighting for the survival of millions of people”⁸⁰. As such, Heller can not be said to have written an anti-war book or have pacifism as a normative standard. He seems to focus on the logic, or rather a lack of such, behind wars, and this is what causes the hopeless laugh of Black Humor. Heller rather holds his aim as the logic of the Cold War period of the fifties. In an interview he stated;

What distresses me very much is that the ethic that is often dictated by a wartime emergency has a certain justification when the wartime emergency exists, but when this thing is carried over into areas of peace - when the military, for example, retains its enormous influence on affairs in a peacetime situation, and where the same demands are made upon the individual in the cause of national interest . . .-when this wartime

⁷⁶ Sam Merrill, "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller," *Playboy* June, 1975, 68. Qtd in Scoggins, "Joseph Heller's Combat Experiences in *Catch-22*," 213.

⁷⁷ James Nagel, "Catch-22 and Angry Humor: A Study of the Normative Values of Satire," in *Dark Humor*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby, *Bloom's Literary Themes (Bloom's Literary Themes)* (New York, NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010), 49.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁹ Schulz, "Toward a Definition of Black Humor," 165.

⁸⁰ Merrill, "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller," 64. Qtd in Scoggins, "Joseph Heller's Combat Experiences in *Catch-22*," 215. Emphasis added.

emergency ideology is transplanted to peacetime, then you have this kind of lag which leads not only to absurd situations, but to very tragic situations⁸¹.

This statement seems to mirror Althusser's social theory where the function of the army is to "ensure subjection to the ruling ideology" and uphold existing conditions of production. The protest against this notion is also noted by Morris Dickstein as quite apparent in *Catch-22* as he states that the "success" of *Catch-22* could be attributed

to the widespread spiritual revulsion in the sixties against many of our most sacrosanct institutions, including the army; to which our leaders replied by heightening just those things which had caused the disgust in the first place, especially the quality of fraud, illusion and manipulation in our public life. Just as the response to war-protest was escalation and the solution of the failures of the bombing was more bombing, so the push for more honesty in public debate was met by more public relations and bigger lies. The Johnson administration's unshakeable insistence that black was white, that escalation was really the search for peace, and that the war was being won, was a perfect realization of the structure of unreality and insanity that runs as a theme through *Catch-22*⁸².

The military bureaucracy and the capitalistic syndicate that serve as the antagonistic reality of *Catch-22* dramatize this manipulating system to the point of absurdity. According to Stephen W. Potts, the soldiers in *Catch-22* serve at the mercy "of a system that brutally manipulates language - and thus thought itself - in order to retain hegemony" and as a result "control the parameters of discourse" and "reorganize "facts" to suit predetermined conclusions", thus "preventing a rational challenge of these "facts"⁸³. These statements relates to Foucault's notion of "general politics of truth", thus challenging the traditional satiric claim for a

⁸¹ Paul Krassner, "An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller," in *A Catch-22 Casebook*, ed. Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973), 288. Qtd in Stephen W. Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 2nd ed., The Milford Series Popular Writers of Today, (San Bernardino, Calif.: Borgo Press, 1995), 40.

⁸² Morris Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh): 1503* *Garland Studies in Humor: 2* (New York: Garland, 1993), 143-44.

⁸³ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 20.

normative. This type of satire rather targets the attempt of establishing “truths”, and this is done through what Sanford Pinsker refers to as a “poker face” narrator, “a showman who spreads before us in a comedian’s patter an absurd and appalling world of viciousness, hypocrisy and stupidity, and leaves us to draw whatever conclusions we may choose (or not choose) to draw⁸⁴. The novel is written in a third person limited omniscient voice, mostly from John Yossarian’s point of view. But unlike *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Catch-22* is polyphonic and it functions as a lengthy satiric dialogue of different voices. According to David M. Craig, this type of narration is typical Heller as “the impersonal narrative voice” functions against “two dimensional characters” who serve as “ideas given flesh”⁸⁵. The contrast between the ironic distance of the narrative voice and the subjective reaction of the individual characters is a key feature of the satiric effect of *Catch-22* and thus its “gallows humor” approach. Nagel proclaims the setting of satire as “often chaotic, crowded, and filled with images of corruption and decay”⁸⁶, and this is primarily the case in *Catch-22*. Humorous situations where various characters react as their “ideas” against the “impersonal” description of war are disrupted by sudden scenes of grotesque realism, and the result creates focus on absurd “truths” that are out of sync with reality. As a result “comic scenes and comic detail occur in chapter after chapter, almost always couched in rampant unrealism. But the unrealism, the incongruities, do not obscure Heller’s insistence on the unrelenting truth of the irrationality, the inhumanity, of war”⁸⁷. It depicts a world “completely out of control” where war is equated with the modern industrial society rather than being seen as an aspect of it, according to Patrick O’Neill⁸⁸.

⁸⁴ O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading*, 172.

⁸⁵ David M. Craig, *Tilting at Mortality : Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction*, Humor in Life and Letters Series (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 188.

⁸⁶ Nagel, "Catch-22 and Angry Humor: A Study of the Normative Values of Satire," 50.

⁸⁷ Louis Hasley, "Black Humor and Gray," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh)*: 1503

Garland Studies in Humor: 2 (New York: Garland, 1993), 113.

⁸⁸ O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading*, 158.

Catch-22 is the story of Captain John Yossarian, a 28 year old American bombardier stationed at the fictional island of Pianosa during the final year of WW2. Just as in *Slaughterhouse Five*, the novel opens with a disclaimer: "The island of Pianosa lies in the Mediterranean Sea eight miles south of Elba. It is very small and obviously could not accommodate all of the actions described. Like the setting of this novel, the characters, too, are fictitious". The ironic tone of the narrative voice is apparent even in the disclaimer, removing the reader from any illusions of realist fiction before the novel has even begun. The style and structure is central to the chaos that the novel seeks to reveal, and it is also quite typical of Black Humor fiction. It is not linear, except for the final four chapters, nor are there given many hints about the succession of the plot. It is written in the past tense, and as the story progresses it becomes clear that the entire novel is structured as a circle of flashbacks, and that most of the people it revolves around are already dead, and these deaths, along with the number of missions needed for rotation, often grotesquely serve as the point of reference in time. According to Morris Dickstein, this gives the impression of everything happening at once as they are "drenched in death on all sides"⁸⁹. Thus the characters are dying and reappearing, "so that we're shocked when they finally do disappear, one by one, each with his own mock individuality, each to his utterly depersonalizing fate"⁹⁰. The narrative is further a series of repetitions, mirror conversations and events. Scenes are often left unfinished and repeated again and again, emphasizing the novel's, and certain characters', focus and feeling of déjà-vu. In many cases a single word, incident or character can serve as the initiator for a shift in the narrative focus, giving the impression of a stream of consciousness from the protagonist. The text is periodically dominated by overly-long sentences, especially when the events are dramatic; Heller even manages to illustrate exhausting events by making narration exhausting. In one episode where the protagonist is deprived of sleep, the effect is intensified

⁸⁹ Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 129.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

by long sentences and frantic reporting of events and surroundings and rapid shifting of focus resulting in an exhausting effect. According to O'Neill, the narrative is in fact "a series of variations on an unchanging situation", namely Yossarian's attempts to escape the war and "the plot" that "threatens to destroy him"⁹¹. This further emphasizes the hopelessness of the situation as there seems to be little progress in the plot; one is tossed forwards and backwards in time while the number of missions and deaths keep increasing and decreasing.

The initial pages of the novel clearly establish the protagonist, John Yossarian, as the typical black humor picaresque antihero. Janoff pronounces the Yossarian as "the closest the movement comes to producing a definite central character"⁹² which is highly representative of his status as a Black Humor cult figure. Descended from the schlemiel of the Jewish novel, according to Dickstein, he is "an inversion of that passive and unhappy figure"⁹³, Yossarian is an Assyrian because Heller wanted him to appear as from an "extinct culture" as this would represent a man who was "intrinsically an outsider"⁹⁴. He is ironically described as a soldier who falls in love with a chaplain, fakes illness to escape flight duty, separates himself from all relations back home, censors letters as a game and signs them "Washington Irving". In constant panic during missions, "Yossarian did not give a damn whether he hit the target or not, just as long as Havermeyer or one of the other lead bombardiers did and they never had to go back"⁹⁵; he receives medals naked, walks backwards in parades, falls madly in love with every girl he sees, a womanizer if you ever saw one, accuses everyone of being crazy, and he thinks people on every side are out to kill him. Yossarian unsuccessfully attempts almost everything to avoid missions during the novel, and he does so without actually breaking civil or military law and provoking "repression", or causing serious harm to others. But escape

⁹¹ O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading*, 156-60.

⁹² Janoff, "Black Humor, Existentialism, and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion," 33.

⁹³ Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 140.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁹⁵ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 34.

proves impossible unless he is in the hospital or goes AWOL; by refusing to fly missions he would “probably” be shot⁹⁶. The rules he violates are for the most part social or “ideological” codes, and as a result he is constantly accused of being crazy himself. After witnessing the death of fellow soldiers, his main focus becomes staying alive, he speculates on enemies and diseases that could kill him as “the number of dead people just seemed to increase. And the Germans were still fighting. Death was irreversible, he suspected, and he began to think he was going to lose”⁹⁷. The comic punch which is presented in the final sentence is typical of Heller’s humor. Suspecting the obvious is in this case an ironic understatement as stating the obvious in *Catch-22* generally doesn’t get you very far: “The only thing going on was a war, and no one seemed to notice but Yossarian and Dunbar. And when Yossarian tried to remind people, they drew away from him and thought he was crazy”⁹⁸. Yossarian was initially brave, but two crucial missions changed him. First, as he went over a target twice in order to be sure of a hit, resulting in the deaths of Kraft, “a skinny, harmless kid from Pennsylvania who wanted only to be liked, and was destined to be disappointed in even so humble and degrading an ambition. Instead of being liked, he was dead”⁹⁹, as well as his crew. On the tenth missions targeting the same bridge, “Yossarian killed Kraft and his crew by taking his flight of six planes in over the target a second time. Yossarian came in carefully on his second bomb run because he was brave then”¹⁰⁰. Yossarian’s attempt to avoid an eleventh mission results in Colonel Cathcart blaming him for the loss of the plane and states “It’s not that I’m being sentimental or anything. I don’t give a damn about the men or the airplane. It’s just that it looks so lousy on the report. How am I going to cover up something like this in the report?”¹⁰¹. The solution becomes to give Yossarian a medal and promote him to captain, “to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 398.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 159.

act boastfully about something we ought to be ashamed of. That's a trick that never seems to fail"¹⁰². Yossarian is at this point faced with the apparent lack of relation between cause and effect in the military bureaucracy.

The second episode is Snowden's death which is echoed all through *Catch-22*, though the events are not revealed until the end of the novel. According to Morris Dickstein, the effect of the gradual revelations is such that it finally "becomes the story"¹⁰³. This is the episode which truly turns Yossarian into a "bad subject" in Althusser's terms. Snowden was a gunner in Yossarian's plane, and Yossarian tended to him as he was injured over Avignon. As opposed to many of the violent absurd episodes in the novel, this episode spans into realism, Heller seems ever more present as the narrator, and this episode is supposedly also based mostly on his memory as he stated in his autobiography. The focus is on Snowden's calmness, and "lack-luster gaze" upon Yossarian and the repetition of "I'm cold, I'm cold" said "softly" and at one point "in a frail, childlike voice", and Yossarian's soothing "there, there". Yossarian is very much the "authority" of this scene as he cares for Snowden and addresses him as "kid". Yossarian is calm and focused and the narration is detailed and, as always, neutral. The wound on his leg is described in grotesque detail, "was that a tube of slimy bone he saw running deep inside the gory scarlet flow behind the twitching, startling fibers of weird muscle?" Yossarian searches in vain for morphine, but the morphine has been replaced by a note with Milo Minderbinder's catch-phrase "what's good for M&M enterprises is good for the country", revealing the true consequence of this act. The impact of Snowden's injuries is revealed as Yossarian rips open Snowden's flak suit and "heard himself scream

¹⁰² Ibid., 160.

¹⁰³ Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 143.

wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out"¹⁰⁴. Yossarian screams again and covers his eyes,

his teeth were chattering in horror . . . Here was God's plenty, all right, he thought bitterly as he stared – liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch. Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes and turned away dizzily and began to vomit, clutching his burning throat¹⁰⁵.

The quoted text, with Yossarian's focus on the baked tomatoes, illustrates the use of gallows humor, and the split from the existentialist "humorless" perspective according to Janoff. Thus is Snowden's secret revealed, he spilled it all over the floor, repeating it over and over in the novel, the realistic description and the grotesque image have a dramatic and shocking effect. Yossarian decodes Snowden's insides, almost as haruspicy: "It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all"¹⁰⁶, or as one doctor says, "we are all dying"¹⁰⁷. In these messages we see the similarities with the existentialist. As a result of this episode, Yossarian becomes "enraged and frustrated in coming to terms with his existential loneliness", and he becomes obsessed with survival. Yossarian exits the plane as a changed man. He won't dress and views Snowden's funeral naked from a tree and receives a medal naked. Like the existentialist he is "overcome with the realization that their physical existence is qualitatively no different from that of the lower animals or even nonhuman matter", which is illustrated through the message in Snowden's entrails; "man is garbage". These episodes occur before the actual beginning of the novel, and are only seen as flashbacks, but they serve to strengthen Yossarian's ethos. According to Patrick O'Neill, by witnessing Snowden's death

¹⁰⁴ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 500-04.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 504.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 504.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

Yossarian “has been permanently marked, has been forced to open his eyes to what we mostly prefer to forget”¹⁰⁸. As Yossarian is traumatized, he seems to adopt some form of madness which could also be spotted in Billy Pilgrim. Yossarian decides to “live forever or die in the attempt”¹⁰⁹ and escapes to the hospital. In these actions he coins the absurd gallows humor schticks essential to Black Humor, “all he was expected to do in the hospital was to die or get better”, in the hospital they “made a much neater more orderly job”¹¹⁰ of dying. In Althusser’s terms, Yossarian has turned into a “bad subject”, an agent within a state apparatus who no longer works to ensure the “subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its practice”. He is no longer steeped in ideology, i.e. the “‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”¹¹¹ and thus removes himself from the duplicate mirror-structure of ideology. Through the better part of the novel he does so in a comical manner as a “gallows humor” response to the utterly hopeless situation he finds himself in. As Morris Dickstein claims, “much of the comedy of *Catch-22* comes from this effort to maintain business-as-usual under “insane” conditions”¹¹².

Yossarian establishes himself as the antithesis to what James Nagel refers to as “the embodiment of weaknesses in American middle class society”¹¹³, characters such as “The educated Texan from Texas, who looked like someone in Technicolor and felt, patriotically, that people of means - decent folk – should be given more votes than drifters, whores, criminals, degenerates, atheists and indecent folk – people without means”¹¹⁴, Appleby, “a fair-haired boy from Iowa who believed in God, Motherhood and the American Way of Life,

¹⁰⁸ O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading*, 166.

¹⁰⁹ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 33.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹¹¹ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," 1498.

¹¹² Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 139.

¹¹³ Nagel, "Catch-22 and Angry Humor: A Study of the Normative Values of Satire," 52.

¹¹⁴ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 9.

without ever thinking of any of them, and everybody who knew him liked him”¹¹⁵ and Major Major’s father,

a sober God-fearing man whose idea of a good joke was to lie about his age. He was a long limbed farmer, a God-fearing, freedom-loving, law-abiding rugged individualist who held that federal aid to anyone but farmers was creeping socialism. He advocated thrift and hard work and disapproved of loose women who turned him down. His specialty was alfalfa, and he made a good thing of not growing any. The government paid him well for every bushel of alfalfa he did not grow¹¹⁶.

These characterizations could all be viewed as lampooning the “Americanism”, a representation of one of the many “ideas given flesh”. A multitude of absurd characters are added to the list of Yossarian’s fellow soldiers, most representing some exaggerated part of American youth. The two idealists, Nately, the rich boy who’s madly in love with an Italian prostitute and “had a bad start, he came from a good family”¹¹⁷ and Clevinger, the college kid who “was a militant idealist” and knew “everything about literature except how to enjoy it”¹¹⁸, are “good but terribly naive boys who genuinely believe in the values for which they are supposedly fighting”, according to Potts¹¹⁹. Both represent the attempt at an established normative of bravery and self sacrifice, which will result in flying missions until they die. The religious alternative is lampooned through a kind and sensitive Chaplain, whose lifelong trust in “the wisdom and justice of an immortal, omnipotent, omniscient, humane, universal, anthropomorphic, English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon, pro-American God”¹²⁰ had begun to waver. Whereas Major Danby, the university professor with a “highly developed sense of right and wrong”, a “gentle, moral, middle-aged idealist”¹²¹ is almost randomly shot by his superiors for moaning, and has to command the soldiers to bomb a village so “tiny” and

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 95-96.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹¹⁹ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity : The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 14.

¹²⁰ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 328.

¹²¹ Ibid., 509.

“insignificant” that he can’t find it on the map¹²². The flight surgeon, Doc Daneeka, is terrified of flying, and rages at the fact that “they had to manufacture fascism and start a war horrible enough to affect even me”¹²³. Major Major Major Major, the closest one could probably get to a Billy Pilgrim in the novel, with his horrible father and a name that made everyone shrink away from him, was promoted to Major by an IBM machine “with a sense of humor almost as keen as his father’s”¹²⁴.

The descriptions of characters, places and incidents are for the most part short and packed with satiric wit and mixed catalogues, such as “the startled captain with malaria in his blood and a mosquito bite on his ass”¹²⁵ and Chief White Halfoat, “a glowering, vengeful, disillusioned Indian who hated foreigners with names like Cathcart, Korn, Black and Havermeyer and wished they’d all go back to where their lousy ancestors had come from.”¹²⁶, the absurd “soldier who saw everything twice”¹²⁷, Yossarian’s roommate Orr, who used to put crab apples or horse chestnuts in his cheeks in order to get apple cheeks, however, at the same time he always had rubber balls in his hands. “Every time someone asked me why I was walking around with crab apples in my cheeks, I’d just open my hands and show them it was rubber balls I was walking around with, not crab apples, and that they were in my hands, not my cheeks”¹²⁸. Orr repeatedly crashes his plane in the attempt to escape Pianosa, and the military, but no one in their right mind would suspect “the crazy” and innocent Orr for doing this. After he disappears, “Yo-Yo’s roomies” enters, four “empty-headed” young men of twenty one who

¹²² Ibid., 373.

¹²³ Ibid., 58.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 49.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 209.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 27.

were glad that the war had lasted long enough for them to find out what combat was really like . . . They reminded him of Donald Duck's nephews . . . They were dumb; they had no complaints. They admired Colonel Cathcart and they found Colonel Korn witty. They were afraid of Yossarian, but they were not the least bit afraid of Colonel Cathcart's seventy missions¹²⁹.

These characters are all similar in that they are for the most part comically presented as caricatures. According to O'Neill they are rather "elements of an animated setting", and no more real as characters than the fictional physical setting of Pianosa¹³⁰. Ultimately they represent obedient "subjects" living in ideology. In a 1975 interview, Heller revealed similarity of some these young enlisted men to his own Air Force experience; "I actually hoped I would get into combat . . . I was just 19 and there were a great many movies being made about the war; it all seemed so dramatic and heroic"¹³¹. This is a view that is also apparent in Vonnegut's fiction where the soldiers are presented as very young and naive and given an enormous responsibility, as illustrated in *Now and Then*:

In December 1944 I was twenty one and a half, and it is hard now, it boggles the mind now, to believe that a young kid like Ritter, whom I'd known the longest and who was somewhat stumpy in physique, was ever, let alone routinely as an occupational specialty, permitted to fly as a pilot at the controls of a twin-engined Mitchell medium-sized bomber that carried a bomb load of four thousand pounds (eight five-hundred-pounders or four of a thousand pounds each) and five other human beings! . . . I . . . find it difficult to envision even now that a kind and unaggressive boy, so young, could learn to fly a bomber. And there were others in the squadron of slighter build and even fewer years who were pilots, too¹³².

The average age of American soldiers in WW2 was actually twenty-six years, far more than the average in Vietnam, which was nineteen. Up until 1971 you could not vote until the age of

¹²⁹ Ibid., 398-400.

¹³⁰ O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading*, 159.

¹³¹ Merrill, "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller," 60. Qtd in Scoggins, "Joseph Heller's Combat Experiences in Catch-22," 215.

¹³² Heller, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*, 174.

twenty one, while you could become a soldier at seventeen¹³³. In *Catch-22* most of the soldiers are presented as very young, though Yossarian is said to be twenty-eight. Snowden is portrayed as a quiet and delicate “kid”, just like Kid Sampson, as is Hupple, Nately and Kraft. There is constant emphasis on the humanity and innocent and frail quality of these characters, and the youngest are killed in very graphic and grotesque scenes, such as Snowden who is pierced by a piece of flak, and Kid Sampson who is grotesquely chopped in half by a plane. Kid Sampson could serve as a graphic illustration of Heller’s “central issue”, which according to O’Neill is “man against the machine, the individual against the dehumanizing system”¹³⁴. It seems an impossible battle for man, as McWatt flies a plane against

blond, pale Kid Sampson, his naked sides scrawny even from so far away, leaped clownishly up to touch it at the exact moment some arbitrary gust of wind or minor miscalculation of McWatt’s senses dropped the speeding plane down just low enough for a propeller to slice him half away¹³⁵.

The childish air of Kid Sampson “leaping clownishly” and the focus on sheer accident holds such dramatic disproportion to the sudden appearance of a roaring engine that cuts him in half, almost as a horrifying man-controlled deus ex Machina, solving the reoccurring “impossible issue” of childish joy and innocence.

There was the briefest, softest tsst! filtering audibly through the shattering, overwhelming howl of the plane’s engines, and then there were just Kid Sampson’s two pale, skinny legs, still joined by strings somehow at the bloody truncated hips, standing stock-still on the raft for what seemed a full minute or two before they toppled over backward into the water finally with a faint, echoing splash and turned completely upside down so that only the grotesque toes and the plaster-white soles of Kid Sampson’s feet remained in view¹³⁶.

¹³³ Andrew Jon Rotter, *Light at the End of the Tunnel : A Vietnam War Anthology*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 377.

¹³⁴ O’Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy : Humour, Narrative, Reading*, 158.

¹³⁵ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 388.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 388.

The reason for Yossarian's resistance seems ultimately the result of a system which refuses him his individuality and which views him as replaceable. The commanding officer, General Dreedle "believed that the young men who took orders from him should be willing to give up their lives for the ideals, aspirations and idiosyncrasies of the old men he took orders from. The officers and enlisted men in his command had identity for him only as military quantities"¹³⁷. Thus the soldiers are seen as gear by the bureaucratic military system, such as when Yossarian is reprimanded by Nurse Cramer for being careless in the hospital,

I suppose you just don't care if you kill yourself, do you?' 'It's my self' he reminded her. 'I suppose you just don't care if you lose your leg, do you?' 'It's my leg.' 'It is certainly not your leg!' Nurse Cramer retorted. 'That leg belongs to the U.S. government. It's no different than a gear or a bedpan. The Army has invested a lot of money to make you an airplane pilot, and you've no right to disobey the doctor's orders.' Yossarian was not sure he liked being invested in¹³⁸.

This illustrates the military subject according to *Catch-22*, as one doctor puts it: "To a scientist, all dying boys are equal", and the point is proven when Yossarian is persuaded to pose as the dying son of a visiting family who are unable to distinguish Yossarian from their own, "It's not Giuseppe, Ma. It's Yossarian. What difference does it make . . . He's dying"¹³⁹. This view of interchangeability is lampooned in Colonel Cathcart's letters of condolence, "Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs.: Words can not express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action"¹⁴⁰, " According to Elaine Scarry,

The boy in war is, to an extent found in almost no other form of work, inextricably bound up with the men and materials of his labor: he will learn to perceive himself as he

¹³⁷ Ibid., 249.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 335.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 213.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 323.

will be perceived by others, as indistinguishable from the men of his unit, regiment, division, and above all national group¹⁴¹.

This view is successfully adopted by soldiers such as Clevinger, but not by Yossarian who keeps insisting on his individualism: “‘They’re trying to kill me,’ Yossarian told him calmly. ‘No one’s trying to kill you,’ Clevinger cried. ‘Then why are they shooting at me?’ Yossarian asked. ‘They’re shooting at everyone,’ Clevinger answered. ‘They’re trying to kill everyone.’”¹⁴² Clevinger recognizes himself and Yossarian as part of the military body, while Yossarian does not. Even though Clevinger is an idealist, he ultimately expresses that he is indistinguishable from the rest of his national group. The soldier in white serves as the ultimate representation of the soldier as indistinguishable military “gear”, according to Potts he is “a living symbol of what Yossarian, Dunbar, and their peers ultimately face - total dehumanization”¹⁴³. The other men mostly fear him as he is incased from head to toe in plaster and gauze:

sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that the stuff could drip back into him. All they really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth¹⁴⁴.

He is treated as an object, and polished by the nurses. The soldier in white is the ultimate tragicomic representation of a John Doe, the soldiers speculate that “anybody might be in there”¹⁴⁵, Dunbar even suggests that the cast is empty; “he’s hollow inside, like a chocolate

¹⁴¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain : The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 83.

¹⁴² Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 19.

¹⁴³ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity : The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 10.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

soldier”¹⁴⁶. One possible consequence of the indistinguishable soldier is the diminished importance of individual action, as defined in Weber’s “rational discipline” according to Melley, and the result of this discipline is illustrated in *Catch-22* as “the transfer of human decision-making capacities to an external and abstract set of rules and procedures”¹⁴⁷. Such a system will ultimately do business “according to calculable rules and ‘without regard for persons’”¹⁴⁸. This inhumane system is the target of Heller’s satire, and the reason for Yossarian’s apparent expression of “agency panic”, it expresses a world where the individual in fact is reduced to the functional, according to Pratt’s notion, and in order to accept it must accumulate the indifference of a machine. Melley claims this individual has been stripped of both its traditional human features and the ability to make rational autonomous decisions, they rather commit to the idea that “bureaucratic constructs, rules and reports are the most ontologically secure things in the world”¹⁴⁹, proving far from any “Lockean” idea of man as guided by “reason”. This is illustrated as McWatt accidentally kills Kid Sampson and as a result decides “oh well what the hell” and commits suicide by flying his plane into a mountainside. This action causes Doc Daneeka to “die”, on paper that is. He was on the flight manifest, and is reported dead since he didn’t come down by parachute. He now poses a bureaucratic paradox for Sergeant Towser who has two “dead” men on his hands. “Mudd, the dead man in Yossarian’s tent who wasn’t even there, and Doc Daneeka, the new dead man in the squadron, who most certainly was there and gave every indication of proving a still thornier administrative problem for him”¹⁵⁰. Mudd is a dead soldier who was not properly registered as he died on his first mission, and as a result his things are just standing in Yossarian’s tent as a representation of him. Doc Daneeka is not dead, but is registered as so. Mudd’s personal possessions serves as a representation of a living being and Yossarian can

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 419.

¹⁴⁷ Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, 70.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵⁰ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 391.

not get “him” out of the tent, causing him to constantly complain about “the dead man in his tent”, while the paperwork marking Doc Daneeka as dead serves as the representation of a dead being, making Doc Daneeka a “non person”. The absurdity of the situation satirizes bureaucracy at its most extreme. Doc Daneeka is even proclaimed dead by Gus and Wes as his temperature is even lower than his ordinary subnormal 96.8. The bureaucratic machinery has been set in motion and there is no stopping it, no superior officers, would help him, “not even the chaplain could bring Doc Daneeka back to life under the circumstances”¹⁵¹.

Ironically even the church could not wake those who are “dead on paper”. He is advised to stay out of sight until they decide what to do with his “remains”, and his wife is notified.

Paradoxically, when Kid Sampson’s legs grotesquely wash up on the beach “to lie there and rot like a purple twisted wishbone”, no one plans to do anything about the remains; they rather “peek through bushes like a pervert at the moldering stumps”¹⁵². It is through episodes such as these Heller is able to satirize basic principles, by juxtaposing absurd humor, ironic distance and grotesque imagery he challenges the notion of death in the military, and this also serves to further antagonize the “system” and its willingness to file the soldiers as “equipment”.

The “antagonistic system”, which Yossarian realizes after the Snowden incident might take his life (the military), or sacrifice him for profit (Milo Minderbinder), or in other ways threaten his existence, is presented through a series of authoritative figures. These men serve to some extent as creators, but are for the most part executors of bureaucratic constructs, rules and reports, and as General Dreedle, they view the enlisted men as equipment. As Clevinger experiences, “they were . . . grown men and he was a boy, and they hated him and wished him dead . . . These three men who hated him spoke his language and wore his uniform, but he saw their loveless faces . . . that nowhere else in the world . . . were there men who hated him

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 395.

¹⁵² Ibid., 397.

more”¹⁵³. Not even the enemy apparently hates him more as there is little focus on the Allied / Axis conflict in *Catch-22*, the antagonist is not really the enemy, as for Yossarian, “the enemy . . . Is anybody who’s going to get you killed, no matter which side he’s on”¹⁵⁴. Against this system “you’re up shit creek without a paddle” if your father is not “a millionaire”, a member of the senate”, “a general”, or “a high-ranking member of the administration”¹⁵⁵. As a “repressive state apparatus”, according to Althusser’s theory, the army forces submission through physical threat. However, physical threat is mainly underlying, and the superior officers serve as the embodiment of an absurd and ruthless unbeatable military bureaucracy and present the enlisted men with an ideology of Americanism, “serving your country”, U.S.O. shows and baseball. The primary concerns of the superiors are the internal power struggle in the army, parades, and loyalty oaths, and as such, *Catch-22* could be seen as expressing the “sense that postindustrial bureaucracy cannot comprehend the basic reality of war, that it is too caught up in its representations, rules and communications”¹⁵⁶. The senior officers’ actions are viewed in part from the protagonist’s point of view and they are reduced according to traditional satiric conventions¹⁵⁷. The ultimate illustration when “the supports of rank and status” are removed “of which clothes are the simplest example”¹⁵⁸, Yossarian and his friends easily outsmart “middle aged big shots” by throwing their clothes out the window. “Clever tactics”, according to one General, “we’ll never be able to convince anyone we’re superior without our uniforms”¹⁵⁹. The superior officers are a list of incompetent characters, and it seems the higher the rank the higher the incompetence. Colonel Cathcart represents Yossarian’s primary concern, as he is determined to become General by the fastest route possible, and this is achieved by raising the number of missions for the men in his squadron

¹⁵³ Ibid., 93.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁵⁶ Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, 74.

¹⁵⁷ Hodgart, *Satire: Origins and Principles*, 118.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵⁹ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 404-08.

from twenty five to eighty during the course of the novel, while he has flown five himself. From Yossarian's point of view, Colone Cathcart "was a valorous opportunist . . . a blustering intrepid bully"¹⁶⁰, the ironic description follows "Colonel Cathcart had courage and never hesitated to volunteer his men for any target available. No target was too dangerous for his group to attack"¹⁶¹. Colonel Cathcart wants so desperately to become general, "he was willing to try anything, even religion"¹⁶². In order to be promoted he makes an effort to be featured in the Saturday Evening Post thinking it would reflect positively on him if the Chaplain prays before missions. He instructs the Chaplain to pray "light and snappy" prayers, nothing that will remind them of death, stay away from "waters and valleys and God . . . I'd like us to stay away from the subject of religion altogether if we can"¹⁶³. He would rather have the Chaplain pray for a tighter bomb pattern. He could measure his own progress "only in relationship to others"¹⁶⁴, proved by various desperate attempts at getting his name in the paper. Cathcart's main concern is further promotion of the dual pattern, the "either - or"-effect, of *Catch-22*, actions concerning his reputation is either "a black eye" or "a feather in his cap".

The Other characters are comic from their very names, and marked by sheer incompetence and concern for just about anything but strategies of war. The combination of the names of many of the superiors and their absurd actions creates a carnivalesque effect which disrupts authority, such as General P.P. Peckem. "He was a spry, suave and very precise general" whose "recent directive requiring all tents in the Mediterranean theater of operations to be pitched along parallel lines with entrances facing back proudly toward the Washington Monument". Inventing the meaningless "bomb-pattern", he has them all convinced that a "nice tight bomb pattern" is the key element of any air raid as it makes such

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 216.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶² Ibid., 217.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 220-21.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 215.

a nice aerial photograph. “There’s one colonel in Pianosa who’s hardly concerned any more whether he hits the target or not. Let’s fly over and have some fun with him today”¹⁶⁵.

Peckem’s main concern is a constant power struggle with General Dreedle. The outcome of this battle is determined by the “most influential man in the whole theater of operations”, Ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, a mail clerk who has access to the mimeograph machine and will “go far” as he “won’t help anybody”¹⁶⁶. He settles the conflict by throwing all communication from Peckem in the waste basket, as he deems Peckem’s writing too “prolix”. This action proves the importance of communications in *Catch-22*. Just as Doc Daneeka is declared dead, men could be rotated and promoted, all on Wintergreen’s orders. Lieutenant Scheisskopf, literally “Shithead”, was “rather glad” war had broken out as it gave him opportunity to wear uniform and say ‘Men’ in a “clipped military voice” to the “bunches of kids who fell into his clutches every eight weeks on their way to the butcher’s block”¹⁶⁷. His main concern is parades and winning “utterly worthless” yellow or red pennants on poles¹⁶⁸. Eagerly planning to nail the men to a long “two-by-four beam “in order “to keep them in line”, he is hailed as a military genius for making the men march without moving their arms. In the end Scheisskopf becomes General and commanding officer of them all through a mistake in communications, and orders them all to march¹⁶⁹. This episode illustrates the manner in which even the powerful can fall victim to the “insane logic of this system”¹⁷⁰. Captain Black is equally absurd with his “McCarthyesque” “Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade”¹⁷¹, which has everyone signing loyalty oaths in order to eat, receive pay and so on or risk being labeled a communist. “The important thing is to keep them pledging . . . It doesn’t matter whether they mean it or not. That’s why they make little kids pledge allegiance even before they know what “pledge” and “allegiance”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 373.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 347.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 449.

¹⁷⁰ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 35.

¹⁷¹ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 130.

means”¹⁷². This leads to problems as “men were tied up all over the squadron signing, pledging and singing, and the missions took hours longer to get under way”¹⁷³, but the superiors seems unable to stop “that idiot Black off on a patriotism binge”¹⁷⁴ out of fear of being deemed unpatriotic. Up until the “majestic, white haired major with craggy face and Jehovan bearing . . . smashed his whole Glorious Crusade to bits with a single stroke”¹⁷⁵, serving as some sort of rational individual in the corrupt military bureaucracy, but as all other rational individuals, he disappears without trace.

Another part of the antagonistic system is Milo Minderbinder, the “minderbinder” behind M & M enterprises. At the end of the novel he has flown five missions, but he is able to avoid flying as no one else is able to run his syndicate, and as such he is the only character who is really deemed “irreplaceable” by the military. He serves as a “modern reincarnation of Defoe’s economic man . . . a myopic encapsulation of the madison avenue mentality”¹⁷⁶. M & M stands for Milo & Minderbinder, “the & was inserted, Milo revealed candidly, to nullify any impression that the syndicate was a one man operation”¹⁷⁷. While Milo was originally the Mess-officer in the US Air Force, he has created an international syndicate. M &M is everywhere and cooperates with everyone except the Russians. According to Stephen W. Potts¹⁷⁸, Milo’s moral philosophy is summarized as he states his attitude towards the Germans: “Maybe they did start the war, and maybe they are killing millions of people, but they pay their bills a lot more promptly than some allies of ours I could name”¹⁷⁹. Milo’s planes, acquired from various Air Forces, flew in from everywhere, and the military pilots at the controls would do whatever Milo told them to.

¹⁷² Ibid., 131.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 132.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹⁷⁶ Nagel, “Catch-22 and Angry Humor: A Study of the Normative Values of Satire,” 49-50.

¹⁷⁷ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 290.

¹⁷⁸ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 30.

¹⁷⁹ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 294.

The planes were decorated with flamboyant squadron emblems illustrating such laudable ideals as Courage, Might, Justice, Truth, Liberty, Love, Honor and Patriotism that were painted out at once by Milo's mechanics with a double coat of flat white and replaced in garish purple with the stenciled name M & M Enterprises, Fine Fruit and Produce¹⁸⁰.

Painting over the "laudable ideals" obviously also has a significant symbolic effect. This action satirizes the obliteration of traditional values in the face of capitalism. Milo even uses German planes and paints over the swastikas with M & M Enterprises. "Right before their eyes he had transformed his syndicate into an international cartel", and Yossarian, though he thought that Milo was a jerk, "also knew that Milo was a genius"¹⁸¹. Milo acquired contacts everywhere and took full advantage of them all. Milo's strategy in becoming unstoppable was to state that "everybody owns a share" in the syndicate, and just as in Yossarian's upcoming discussion with Colonel Korn, one discovers that the rhetoric of such a system is that you can not be against it. In this case "what is good for M&M enterprises is good for the country", probably a nod to the corporate logic of "what's good for General Motors is good for America". It seems impossible to be against one's country, but in the end Milo admits that what is good for the syndicate is actually good for Milo. Milo's ruthlessness is illustrated when he attempts to make the men eat chocolate covered cotton, and when he bombs his own squadron in a deal with the Germans. The Germans take the cotton off Milo's hands seeing that the men won't eat it, and Milo bombs the Americans for them. He even orders the planes to "strafe" at the survivors, as it is "in the contract". Milo standing in the tower lecturing his pilots on effectiveness and "haste makes waste" when they are bombing their own men and supply sheds serves as a clear example of Milo's ambitions¹⁸². Afterwards he is able to convince everyone but "a few embittered misfits" that his actions were justified by "disclosing the tremendous profit he has made". He could actually reimburse the government

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 290.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 291.

¹⁸² Ibid., 296-97.

for the damage, but there really was no reason to reimburse the government because everyone owned a share, and

in a democracy, the government is the people . . . We're the people, aren't we? So we might just as well keep the money and eliminate the middleman. Frankly, I'd like to see the government get out of war altogether and leave the whole field to private industry. If we pay the government everything we owe it, we'll only be encouraging government control and discouraging other individuals from bombing their own men and planes. We'll be taking away their incentive¹⁸³.

To eliminate the middleman is exactly the suggestion being made with the soldier in white, "Why can't they hook the two jars up to each other and eliminate the middleman?"¹⁸⁴. He is described by Melley as "a miniature version of the postindustrial bureaucracy, which is designed more to manage and "process" things than to "make" them"¹⁸⁵. This could also be applied to Milo's syndicate, and the capitalistic system, as this is also designed for the "process" of capital. Milo does not "make" anything, he trades for profit. In both instances, the suggestion, according to cold calculation, is to remove the centre, "the man", which is the primary focus in a hospital, and "the government", which is the primary agent of war, as these are evidently the final obstacle for efficiency and profit. Milo's way of reasoning is indisputable according to rules which need not take human needs into account:

He had raised the price of food in the mess halls so high that all the officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him in order to eat. Their alternative - there was an alternative, of course, since Milo detested coercion and was a vocal champion of freedom of choice - was to starve¹⁸⁶.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 298.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 195.

¹⁸⁵ Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, 69.

¹⁸⁶ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 423.

According to Heller, Milo is in fact more “horrifyingly dangerous” than the other characters, because he has this “mental and moral simplicity” and lacks “evil intent”¹⁸⁷. As previously mentioned, this could illustrate the manner in which enlightenment notions serve as conceptualities for a capitalist market society, as Jameson proposes. The technique applied by Milo is later referred to as “protective rationalization” as the chaplain discovers its details:

The chaplain had sinned and it was good. Common sense told him that telling lies and defecting from duty were sins. On the other hand, everyone knew that sin was evil, and that no good could come from evil. But he did feel good; he felt positively marvelous. Consequently, it followed logically that telling lies and defecting from duty could not be sins. The chaplain had mastered, in a moment of divine intuition, the handy technique of protective rationalization, and he was exhilarated by his discovery. It was miraculous. It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all. It merely required no character¹⁸⁸.

This technique is regularly applied by Milo in his business ventures, “bribery is against the law . . . But it’s not against the law to make a profit, is it? So it can’t be against the law for me to bribe someone in order to make a fair profit, can it?” Milo combines this logic with a combination of innocence and “a strong trace of old hauteur”¹⁸⁹ and is thus able to bribe, cheat, kill, bomb Americans for Germans and reason that it is “good for the country”. The “aggressive” manner in which Milo uses this technique makes him unstoppable, and this again illustrates the logic of a Catch-22 which is ultimately the driving force of the novel. Catch-22 is explained several times, first as the reason why the doctors can’t ground crazy men from flying: “There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the

¹⁸⁷ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity : The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 31.

¹⁸⁸ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 417.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 305.

process of a rational mind”, at this point Yossarian is really declared sane by Catch-22 as he is terrified of flying. However,

Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to¹⁹⁰.

The insane logic of Catch-22 thus prevent Yossarian and the others from being grounded at all times. This circular pattern keeps repeating itself on many different levels in the novel, it could be straight forward as when Yossarian wishes to marry Luciana who refuses to marry him because he is crazy, and claims he is crazy because he wants to marry her, or when Colonel Korn refuses everyone from asking questions except those who never asks questions, or Major Major who refuses to see anyone unless he is out. But ultimately, Catch-22 is the weapon of the powerful, such as the military bureaucracy or Milo's syndicate, against the powerless, such as ordinary civilians or the enlisted men. It depends primarily on the lack of ability or willingness to challenge its logic. With the “repressive state apparatus” and its underlying threat of violence there is no room for protest, and the ultimate description of catch-22 reveals itself as “Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing”¹⁹¹. The ultimate explanation of catch-22 is clarifying, the logic is stripped to the absolute basics, and this is what remains. Heller reaches for the grotesque and absurd in order to prove his point:

In parts of Africa little boys were still stolen away by adult slave traders and sold for money to men who disemboweled them and ate them. Yossarian marveled that children could suffer such barbaric sacrifice without evincing the slightest hint of fear or pain. He took it for granted that they did submit so stoically. If not, he reasoned, *the custom*

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 467.

*would certainly have died, for no craving for wealth or immortality could be so great, he felt, as to subsist on the sorrow of children*¹⁹².

Heller often emphasizes that the soldiers are “kids”, and as Natley is killed in a mission he has to fly for Milo, and the bombing of a tiny village with “children, dogs and old people” in order to create a nice aerial photograph¹⁹³, the craving for wealth is at this point subsisting on the sorrow of children. The logic of catch-22 is, through manipulation of language, able to turn “kids” into military “gear”, as explained by nurse Cramer, and Yossarian realizes that they have all been “submitting stoically”. His trip through “the eternal city” of Rome at the novel’s conclusion serves as a scene of mob violence, “the common feature of degenerative culture” according to Weisenburger¹⁹⁴. Essentially it is centralized around the topic of the strong beating the weak in front of passive spectators. In the end, “Yossarian deserts, according to Heller, as a result of “the guilt and responsibility for never intervening in the injustices he knows existed everywhere”¹⁹⁵.

At the end of the novel Yossarian realizes that “Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up”¹⁹⁶. Catch-22 is really a system depending on cause and effect when there in fact is no *real* relation between cause and effect, and no relation between the real and the ideal, what matters is everyone believing in a relation. In a system of “automatons” who believe “bureaucratic constructs, rules and reports are the most ontologically secure things in the world”, everyone still believes in catch-22. The

¹⁹² Ibid., 465.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 373.

¹⁹⁴ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 172.

¹⁹⁵ Merrill, "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller," 51. Qtd in Harold Bloom, *Joseph Heller's Catch-22*, Modern Critical Interpretations (Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 92.

¹⁹⁶ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 469.

consequence of such a system, or protective rationalization, is presented in a conversation between Yossarian and Colonel Korn. Yossarian is asked:

‘Won’t you fight for your country . . . Won’t you give up your life for Colonel Cathcart and me?’ . . . ‘What have you and Colonel Cathcart got to do with my country? You’re not the same.’ . . . ‘How can you separate us? . . . You’re either for us or against us. There’s no two way about it . . . *You’re either for us or against your country.*’ . . . ‘Oh, no, Colonel. I don’t buy that’ . . . Colonel Korn was unruffled. ‘Neither do I, frankly, but everyone else will. So there you are’¹⁹⁷.

This argument is also applied by Milo when he claims that “what’s good for the syndicate is good for the country”. The main concern of all the senior officers is in fact not the country, admits Korn, it is to get a promotion. The reason is revealed as; “For the same reason I want to be a colonel. What else have we got to do? Everyone teaches us to aspire to higher things. A general is higher than a colonel, and a colonel is higher than a lieutenant colonel. So we’re both aspiring”¹⁹⁸. With these statements, and others that are similar, Heller completely tears down the ethos of the superior Officers. Korn illustrates how “fight for your country” has actually come to mean “fight for my promotion”. According to Stephen W. Potts, authoritative figures in *Catch-22* stands as “manipulators of people, language, and logic, those in power in the world of *Catch-22* write all the rules and define all the “truths” themselves. All that matters is holding onto that power and exercising it over those who cannot stop them”¹⁹⁹. Yossarian represents the largest problem of such a system, he was “rocking the boat” and not being “a good member of the team” according to Milo²⁰⁰. He refuses to believe in the relation between Korn and the country, and has made things difficult by making the men unhappy. As such, Korn illustrates the ability to confuse relations of cause and effect by manipulation of language as he claims that “the morale is starting to deteriorate”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 486. Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 488.

¹⁹⁹ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 36.

²⁰⁰ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 465.

because Yossarian has been a “bad subject” by refusing to fly, while Yossarian argues, that the deteriorating morale is a logical consequence of raising the missions to absurd numbers (80 by the end of the novel). Korn claims “The men were perfectly content to fly as many missions as we asked as long as they thought they had no alternative. Now you’ve given them hope, and they’re unhappy”²⁰¹. The only solution is to remove Yossarian from the men, “they’ll be easy enough to discipline and control once you’re gone”, and to make Yossarian work for the system, “like us. Join us. Be our pal. Say nice things about us here and back in the states”²⁰². Instead of punishing Yossarian, they attempt to make him part of the part of the system as propaganda. As Yossarian initially accepts the deal he is stabbed by Nately’s whore and changes his mind.

The final four chapters, which ultimately ends in Yossarian’s attempt to rescue Nately’s whore’s “Kid Sister”, probably as a symbol of all the “kids” who suffer, and escape to the “neutral” Sweden, have received quite an amount of attention from the critics. There seems to be general agreement that these pages are out of sync with the “irrationalist perspective”²⁰³ found in the 39 chapters prior to “The eternal city”. Weisenburger claims that

Catch-22 develops this conclusion out of a plot that has, as we have noted, all the trappings of conventional satire, yet in so doing it reaffirms the principal values of bourgeois society, in particular the value of “responsible” monogamous union (a decisive change for a womanizer like Yossarian) and the ideal of rationalizing one’s self interest along lines that also benefit others (an ideal at least as old as Adam Smith)²⁰⁴.

In this Weisenburger sees an optimistic resolution of comedy, and not one of satire. Janoff seems to agree with Weisenburger on the notion that Yossarian succumbs to the existentialist or generative “bourgeois” solution as he claims that “this attitudinal change is dramatized by

²⁰¹ Ibid., 483.

²⁰² Ibid., 489-90.

²⁰³ Janoff, “Black Humor, Existentialism, and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion,” 34.

²⁰⁴ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 174.

Yossarian's altruistic interest in Nately's whore's kid sister and in his desire to escape to Sweden where he believes, naively, that the world will be significantly less absurd" serves as "a logical impossibility since suffering and death (which know no national boundary) are the ultimate absurdity"²⁰⁵. However, according to Melley, Yossarian actually "abandons his social commitments" and Potts claims that Yossarian follows in Orr's footsteps "by attempting the impossible himself" Yossarian is attempting "a mad, death-defying leap of faith away from the moral insanities and inanities of the war". However, Potts emphasises, both the narrative suggests and Heller has confirmed that "Yossarian does not really expect to make it to Sweden, his desertion is an Absurd act of protest, an antinomian refusal to accept the false dichotomies represented by the hegemonic fiction of *Catch-22*"²⁰⁶. The irony in Yossarian's initial description of Sweden also suggests such a conclusion:

Sweden, where the level of intelligence was high and where he could swim nude with beautiful girls with low, demurring voices and sire whole happy, undisciplined tribes of illegitimate Yossarians that the state would assist through parturition and launch into life without stigma²⁰⁷.

This absurd description seems more like a mock- "protective rationalization" view of Sweden, the alternative Yossarian wishes for as he dreams of escaping. Yossarian runs to save his life²⁰⁸, because he no longer has to "save" his country. He has flown seventy missions, far more than most soldiers would have to, the war is nearly won, and there are no ideals to fight for, "between me and every ideal I always find Scheisskopfs, Peckems, Kornes and Cathcarts. And that sort of changes the ideal . . . When I look up, I see people cashing in. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy", all ideals are thus "constructs". At this point "capitalist"-Milo, and "communications"-Wintergreen has now

²⁰⁵ Janoff, "Black Humor, Existentialism, and Absurdity: A Generic Confusion," 34.

²⁰⁶ Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller*, 39.

²⁰⁷ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 355.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 516.

merged and become partners in M & M Enterprises, and Yossarian and Danby states that there is “no hope for us . . . no hope at all”²⁰⁹. The final four chapters seem to be a summary of the polyphonic “discussion” that has been held from the first chapter. It seems that the satiric targets are revealed one by one in lengthy statements. The solution comes in form of Yossarian’s former roommate “Orr”, deemed the alternative “OR” by most critics, his fate is brought by the chaplain who suddenly states that Orr survived his recent crash and washed ashore in Sweden. Yossarian suddenly realizes what Orr was trying to tell him, the only way out for “the weak” is to escape. Yossarian, seeing that there might be hope after all, exclaims: “Bring me crab apples and horse chestnuts before it’s too late . . . Danby, bring me buck teeth too, and a valve to fix and a look of stupid innocence that nobody would ever suspect of any cleverness. I’ll need them all”²¹⁰. It is Orr’s “tongue in cheek” attitude and look of “stupid innocence” that Yossarian seems to adopt in the final pages when he suddenly bolts for the kid sister and Sweden. “Stupid innocence” is apparently the greatest weapon of all, and the only antidote for Catch-22. Even the “poker face” narrative makes use of “stupid innocence”, and apparently it is all a weak yet “intelligent person of great moral character who has taken a very courageous stand”²¹¹ can do in a hopeless society dominated by an absurd machine bureaucracy. Yossarian’s escape is as absurd as the novel itself, but it seems Yossarian sees his ultimate responsibility as surviving. “I’m not running from my responsibilities. I’m running to them. There’s nothing negative about running away to save my life”²¹². Numasawa states that Yossarian’s escape is “a black humorists’ lesson that the best a human being can achieve in this non-exit world is a certain comic dignity . . . by all means escape and “drop

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 513.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 515.

²¹¹ Ibid., 485.

²¹² Ibid., 516.

out”, choose the lesser disgrace of running away rather than the worse disgrace of staying in line with the nonsense”²¹³.

Catch-22 and its protagonist ultimately stand as a satiric reminder of the absurdities of war. Heller questions the need for war and challenges the institutions that provide images of war as “dramatic and heroic”, and send “kids” “to the butcher’s block”. Heller manipulates time and space and targets the use of language to the extent where one can no longer define young from old, good from bad or true from false:

How many winners were losers, successes failures, rich men poor men? How many wise guys were stupid? How many happy endings were unhappy endings? How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors, how many sainted men were corrupt, how many people in positions of trust had sold their souls to black-guards for petty cash, how many had never had souls? How many straight-and-narrow paths were crooked paths? How many best families were worst families and how many good people were bad people? When you added them all up and then subtracted, you might be left with only the children, and perhaps with Albert Einstein and an old violinist or sculptor somewhere²¹⁴.

In such a world one comes to understand that the creation of normatives could be a very dangerous game to play, and as a modern satirist it could prove ultimately useless. As Vonnegut, Heller’s message focuses on preserving future generations. It is ultimately Heller’s narrative which leaves the reader to draw conclusions, as it seems stunningly distanced and indifferent. However, as the most important factor of these novels are to challenge the existing narrative of World War II, one might argue that comedy is merely yet another deceiving surface, as the monsters, and the serious issues, are looming directly underneath.

²¹³ Numasawa, "Black Humor: An American Aspect," 54.

²¹⁴ Heller and Jacobson, *Catch-22*, 473.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*

Slaughterhouse Five was initially published in 1969, 24 years after the allied bombing of Dresden, Germany. Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922-2007) had enlisted and served briefly as an infantry scout in World War II before being captured at the Battle of the Bulge²¹⁵. At the age of twenty-two he survived the bombing and subsequent firestorm of Dresden which, according to Vonnegut and various other sources, killed 135,000 people on February 13th, 1945. Only 35,000 victims were ever identified, while bodies and parts of bodies were excavated for years following. The official numbers regarding the Dresden death toll vary greatly depending on the source, however, the estimated 135,000 casualties marks Dresden as the worst casualty rate after a single operation, even surpassing the bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki²¹⁶. Following his return to the U.S. at the end of the war, Vonnegut wrote and published several other novels, and struggled for twenty three years to write a book about Dresden without being able to find his approach to the subject. It was not until his country waged yet another war, this time in Vietnam, that he was able to confront and write of his experience in Dresden,

I think the Vietnam War freed me and other writers, because it made our leadership and our motives seem so scruffy and essentially stupid. We could finally talk about something bad that we did to the worst people imaginable, the Nazis. And what I saw, what I had to report, made war look so ugly. You know, the truth can be really powerful stuff. You're not expecting it²¹⁷.

A letter written by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. to his family on May 29th 1945, explaining his capture, transport as a POW and the bombing of Dresden, proves the close relation of events reported in "the war parts" of *Slaughterhouse Five* to Vonnegut's personal experiences. This

²¹⁵ Stanley Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 16.

²¹⁶ Hermann Knell, *To Destroy a City : Strategic Bombing and Its Human Consequences in World War II*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2003), 254.

²¹⁷ Kurt Vonnegut and Daniel Simon, *A Man without a Country* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2006), 20.

relation has also been thoroughly discussed by Rachel McCoppin in “God Damn it, You’ve Got to be Kind: War and Altruism in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut”, claiming that “though it is not entirely certain that Vonnegut draws from his own life experiences for his novels, it seems likely”²¹⁸. Vonnegut confirms this notion in his autobiographical *A Man Without a Country*, noting that it took him twenty-three years to “tell the truth”²¹⁹. In “Wailing shall be in all Streets” Vonnegut expresses outrage at the people who “relished” the idea of “total war” and its “modern ring” and “spectacular technology”²²⁰. Dresden, who “owed her good fortune to her unwarlike countenance: hospitals, breweries, food-processing plants, surgical supply houses, ceramics, musical instrument factories, and the like . . . hospitals had become her prime concern”, would fall victim to the “spectacular technology” of modern warfare, saturation bombing. As a prisoner, Vonnegut writes he was “hungry, dirty and full of hate for our captors”, but “the beastly tale” for the author lies in that a city filled with symbols far older than the swastika, those of “the good life; pleasant, honest, intelligent”, an “open city”, filled with twice its normal population due to a “stream” of refugees, “women, children and old men”²²¹, had “no reason to prepare for attack” and thus their shelters were no more than “a gesture”²²². The notion of British pilots “chiding” those “who had flown heavy bombers on city raids” with “how on Earth did you stand the stink of boiling urine and burning perambulators?” and the routine news following the attack on Dresden, “Last night our planes attacked Dresden. All planes returned safely”²²³ provokes Vonnegut to respond,

It is with some regret I here besmirch the nobility of our airmen, but boys, you killed an appalling lot of women and children . . . Burned alive, suffocated, crushed – men,

²¹⁸ Rachel McCoppin, “‘God Damn It, You’ve Got to Be Kind’: War and Altruism in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut,” in *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. David Simmons (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 49. Qtd in Simmons, “‘The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True’: Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*,” 66.

²¹⁹ Vonnegut and Simon, *A Man without a Country*, 19.

²²⁰ Vonnegut, *Armageddon in Retrospect*, 34.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²²² *Ibid.*, 36.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 37.

women and children indiscriminately killed. For all the sublimity of the cause for which we fought, we surely created a Belsen of our own. The method was impersonal, but the result was equally cruel and heartless. That, I am afraid, is a sickening truth²²⁴.

The conflict between Vonnegut's personal memories and the public image of the war is the central issue of *Slaughterhouse Five*. Narratives of "The Good War" seemed to have appeal in the ideological battle and rising conflict in the Far East. According to Marling and Wetenhall,

World War II seemed clean, straightforward, refreshingly unambiguous in a Cold War world of espionage and ideology. In less than a decade, World War II and its symbols came to stand for the postwar ideal, for things as they should have turned out: American valor and know-how supreme; America always victorious²²⁵.

The "patriotic fervor" and frenzy created by movies such as the John Wayne movie *Sand of Iwo Jima* even caused Marine recruiters to set up a booth outside the 1950 release of the film, according to Christina Jarvis, who argues that *Slaughterhouse Five* "simultaneously address World War II and Vietnam in an attempt to undermine the privileged space that "the Good War" occupies in America's cultural imagination"²²⁶. Jarvis thus concludes that Vonnegut's "primary goal" is "a specific revision of World War II narratives"²²⁷, which seems to imply a revision of an image that has become, in Baudrillard's terms "pure simulacrum". Alberto Cacicedo summarizes the ongoing discussion as to which whether the novel expresses resignation or an "impulse towards ethical behavior", and claims that the central issue is not "taking responsibility, but getting to the point at which responsible action is possible". In order to reach this point, argues Cacicedo, one must develop Swift's sense of indignation and one must "squarely and unblinkingly face the memories of what one must fight against"²²⁸.

²²⁴ Ibid., 40.

²²⁵ Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall, *Iwo Jima : Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 127.

²²⁶ Christina Jarvis, "The Vietnamization of World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity's Rainbow*," *War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 15, no. 1-2 (2003): 96.

²²⁷ Ibid., 97.

²²⁸ Alberto Cacicedo, "'You Must Remember This': Trauma and Memory in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46, no. 4 (2005): 358.

This ultimately leads to Jarvis' suggestion of a "revision" of narratives, and as such *Slaughterhouse Five* begins where *Catch-22* ends, with the confrontation of memories.

Slaughterhouse Five is written in part in a first person narrative during the first and final chapters, a third person omniscient voice is used for the remaining chapters. The initial chapter serves as a prologue, an autobiographical synopsis of Vonnegut's struggled experience with regards to writing the "famous Dresden book". The final chapter is a return to autobiography, thus framing the novel. The second chapter initiates with an address in the style of a sermon, addressing the reader with an imperative, "listen", before moving to present his protagonist. The formal tone, however, is rare in Vonnegut's fiction; he reduces himself both as a character and stylistically. The narrator makes several appearances in the narrative, during one of these, the prisoners of war have been properly fed for the first time in weeks, resulting in an "excrement festival", Vonnegut as the narrator appears as "an American" who had "excreted everything but his brains", but "moments later" says "there they go, there they go"²²⁹. Vonnegut expresses gallows humor in his narrative, as a former soldier he reveals himself traumatized and finding humor to be the manner in which the story could be told, He writes in *A Man Without a Country*, "I saw the destruction of Dresden. I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly one response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief"²³⁰. *Slaughterhouse Five* bases itself on incongruity, and is filled with grotesque imagery to illustrate principles such as Isaac Newton's third law of motion, every action has an equal and opposite reaction, "Billy coughed when the door was opened, and when he coughed he shit thin gruel"²³¹. There is also made frequent use of colloquial language, such as referring to "this one guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to

²²⁹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 160.

²³⁰ Vonnegut and Simon, *A Man without a Country*, 3.

²³¹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 101.

have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war”²³². Notions such as “clapping” to “celebrate frustration”, and a train that “grew shorter” are not uncommon. A dead “hobo” turns from “liquid” to “stone” and the protagonist sees “haystacks” of dead prisoner’s overcoats²³³. Slang is inserted emphasize grotesque details, such as candles and soap that were made from the “fat or rendered Jews and Gypsies and *fairies* and communists and other enemies of the state”²³⁴. The main issue of Vonnegut’s journey in *Slaughterhouse Five* is, as James Lundquist writes, “how to represent imaginatively things that are unimaginable”²³⁵. Targeted and grotesque events are at times placed in comic surroundings, as when Billy Pilgrim, in the search for Tralfamadorian methods of peace, presents his own planet as one where “I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen, who were proud of fighting pure evil at the time . . . Earthlings must be the terrors of the universe”, feeling as though he “had spoken soaringly” while he saw the “Tralfamadorians close their little hands on their eyes . . . He was being stupid”²³⁶. Vonnegut states in an interview with *Playboy* that his books are “essentially mosaics made up of tiny little chips; and each chip is a joke”²³⁷. These so-called “shticks” are apparent all through *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut’s style of narration plays a vital part in the black humor tone of the narrative. Dickstein refers to Vonnegut’s style as the “simple man” narrator²³⁸, and Vonnegut himself claimed that “I trust my writing most and others seem to trust it most when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am”²³⁹. Meeter compares Vonnegut’s “deadpan narrator” to the deadpan narrators of Swift’s *Gulliver* and Twain’s *Jim Baker*, however, “In Vonnegut’s case the reader’s pleasure is divided not

²³² *Ibid.*, 1.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 98-103.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

²³⁵ James Lundquist, *Kurt Vonnegut*, Modern Literature Monographs (New York: Ungar, 1977). Qtd in Harold Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*, Bloom's Guides (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 75.

²³⁶ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 148.

²³⁷ "Playboy Interview." In Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloon: <Opinions>*, 258.

²³⁸ Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 138.

²³⁹ Vonnegut, *Armageddon in Retrospect*, 1.

only from the continued tension between tone and material (as in Swift and Twain) but, still more importantly, from the tension between two *kinds* of material, one fantastic and the other real”²⁴⁰. Vonnegut acts estranged from contemporary society, as a typical satirist narrator, according to Hodgart, as a “symbol destroyer”, reducing himself and even more so his protagonist to outsiders who refuse “to see the symbolic values which . . . society attaches to apparently trivial objects and actions, thus the absurdity of social institutions is exposed when they are reduced to childish or primitive terms”²⁴¹. He further weakens himself according to the ruling ideology by writing pleasantly about Gerhard Müller and his life as a taxi driver in Communist East Germany. He is also quick to debunk the novel by claiming he would hate to tell the reader what “this lousy little book” had cost him in “money and anxiety and time”²⁴². The structure of the initial chapter is as experimental as the rest of the novel; it is an intermixture of poetry, sermon, snippets of fact and other novels and brief narratives. These serve as commentary to the plot, the Gospels and the historic narratives in particular emphasize the manner in which history repeats itself, and the Dresden bombing seems to be one in a million atrocities. The novel is briefly interrupted by narratives from Science Fiction writer Kilgore Trout, a reoccurring figure in Vonnegut’s fiction, historical commentaries containing U.S. “official” narratives of the Dresden bombing, and Nazi propaganda by Howard W. Campbell Jr., the protagonist of *Mother Night*, commenting on America’s poor. These serve as commentaries to the action, emphasizing the impact of social narratives while revealing some highly unfortunate “truths”. The question posed seems to reflect which narratives more accurately present social truths, whether the narratives such as those created by “official Air Force Historian”, Harvard History Professor Bertram Copeland Rumfoord

²⁴⁰ Glenn Meeter, "Vonnegut's Formal and Moral Otherworldliness: Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five," in *The Vonnegut Statement.*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer (New York: Delacorte, 1973), 206.

²⁴¹ Hodgart, *Satire : Origins and Principles*, 124.

²⁴² Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 2.

are, in Baudrillard's terms, the reflections of a basic reality or indeed the ideological masking and perverting of said reality.

The autobiographical narrative of the initial chapter conveys Vonnegut's twenty year struggle with his "Dresden novel" .. An early outline, "the prettiest one"²⁴³, was written with his daughter's crayons on a roll of wallpaper. Masking reality, this Jamesian outline seems to be "pretty" both in terms of presentation and plot as Vonnegut in this draft had decided to focus on the good moments of the war, including a classic comedy ending, which had the exchange of soldiers at the end of the war "one for one", where the "souvenirs" they had taken in the ruins were compared and they were transported to a rest camp in France. There they were fed "chocolate malted milkshakes" until they were all covered with "baby fat", and could go home and marry "pretty" girls covered with "baby fat" and have "babies"²⁴⁴. In this spirit Vonnegut visits his old war buddy Bernard O'Hare, and they only share recollections of "happy and drunk" Russians, and "one guy who got into a lot of wine" who had to be taken home "in a wheelbarrow"²⁴⁵. Bernard O'Hare's wife Mary, "a trained nurse, which is a lovely thing for a woman to be", eventually snaps at the men, claiming

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 upstairs²⁴⁶.

Vonnegut acknowledges this fact, stating "we *had* been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood"²⁴⁷. Mary's suggestion that the war was fought by babies turns Vonnegut, and he subsequently subtitles his novel *The Children's Crusade*. Upon realizing that Mary "thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies", he vows not to have any part

²⁴³ Ibid., 6.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 17.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne in his novel²⁴⁸, and to write the truth. With these notions Vonnegut repeatedly recognizes the importance of the Ideological State Apparatus. As a parallel to his subtitle, Vonnegut draws upon a narrative of a real children's crusade, discovering that most of the thirty thousand children who volunteered to go to Palestine in 1213 fact ended up as soldiers, slaves or died at sea. According to Stanley Schatt, this leads Vonnegut to conclude that "all wars are fought by the young - usually for causes they cannot understand"²⁴⁹. Vonnegut's point is emphasized by quoting *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* by Charles Mackay, LL, D., published in London in 1841: "History in her solemn page informs us that the crusaders were but ignorant and savage men . . . and that their pathway was one of blood and tears. Romance on the other hand, dilates on their piety and heroism . . . and the great services they rendered Christianity"²⁵⁰(20).

Vonnegut is clearly drawing a comparison to the romantic representation of war, also drawing parallels to the New York World's Fair, where it is put on display "what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney" and "what the future would be like, according to General Motors"²⁵¹. It seems the presentation of his wartime experience and the massacre in Dresden thus presents a problem for Vonnegut, and he addresses his publisher regarding *Slaughterhouse Five*, explaining how his novel will be,

it is so short and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?'²⁵².

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁴⁹ Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, 82.

²⁵⁰ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 20.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 23. Emphasis added.

²⁵² Ibid., 21.

As it were, no public information was to come from Dresden. Vonnegut's attempt at investigating "who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what the desirable results there had been and so on" was met by a PR man who told him "sorry, but the information is top secret still". To which Vonnegut's wife asks "Secret? My God - from whom?"²⁵³ Vonnegut is at this point left with his personal recollection and the question of how to present it.

Just as *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse 5* opens with a disclaimer, and it too removes the reader from the realm of realist fiction, "This is a Novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from. Peace". The initial chapter opens with a statement that "all of this happened more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true". The narrative, following Billy Pilgrim, is structured in a manner where it all seems to happen simultaneously. *Slaughterhouse Five* is seemingly set in 1968 and actually circles around various flashbacks and fantasies belonging to protagonist Billy Pilgrim. These are part memories of his wartime experiences, his quite successful career and unhappy marriage and delusions of alien abduction and time travel following surgery. The experimentation of "rapidly shifting narratives, hazy boundaries between reality, hallucination and fantasy"²⁵⁴ is thus done thoroughly in *Slaughterhouse 5*. Billy Pilgrim's story leaps continuously as he travels through time and space. Only the parts including Billy's experiences in the war are linear, and these are constantly interrupted by time travel. "Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant stage of fright, *he says*, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next"²⁵⁵. As an expression of "the insanity of contemporary history", according to Morris Dickstein, Vonnegut writes a "pop adaption" of

²⁵³ Ibid., 14.

²⁵⁴ Pratt, *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, xxi.

²⁵⁵ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 29.

“modernist experiments with time”²⁵⁶. Billy Pilgrim is able to view his own death, and his birth, and at times also view events backwards, this ability is used to reverse a movie showing a bombing raid so that bullets and bombs are “sucked” back into guns and lifted “miraculously” back into planes. Weapons and bombs are shipped back to the factories in “the United States of America”, and there they are dismantled and the minerals are put back into the ground, “to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again”²⁵⁷. The altered notions of time and space and occurrences of alien abduction have made some critics draw the conclusion that Vonnegut moves within the realm of science fiction. However, as Dolmetsch suggests, Vonnegut is *not* a science fiction writer, he merely uses science fiction as “fictive devices or as means in particular ends”, it serves as a “technique for juggling complex time schemes, juxtaposing past, present and future without confusion, and as a device for unifying what otherwise are very loosely structured novels”²⁵⁸. As Vonnegut himself stated in *Vampeteers, Foma and Grandfalloons*; “I have been a sore headed occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘science fiction’ . . . and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics mistake the drawer for a urinal”²⁵⁹. The Tralfamadorian view of time could rather be seen as a useful representation of a determinist philosophy which in essence is based upon the ability to ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones as they say, an idea taken even further by the constant repetition of the phrase “...so it goes” following every death in the novel, whether it be the death of the novel, champagne, of an individual or the Dresden bombing. According to Dolmetsch, “So it goes” suggests “a pragmatic approach to the daily defeats and miniscule moral advances that compose our Sisyphean existence”²⁶⁰. As *Catch-22, Slaughterhouse Five* is “drenched in death” and focuses on death as unavoidable,

²⁵⁶ Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 128.

²⁵⁷ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 94.

²⁵⁸ Carl Dolmetsch, "'Camp' and Black Humor in Recent American Fiction," in *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Alan R. Pratt, *Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (Grh): 1503 Garland Studies in Humor: 2* (New York: Garland, 1993), 224.

²⁵⁹ Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons: <Opinions>*, 1.

²⁶⁰ Dolmetsch, "'Camp' and Black Humor in Recent American Fiction," 224.

both the narrator and Billy Pilgrim are repeatedly compared to the dead, Vonnegut's breath reek of "mustard gas and roses", as the corpse mines in Dresden, he is a "pillar of salt" like Lot's wife for looking back at disaster. Billy Pilgrim's feet and hands are at several occasions described as "blue and ivory"²⁶¹, as are those of the stacked bodies in the war. Vonnegut quotes World War One soldier and author Celine in the initial chapter, stating that "no art is possible without a dance with death . . . The truth is death . . . I've fought nicely against it as long as I could . . . Danced with it, festooned it, waltzed it around . . . decorated it with streamers, titillated it"²⁶². Other intertextual references include those of various poems and limericks, factual texts and several "nods" to Lewis Carroll, such as a bottle which "seemed to say" "Drink me" and a character comparison to "Tweedledum or Tweedledee", also, according to Schulz, "activities and thoughts appear in their negative aspects, expanding our sensibilities, like Alice through the Looking Glass, with the hint of new amazements"²⁶³.

And indeed, the protagonist of *Slaughterhouse Five* seems to both have gone through a mirror and tumbled down the rabbit hole. Billy Pilgrim is presented as being born in 1922, "a funny looking child who became a funny-looking youth - tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca Cola"²⁶⁴, often noted as a "representative of suffering humanity"²⁶⁵. First impressions leave an image of a wealthy, yet unhappy and unfortunate optometrist who suffered a mild nervous collapse after serving in the Second World War. The fact that Billy is unhappy indicates the failure of American consumerism to cover up Billy's war trauma, Billy is "as rich as Croesus"²⁶⁶ yet he "really didn't like life at all"²⁶⁷. After marrying the girl he did not love and had two children he never really got to know, one of whom end up as a

²⁶¹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 35.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶³ Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World*, 23.

²⁶⁴ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 30.

²⁶⁵ Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction* (London: Arnold, 1990). Qtd in Simmons, "'The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True': Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*," 121.

²⁶⁶ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 78.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

troubled alcoholic at sixteen, only to “straighten out” and become a Green Beret, his status seems to be measured by the notion of his service in Vietnam, emphasizing the repetitive nature of history. All seemed polished and well in Billy’s “lovely Georgian home in Illium” until Billy went on the radio and started informing the world that he was “spastic in time” and had been abducted by aliens who had told him that time is “an illusion”. He intended to prescribe “correcting lenses for Earthling Souls” which Billy believed to be “lost and wretched”²⁶⁸. The “modern prophet”, a notion established by constant references to Christ in the narrative, soon finds himself on the verge of placement in “an old people’s home” by his “twenty-one year old” daughter who believes him to be “senile” and his tale to be “crazy”²⁶⁹. The debate as to whether Tralfamadore exists or is a part of Billy’s imagination has never been truly settled and Vonnegut left this issue somewhat open. However, as Josh Simpson claims, it is revealed by the end of the novel that Tralfamadore has been placed in Billy’s imagination by science fiction novelist Kilgore Trout²⁷⁰. The similarities between Billy’s life on Tralfamadore, “where he was displayed naked in a zoo” and was “mated . . . with former Earthling movie star named Montana Wildhack”²⁷¹, and *The Big Board* by Kilgore Trout, where an “Earthling man and woman . . . were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials . . . and put on display on a planet called Zircon-212”²⁷² are obvious. Billy “had read” this novel “before – years ago, in the veterans’ hospital” and then forgotten all about it, until he sees it again in an adult store in New York. As such, it becomes quite clear that all time travel and abduction is the result of a mind in conflict with memories and reality.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 36.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 36-37.

²⁷⁰ Josh Simpson, "'This Promising of Great Secrets': Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* or 'Fantasies of an Impossibly Hospitable World': Science Fiction and Madness in Vonnegut's Troutean Trilogy," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 45, no. 3 (2004): 267.

²⁷¹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 32.

²⁷² Ibid., 257.

Billy was an unfortunate child whose approach to life seems to be represented by the manner in which his father attempts to teach him how to swim, by tossing the “numb” and “terrified” child into the deep end of the pool, where Billy sinks, resigns, and nearly drowns. At twenty one, Billy serves as a chaplain’s assistant in the war, and yet again finds himself at the deep end. Entering the war as it is nearly over, he never reaches his destination, nor is he issued a uniform, helmet or boots. Not only is he a picaresque antihero, he is the embodiment of an anti-soldier, the exact opposite of a John Wayne or Frank Sinatra. Even twenty years after his wartime experience, people refuse to believe he has ever served in the war. He ends up a “dazed wanderer” behind enemy lines in December of 1944, “empty handed, bleakly ready for death”. In the German winter he had “no helmet, no overcoat, no weapon, and no boots”, the comic image is completed by his “low cut civilian shoes” which were missing a heel and this “made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down”²⁷³. According to Dickstein, Billy Pilgrim is a “childlike” character in a world that “kills and maims in the most casual and summary way”²⁷⁴. The descriptions of Billy Pilgrim is specked with tragicomic imagery, he is depicted as going bald while also having a “random bristly beard” with some white bristles, his face crimson from the cold, “he didn’t look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo”²⁷⁵. He is at all times during the novel clad in civilian clothing, and according to Schulz, “Billy Pilgrim is less the embodiment of every soldier led to slaughter . . . the Everyman . . . whose pilgrimage . . . steps pointlessly towards the void”²⁷⁶. Billy could be seen as the personification of gallows humor, laughing in the most hopeless of situations, as fellow soldier Roland Weary has him beaten and kicked to the ground, while Billy is attempting to “form himself into a ball”. His jacket, shirt and undershirt hauled up, his back is naked. Weary attempts to aim a kick with his “large combat boots” at “the pitiful buttons of

²⁷³ Ibid., 40-41.

²⁷⁴ Dickstein, "Black Humor and History: Fiction in the Sixties," 128.

²⁷⁵ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 42.

²⁷⁶ Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World*, 60.

Billy's spine . . . The tube which had so many of Billy's important wires in it. Weary was going to break that tube". An audience of Germans surveys the situation, wondering "why one American would try to murder another one so far from home, and why *the victim should laugh*"²⁷⁷. During the war Billy is at all times seen as the pitiful outsider, he lies down to die on several occasions, but is rescued at the last minute. Fellow soldiers avoid him, and it seems nothing less than a miracle that he survives both transport and a POW camp before marching as a clown in front of a parade of "ridiculous" Americans into Dresden in a "blue toga and silver shoes, with his hands in a muff", looking as if he was "at least sixty years old" while spectators can hardly believe their eyes. Billy is confronted with his ridiculous appearance by a German surgeon who "supposed that Billy had gone to a lot silly trouble to costume himself just so", while Billy Pilgrim has in fact tried to avoid freezing to death by stealing random costumes and stage props, it was "fate . . . and a feeble will to survive" which had costumed Billy Pilgrim²⁷⁸.

Billy Pilgrim's journey, is as Alberto Cacicedo suggests, all about the confrontation of memories. As the "Snowden"-episode of *Catch-22*, Billy Pilgrim is deeply traumatized and keeps revisiting experiences of the war, yet it is not until the end of the novel that the past is revealed. After being "grotesquely" affected by a barbershop quartet at a party in 1968, he had "proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was". He suddenly travels in time to the Dresden bombing, the safe shelter of the meat locker, and the "sounds like giant footsteps above". Outside, "the one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn". Afterwards, the baroque city of Dresden was reduced to "the moon", and the guards resembled a barbershop quartet in their "astonishment and grief". Individuals who were caught in the firestorm have been reduced to "little logs lying

²⁷⁷ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 65. Emphasis added.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

around”²⁷⁹. The narrator and Bernard O’Hare are present in Dresden with Billy. The prisoners become corpse miners, and accidental domes reveal “dozens of bodies . . . sitting on benches. They were unmarked”. The young soldiers remove bodies from “hundreds” of “wax museums”, but eventually bodies “rotted and liquefied” and smelled of “roses and mustard gas”²⁸⁰. Billy works with a Maori who “died of the dry heaves” after tearing himself “to pieces, throwing up and throwing up”²⁸¹. So the bodies were not brought up, instead they were cremated on the spot with flame-throwers, and ironically, in the middle of over 100.000 bodies, a high school teacher named Edgar Derby is shot in the ruins for “being caught with a teapot” from the catacombs”²⁸². According to Simmons,

the contrast between the narrator’s suggestion that what is needed is an increased level of respect for human life and the undignified manner in which the burnt bodies are disposed of only seems to highlight how the narrator’s knowledge of Dresden hinders him from believing in the possibility of a positive reformulation of society²⁸³.

As a result of what he has experienced, in 1968, following a plane crash, brain surgery and the sudden and paradoxical death of his wife, Billy Pilgrim, echoing Yossarian, stops working within accepted ideological structures. He has up until this point been “steeped” in ideology, illustrating complete lack of agency, and thus finds both his crying and nervousness unexplainable. Upon discovering a source of ideology that would be able to host and accept such events as the Dresden bombing, he suddenly thinks the time is “ripe” to inform the world of it. As this involves time travel and alien abduction, factors that do not correspond with the ruling ideology, the thrilled Billy Pilgrim is threatened by a Repressive State Apparatus. However, neither does the ruling ideology correspond with the bombing of Dresden, as the official silence and secrecy of the event illustrates, the “image” of Dresden would effectively

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 226-31.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 273-74.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 274.

²⁸² Ibid., 274.

²⁸³ Simmons, ““The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True”: Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*,” 73.

cancel many notions of “the Good War”. Billy Pilgrim’s search for an alternate imaginary relation to reality represents the inability of the existing ideology to host certain aspects of said reality. According to Sanford Pinsker, it is the “post modern world” that “drives Vonnegut to Tralfamadore”²⁸⁴. In a novel where “all deaths are equally absurd, equally meaningless, Billy Pilgrim . . . has been privy to the only truth which can deal with an apocalyptic event like the Dresden fire-storm”²⁸⁵. According to Weisenburger, Tralfamadore is the “narrative projection of . . . a modernist culture that puts too much stock in scientific determinism . . . A warring society whose members live and die by their fictions, or “lies”, especially the lie that they had best look away from the war”, thus leading to an intent to put “readers between the poles of a classic antinomy: a despair born out of hopelessness and a set of ridiculously inhuman, inconsistent fictions that are untenable options to that despair, yet sufficiently like our own to make us squirm”²⁸⁶. As Weisenburger suggests, Tralfamadore is the satirical representation of a determinist narrative, absurd yet recognizable. The truth presented by Billy as Tralfamadorian includes the knowledge that the universe ends, completely out of human control, by the push of a button, and the Tralfamadorian unwillingness to prevent it as “he has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him, and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way”²⁸⁷. According to Tralfamadorians, “only on earth is there any talk of free will”²⁸⁸. As such “the idea of preventing war on earth is stupid, too”²⁸⁹, and the secret is to “spend eternity looking at pleasant moments”²⁹⁰. As Yossarian and the existentialists, Billy Pilgrim has become “enraged and frustrated in coming to terms with his existential loneliness” and is “overcome with the realization that their physical existence is qualitatively no different from that of the

²⁸⁴ Sanford Pinsker, *Between Two Worlds : The American Novel in the 1960's* (Troy, N.Y: Whitston Pub. Co, 1980), 96.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁸⁶ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 177.

²⁸⁷ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 149.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

lower animals or even nonhuman matter”. Billy, being a passive spectator without uniform or weapon, only cries once in the ruins of Dresden, upon realizing he has treated a couple of horses as if they were “no more sensitive than a six-cylinder Chevrolet”²⁹¹. Billy’s emotional response indicates resistance to participation in the reduction of animate beings to the inanimate, and as such any “dehumanizing” systems. The Dresden bombing thus “enrages” Billy into resigning to a Tralfamadorian determinist philosophy in which “every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine”²⁹², an ideology that would be able to accommodate the Dresden bombing. However, as Yossarian he differs from the Existentialists as comedy is injected in the form of philosophy belonging to little creatures described as “two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber’s friends. Their suction cups were on the ground, and their shafts which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm”²⁹³. These friendly creatures are highly advanced, can see in four dimensions, and they place Billy Pilgrim under a glass dome in a zoo and cheer wildly at everyday routines such as a visit to the bathroom.

As in *Catch-22*, most characters are “two dimensional”, as such “there are almost no characters in this story because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters”²⁹⁴. According to Weisenburger, quotes such as this illustrates exactly the “general” or “cosmic” irony associated with Black Humor. However, he questions how serious Vonnegut is as he claims certain characters inhabit more “specific” ironies as many characters ironically shape their lives according to fiction. The shaping of these fictions is however a central target of Vonnegut’s satire, and as such they represent the creation of the social and political narratives that are the essential target of Black Humor

²⁹¹ Ibid., 251.

²⁹² Ibid., 196.

²⁹³ Ibid., 33.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 209.

satire. The invented “narratives” of the characters are generally accompanied by a brief description from the narrator’s point of view, often carrying grotesque detail, giving a comic effect and revealing the “invented” narrative as a hoax. As Mary O’Hare suggests, most images of war are created by books and movies, and Billy Pilgrim creates his determinist view of the world, by definition an ideology, which is able to accommodate the Dresden bombing, from Science Fiction novels and pornographic movies. This notion further emphasizes the satiric target as “the need for human beings to erect meaning-making systems”²⁹⁵. Billy and former infantry captain Eliot Rosewater, a reoccurring figure in Vonnegut’s novels, “had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war. Rosewater had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman mistaking him for a German soldier” while Billy “had seen the greatest massacre of European history . . . so they were trying to reinvent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help”²⁹⁶. The strategy of reinvention is also applied by soldiers in the war. Billy’s fellow soldier, the “clumsy and dense”²⁹⁷ Roland Weary looking like “Tweedledum or Tweedledee, all bundled up for battle, was short and thick”, eighteen years old, “and as new to war as Billy”²⁹⁸. He subscribes to a “heroic wartime model”²⁹⁹ according to Simmons, and imagines himself as part of “The Three Musketeers”. He creates a heroic “war story” starring himself and two scouts who “become close friends immediately” and are recommended for “Bronze Stars” after saving the “God-damned hide” of “damned college kid” Billy Pilgrim³⁰⁰. His fantasy is brutally destroyed as the other “musketeers” abandons him, as all other acquaintances of his life has done, and he is left to surrender with Billy Pilgrim who he blames for being abandoned. He loses all his equipment and comfortable clothes and shoes and dies in pain from gangrene “that had started

²⁹⁵ Blake Hobby, "Dark Humor in Cat's Cradle," in *Dark Humor*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby, *Bloom's Literary Themes (Bloom's Literary Themes)* (New York, NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010), 58.

²⁹⁶ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 128.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹⁹ Simmons, ""The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True": Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*," 70.

³⁰⁰ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 52-53.

in his mangled feet”, telling his fellow prisoners again and again in “delirium” of “The Three Musketeers” and his “killer”, Billy Pilgrim³⁰¹. Vonnegut illustrates in this case, as in many others, that the character’s never leave their invented “narratives”, even as they face death. Paul Lazzaro keeps repeating his story of murdering his enemies after the war while “fizzing with rabies”³⁰². A “hobo” keeps repeating “I been hungrier than this . . . I been in worse places than this. This ain’t so bad”³⁰³, right until his death on the ninth day on the train³⁰⁴. Another casualty during this transport is “Wild Bob”, a colonel who while dying from pneumonia after loosing “an entire regiment, about forty-five hundred men - a lot of them children”³⁰⁵, gives a heroic address while “staring into Billy’s eyes” imagining “there were dead Germans all over the battlefield who wished to God they had never heard of the Forty-fifty-first”³⁰⁶. High School teacher Edgar Derby, “mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom”³⁰⁷, ends his days in front of a firing squad for stealing a teapot in the ruins of Dresden. Derby is forty-four, has “one of the best bodies”, and “is the oldest American by far” and had “pulled political wires to get into the army at his age”³⁰⁸, falsely believing that his age would earn him a promotion. He is spotted reading *The Red Badge of Courage* and is at one point a “character” who “movingly” defends “the American form of government, with freedom and justice and opportunities and fair play for all” claiming “there wasn’t a man there who wouldn’t gladly die for those ideals”³⁰⁹. Derby is, according to Peter J. Reed, representative of “the irony of a society which condones massive

³⁰¹ Ibid., 101.

³⁰² Ibid., 191.

³⁰³ Ibid., 87.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 100.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 84.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 85.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 191.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 106.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 209.

destruction but which executes a man - one who tries bravely and to be decent and moral - for salvaging a teapot for the wreckage”³¹⁰.

As the example of those who are able to distance themselves from the war, Vonnegut presents the fifty British officers who “had not seen a woman or child for four years or more” as they are in a POW camp, and all attempts tunneling would “inevitably” end in surfacing “within a rectangle of barbed wire” where they would be “greeted listlessly by dying Russians who spoke no English, who had no food or useful information or escape plans of their own”³¹¹. As a result they lift weights, groom, play chess, they “were clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong” and “sang booming well”. Due to a clerical error “they were among the wealthiest people in Europe, in terms of food”³¹², even the Germans adored them, “they made war look stylish and reasonable and fun”³¹³. The bureaucratic error is emphasized as it is in *Catch-22*, as the difference between the British and the Russian prisoners illustrate the consequence of such errors while the German guards are unable to act upon it. According to Simmons, the British are able to maintain their “zest” by ignoring the reality of the war that is going on around them”³¹⁴ illustrated in part by staging a comic Cinderella for the miserable American prisoners and as one of them expresses, “you know - we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined that it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies”³¹⁵. However, their ability to ignore reality is blocked as American prisoners stay in their camp, as such Vonnegut illustrates the importance of visual impression, “when I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. ‘My God, my

³¹⁰ Peter J. Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, Writers for the Seventies* (New York,: Warner Paperback Library, 1972). Qtd in Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*, 55.

³¹¹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 118-19.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 120.

³¹⁴ Simmons, ""The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True": Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*," 71.

³¹⁵ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 135.

God - ‘ I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade’”³¹⁶. The Americans are briefly introduced to German antagonistic reserves who are “violent, windburned, bristly men” with teeth “like piano keys”, cigars and machine-gun belts, grotesquely spitting “snot and blutwurst and tobacco juice and Schnapps” at the Americans. These German soldiers seem more as an establishment of the Germans as “the enemy”, as only these Germans and the British are exclusively identifiable by nationality and as soldiers and nothing more. Most soldiers seem to be victims of their national origin, as they are subjects living in ideology, and as such victims of the army as a repressive state apparatus. Their national identity is challenged as one of Billy Pilgrim’s German guards is a sixteen year old “distant cousin” of his, and the German soldiers are in part equally miserable to the Americans. The Germans who captured Billy Pilgrim and Roland Weary were “farmers”, two boys in “their early teens” and two “ramshackle old men” with a “shivering” German shepherd named “Princess”³¹⁷. The American soldiers are marched into Dresden by soldiers who were “boys and men past middle age” who “knew what sick and foolish soldiers they themselves appeared to be”³¹⁸. The “eight ridiculous Dresdeners ascertained that these hundred ridiculous creatures really *were* American fighting men fresh from the front . . . Their terror evaporated . . . Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves”³¹⁹.

Slaughterhouse Five has most soldiers reduced to children, “fools”, “machines” and “animals”, this is also stressed by the “naive” narrative point of view as it is for the most part a vast contrast to the character’s perspective. From Billy Pilgrim’s point of view, a Russian prisoner resembles “a radbag with a round, flat face that glowed like a radium dial”³²⁰.

Similarly, a delirious Billy Pilgrim who is caught on barbed wire in the POW camp is

³¹⁶ Ibid., 135. Emphasis added.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 66.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 190.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 191.

³²⁰ Ibid., 104.

dehumanized by a Russian prisoner. The Russian approached “the curious scarecrow, tried to talk with it gently, asked it what country it was from. The scarecrow paid no attention, went on dancing. So the Russian undid the snags one by one, and the scarecrow danced off into the night”³²¹. It is not only humans who are given animalistic or machine-like qualities; this notion is also satirized by subjecting machines to personification. This also serves as further illustration of the “outsider” narrator who fails to see symbolic value in the lethal machinery. Billy being shot at is described as a bullet aiming at “the filthy flamingo who stopped dead center in the road when the lethal bee buzzed past his ear”³²². Locomotives are saying “hello” as they whistle³²³, and “light” is made playful as it “*leaped* through the door, *escaped* from prison at 186,000 miles per second”³²⁴. Edgar Derby describes being captured as the result of being caught in the “incredible artificial weather that Earthlings sometimes create for other Earthlings when they don’t want those other Earthlings to inhabit earth anymore”, bullets are referred to as “little lumps of lead in copper jackets”³²⁵. Roland Weary’s short military career consisted of being part of a gun crew where

he had helped to fire a shot in anger - from a 57-millimeter antitank gun. The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty. The gun lapped up snow and vegetation with a blow-torch thirty feet long. The flame left a black arrow on the ground, showing the Germans exactly where the gun was hidden. The shot was a miss. What had been missed was a Tiger tank. It swiveled its 88-millimeter snout around sniffingly, saw the arrow on the ground. It fired. It killed everybody on the ground but Weary. So it goes³²⁶.

The personification of inanimate objects further emphasizes the notion of dehumanization, suggesting the transference of “human decision-making capacities to an external and abstract

³²¹ Ibid., 158.

³²² Ibid., 42.

³²³ Ibid., 89.

³²⁴ Ibid., 118.

³²⁵ Ibid., 135.

³²⁶ Ibid., 33.

set of rules and procedures”³²⁷, resulting in a system which will ultimately take action “according to calculable rules and ‘without regard for persons’”³²⁸. From the German guards point of view, each train car carrying prisoners became “single organisms which ate and drank and excreted through its ventilators”, also talking and yelling through “its ventilators . . . In went water and loaves of blackbread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and piss and language”³²⁹. The American prisoners are marched as a “Mississippi of humiliated Americans”³³⁰, corresponding with the Nazi image of an American “mass of undignified poor”³³¹, they evacuate the train as “liquid” which “began to flow”, while the English are caught in “a sea of dying Russians”³³². The images of “single organism” trains, rivers and seas of human beings emphasizes Scarry’s notion of the soldier as “indistinguishable from the men of his unit, regiment, division, and above all national group”, thus illustrating the “dehumanizing” system also found in *Catch-22*. The “indistinguishable” soldier suggests removal of individual agency and as such serves to justify random violence, illustrated by an American soldier being beaten by a German guard, asking “Why me” and gaining the answer “vy you? Vy anybody?”³³³. Similarly Dresden is turned into “one big flame” which “ate everything organic”³³⁴ as to which the notion of the collective Dresden as part of a violent antagonist, the Nazis, a representation of “pure evil”³³⁵, is challenged by emphasizing the details and individuals of Dresden, and their part in other bodies as well. The prison guards who were in the “comfort of their homes” as part of a “family”, a mass of teenage girls, “refugees”, were killed in a shallower shelter³³⁶, “schoolgirls” were boiled alive in a water

³²⁷ Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, 70.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

³²⁹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 90.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

³³² *Ibid.*, 118.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 116.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

tower³³⁷, and eventually the “unmarked” bodies “sitting on benches” in the hundreds of Dresden corpse mines.

The antagonistic reality and the “glacier” of wars that face Billy Pilgrim seem to be both unbeatable and durable due to ideology. “Earthlings” are named the “great explainers”³³⁸ by the Tralfamadorians, and Tralfamadore is in itself part of Billy Pilgrim’s personal explanation of the universe. The conflicting narratives of all characters appear to illustrate Foucault’s “regime of truth”, where the “status of those who are charged with what counts as true” is “accorded value in the acquisition of truth”. Billy Pilgrim is unable to accommodate the Dresden bombing in any existing “truth” or ideological narrative, and the only “tales” he was able to read after the war was science fiction as these were the only narratives that would accommodate that part of reality. The novels of Kilgore Trout serve with useful commentary to the narrative, and to various social constructs. Trout is a “nobody”, and his novels remain mostly unread, according to Eliot Rosewater, because his “prose was frightful” only his “ideas were good”. *The Gospel from Outer Space* claims that “Christians found it so easy to be cruel” as a result of “slipshod storytelling in the New Testament”, the alien protagonist supposes the intent of the gospels were to teach people “to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low. But the Gospels actually taught this: Before you kill someone, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected”³³⁹. Some of Trout’s other books included money trees which “attracted human beings who killed each other around the roots and made very good fertilizer”, and a 1932 novel which “predicted the widespread use of burning jellied gasoline on human beings” dropped from airplanes by robots which had “no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the

³³⁷ Ibid., 148.

³³⁸ Ibid., 108.

³³⁹ Ibid., 138-39.

ground”³⁴⁰. Twenty years after the war, Billy Pilgrim had attempted to reinvent reality as society seemed to have produced a “false representation” of his World War II experience. As subjects, all characters are shown to depend on their “imaginary” relation to existence, most soldiers depend on the image of John Wayne, Frank Sinatra or the “Three Musketeers”, and the enemy image is one of soldiers with machine-gun belts. As an explanation for the terrible state of the American soldiers, Nazi propaganda claims America to be a “mass of undignified poor” in a country where “the most destructive untruth is that it is very easy for any American to make money”, and the “rich and powerful . . . ruling class” thus turns the blame inwards to the poor, noting Jameson’s notion of the liberal individual being used to serve capitalist ideology illustrated in the statement “if you’re so smart, why ain’t you rich?”³⁴¹.

Billy ends up sharing a hospital room with the antagonized “Official Air Force Historian”, Harvard History Professor Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, a man so unpleasant that even hospital staff resent him. However, he is the “official” historian and is thus given truth value, while Billy Pilgrim is a war veteran with a brain injury whose utterances are not. He is as a result subjected to “an adventure very common among people without power in time of war: He was trying to prove to a willfully deaf and blind enemy that he was interesting to hear and see”³⁴², a notion further highlighting the removal of individual agency. The “full professor . . . author of twenty-six books . . . multimillionaire since birth” satirizes the “agreeable” official author of history as Rumfoord offers Billy a “tale” where the Dresden bombing “had to be done” and encourages Billy to “pity the men who had to *do* it”³⁴³, a notion, according to Stanley Schatt, suggesting “that the United States Air Force tried to transform the Dresden fire-bombing from an atrocity to something almost heroic”³⁴⁴. The

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 213-14.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 164.

³⁴² Ibid., 247.

³⁴³ Ibid., 254.

³⁴⁴ Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Qtd in Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*, 60.

twenty-three year old official secrecy of the Dresden raid is due to the fact that “a lot of *bleeding hearts* . . . might not think it was such a wonderful thing to do”³⁴⁵. The reduction to “bleeding hearts” and the notion of “wonderful thing to do” feminizes any opposition to the bombing, contrasting it to military masculinity. Other “official” versions include those from Generals and British Air Marshals. One version apologetically report “those who approved it were neither wicked nor cruel, though it may well be that they were too remote from the harsh realities of war to understand fully the appalling destructive power of air bombardment in the spring of 1945”³⁴⁶, thus supporting the notion of distance as a contributing factor in ideology. One expresses “regret” that 135,000 had to lose their lives in Dresden, but also find it “difficult to understand” those who “weep about enemy civilians” while not shedding a tear for “our gallant crews” and focusing on “v-1’s and V-2’s” that were “at the very time falling on England, killing civilian men, women and children indiscriminately”, remembering “who started the last war” and regretting the “loss of more than 5,000,000 Allied lives in the necessary effort to completely defeat and destroy Nazism”³⁴⁷. The technique which is being applied is similar to that being used in *Catch-22*, creating an attack on those who question said Allied actions and an effect along the lines of being for the attack or *against the country* by the removal of focus from Allied action to enemy action. According to Stanley Schatt, who is paraphrasing Donald J Greiner, this expresses a view where “the balancing of one atrocity with another by the other side neutralizes both and expiates all guilt”³⁴⁸. The focus is removed from the victims along the lines of “protective rationalization”. Distance in time and space and lack of visual impressions are key factors as the historian notes, and Vonnegut emphasizes this factor in the prologue by stating that among his veteran friends, “the ones

³⁴⁵ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 244-45. Emphasis added.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

³⁴⁸ Donald J. Greiner, "Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five and the Fiction of Atrocity," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 14, no. 3 (1973): 43. Qtd in Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* In Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*, 60.

who hated war the most, were the ones who'd really fought"³⁴⁹. According to Peter J. Reed, "the significance of the Dresden firestorm" is weighed "on the scale of human response, from the collective, public view of the official history to the personal nightmare of Billy Pilgrim"³⁵⁰.

The Dresden bombing serves to target the conflict in Vietnam two decades later, as the "Good War" serves as an image for US combat operations twenty years on, and as Billy's son serves in Vietnam. The WW2 alliance which patriotic Edgar Derby referred to as the "brotherhood between the American and the Russian people"³⁵¹ has, as the Nazi propaganda foresaw, turned to cold war with the Soviet Union and violent conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. A major in the marines, a U.S. "official", and according to Jarvis, a "thinly disguised Curtis LeMay", US General and commander of the Air Force, speaks to a resigned Billy Pilgrim at a lunch with the Lions Club where Billy is past president. The major claims the Americans have "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*". Ironically the major suggests doing exactly what he accuses the communists of, as he was "in favor of increased bombings, of *bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason*"³⁵². As such, he reveals his argumentation as invalid. However, as the "catch-22", the Major's argumentation depends on people "without power" accepting his invalid argument. Billy Pilgrim has resigned and is "unenthusiastic about living", he is unable to change "the past, the present, and the future"³⁵³, and is as such subject to "protective rationalization" and powerless to challenge the notions presented. Curtis LeMay, the "brain" of the saturation bombing of Japanese cities, according to Jarvis, more than any other figure "embodies

³⁴⁹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 13.

³⁵⁰ Reed, *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* Qtd in Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*, 56.

³⁵¹ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 209.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 76. Emphasis added.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 77.

continuities between World War II and Vietnam”, and “perhaps more than any other military figure, LeMay and his actions symbolize the trend of incorporating civilian targets in waging war”³⁵⁴.

It seems impossible to hope for reform at the end of *Slaughterhouse Five*, the novel has no expressed normative, it is a world where “all the real soldiers are dead”³⁵⁵ and the pitiful leftovers in part starve to death as Prisoners of War. The American soldiers symbolically survive as a result of living in a “shelter for pigs about to be butchered” while their countrymen are reducing “Oz” as the narrator calls Dresden, “a Sunday school picture of Heaven . . . The loveliest city that most of the Americans had ever seen”³⁵⁶ to a landscape resembling “the moon”, subsequently killing over 100,000 individuals, while the official version compares the bombing to an act of heroism. One generation later, Billy’s son is fighting in Vietnam where “robots” pour “jellied gasoline on human beings”, the implication being that the surviving narrative of Billy’s “Good War” empowers continued action in Vietnam, and every narrative since the Gospels seems to imply that atrocities such as Dresden have always happened and will always happen. According to McCoppin, “Vonnegut’s message is to exercise free will and put your own guns in the closet” and that the topic of war and black humor is used to “advocate the existential component of individual responsibility for one’s action in the modern and postmodern world”³⁵⁷. However, apocalyptic events such as Dresden force Vonnegut to resign, the ultimate reason for Billy’s travels to Tralfamadore is the inability for any system of meaning to accommodate modern warfare while allowing hope in individual action. Vonnegut expresses this notion through Eliot Rosewater speaking to a psychiatrist, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies,

³⁵⁴ Jarvis, “The Vietnamization of World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” 100.

³⁵⁵ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 203.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁵⁷ McCoppin, “‘God Damn It, You’ve Got to Be Kind’: War and Altruism in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut,” 47. Qtd in Simmons, “‘The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True’: Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*,” 72.

or people just aren't going to want to go on living"³⁵⁸. Vonnegut is admitting defeat by the initial chapter as he sets out to write an "anti-war" novel. Harrison Star, "the movie maker", inquires "why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?" To which Vonnegut informs the reader: "What he meant of course was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. *I believe that, too*. And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death"³⁵⁹. As a Black Humor narrative, *Slaughterhouse Five* does not propose any solutions, it attempts rather at conveying satirical targets in an absurd and resigned manner. Weisenburger states, "there is no plan for reform" and there is "no useful purpose to which the communal power of empathy can be put, hence nothing to offer the "sick" people Vonnegut describes as too captivated by their own powerlessness against institutional violence"³⁶⁰. Vonnegut claimed in a 1996 interview that Billy Pilgrim was in fact based in part on Edward Crone, "a very gawky guy with very narrow shoulders who should never have been in the army" who in fact "looked like a filthy flamingo", an engineering student who got drafted and wound up, "as everybody eventually wound up", in the infantry. "All the army needed at that time were riflemen. And . . . he died in Dresden. He died of what is called the "thousand mile stare"", he sat down with his back towards a wall, and would not eat, speak or drink, just stare into the space in front of him. Crone is buried in Rochester after his parents returned his body after the war, and visiting this grave in 1995 "finally closed up the war" for Vonnegut.

I talked to him a little. I know that he gave up to the "thousand mile stare" because life made absolutely no sense to him. And he was right. It wasn't making any sense at all. So he didn't want to pretend he understood it anymore, which is more than the rest of us did. We pretended we understood it³⁶¹.

³⁵⁸ Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 129.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 4. Emphasis added.

³⁶⁰ Weisenburger, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930-1980*, 178.

³⁶¹ Lee Roloff, "Kurt Vonnegut on Stage at the Steppenwolf Theater, Chicago," *TriQuarterly* 1998. In Bloom, *Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five*, 86.

The ties to reality further emphasize the tragic notions of Vonnegut's work. The real Billy Pilgrim did not survive to become insane, or "pretend he understood" by Tralfamadorian notions, he died, like so many did, from the sheer horror of war. Vonnegut does not state rage, like Heller does, he uses litotes as the basis for the uncertainty of his novel, "I am not overjoyed"³⁶² he claims of Billy Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian philosophy were "*everything* is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does"³⁶³. Vonnegut indicates, with an innocent smile, that humanity is in fact like little plumber's friends, suction cups firmly on the ground. He has, as he said he would, created a novel of the Dresden bombing and a Children's Crusade, in the Tralfamadorian manner of a lot of "carefully chosen" messages, because he knows that Earthlings react to massacres as the Tralfamadorians by closing their eyes because "terror was so unpleasant to see"³⁶⁴. But as the little plumber's friends were wildly fascinated with naked bodies and bathroom visits, he set out to tell the truth while disguising horror and death with grotesque comedy and an alien sense of "mock innocence", telling a tale of "mountains of corpses" and 135,000 Hansels and Gretels" that had "been baked like gingerbread men"³⁶⁵, hoping that the eyes would be deceived into looking long enough to understand the "serious topic" at hand.

³⁶² Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, 269.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 254.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁶⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (New York 1974), vi-vii.

Conclusion

At the outset I proposed to investigate Black Humor as a satiric mode based on *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. The focus was to be on certain elements that separated it from the formalist model of “reformatory” satire, most prominently the apparent lack of a normative standard and as such the targeting of the creation of such standards. The analysis sought to locate a satirist narrator who expresses no explicit sense of superiority and reduces himself and his protagonist according to the ruling ideology. There should be no fantastic vision of the world reformed and social and political narratives should stand challenged. As a result, most attempts of establishing normatives are targeted. The satirist demonstrates a complete lack of confidence in his own ability to influence the state of affairs in a world gone mad, individual action seems useless, and all that remains is the hollow laugh of the man on the gallows.

Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller touched upon a nerve in American society, an expression of looming discontent initiated by the Beats in the 1950’s. World War II had left America victorious against the most evil of enemies, the image seemed clear cut. Social and political narratives were undisputable black and white, but as the ruling ideology seemed to be moving, from the “innocent humanitarian liberalism” of the war years, slowly into Cold War and paranoia, and the images faded into shades of gray. Satire does not grow in ages of unanimity, it feeds on discontent. By the 1960’s consensus among young authors seemed to be that America’s political narrative had become one of absurdity and outright stupidity, and a satiric tradition blossomed once again. The novels attempt to present an absurd reality through the image of World War II. The comic effect of the novels is to a great extent based on the deadpan narrator posing as an outsider while reducing the narrative to almost alien terms. The limits between narrator and author are hazy, as Schulz suggested, and Kurt Vonnegut even

includes a prologue where he reduces himself to “an old fart”. This weakened ethos makes it impossible to propose serious solutions. In the middle of the absurd reality created in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, protagonists Billy Pilgrim and John Yossarian serve as representatives of “everyman”, panicking on flight duty and bobbing tragically “up and down” through a personal nightmare. They initially function in ideology, however due to events in the war, the deaths of Snowden and Kraft for Yossarian and the Dresden bombing for Billy Pilgrim, they are forced to recognize the mortality of man, and the absurd system of which they are in fact part. Just like their creators, they experienced a “dance with death” and *became* antiheroes, a role also inhabited by the narrator. They have been, as Patrick O’Neill proposes, “permanently marked” and were forced to open their eyes to “what we mostly prefer to forget”. This serves the lack of an apparent normative in the novel as the satirist has no fantastic vision of the world reformed. Like the existentialists they have been confronted with their physical existence being qualitatively no different from the lower animals or nonhuman matter, however, as opposed to the existentialists the response is humorous. Upon realizing that all others still work as subjects in ideology they experience agency panic and start reducing themselves according to the ruling ideology. As soldiers they are subjected to a Repressive State Apparatus, and the threat of physical violence and death is ever present as the main focus for the protagonists is to survive, even if Billy Pilgrim at times does so grudgingly. Contrasted with the protagonist, most of the other soldiers are seen to cling to their “imaginary relation to reality”, even into their deaths, and universal norms are proven to be nothing more than ideology.

As political and social constructs are challenged in these novels, and all attempts at establishing a “normative” of sorts are satirized, all figures of authority and creators of “truth” such as higher ranking officers, doctors, priests, historians, professors and so on are reduced and targeted, as are capitalists and idealists. The enlisted men are seen to be doomed either

way, as are future generations because wars are as certain as glaciers. The real soldiers are seen to be the Snowdens and the Ronald Wearies, tragic figures far from any image of Frank Sinatra. In such a world you're up "shit creek without a paddle", as Clevinger discovers, if you're not the son of a Senator, millionaire, General or "high ranking member of the administration", or as Vonnegut terms it, if you're "a bum with no connections". However all are seen to cling desperately to an imagined reality rather than admitting the truth. At the heart of Vonnegut's and Heller's satires, one finds them advocating liberal humanism, the very notions of the "golden age of satire". However, this is done in a spirit of hopelessness and gallows humor, knowing that in the world post Hiroshima, Holocaust, Dresden and Korea these notions have lost their content and could be used to justify any atrocity. Public Relations men themselves, Vonnegut and Heller were highly aware of the techniques that were being applied in order to construct consensus. They recognized that the classic dichotomy of good and evil had come to represent an ideological battle against communism where the "hero" expresses such sentiments as "bombing Vietnam back to the Stone Age", and the core pillars of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness had come to signify a capitalist ideology and consumerism in the spirit of Milo Minderbinder. Both novels have characters applying the technique of protective rationalization, where it is easy to turn "vice into virtue", "thievery into honor", "brutality into patriotism" and "sadism into justice", claiming that it didn't require brains at all, "it merely required no character". This technique is applied by most of the characters, Milo Minderbinder is even able to do business with the Germans, bomb his own squadron and bribe the government while resonating that it is "good for the country". Similarly *Slaughterhouse Five* illuminates the manner in which Romance once transformed a "handful of quarrelsome knights" into men of honor and virtue, and history repeating itself as the Dresden bombing is "officially" narrated as an act of heroism. "Pity the men who had to do it" states the aging history professor to Billy Pilgrim, while Vonnegut remembers the

British pilots chiding one another about the “stink of boiling urine” and the men, women and children who were “indiscriminately killed”. Through the alternative images of the humorous and grotesque, Heller and Vonnegut reveal the true horrors of war, such as Snowden’s intestines, rotting stumps and little “logs” of burnt human beings. They thus force their way through all “surface realities” to present “life as it is”, and proves most sociopolitical narratives to be nothing but ideology.

The novels illustrate complete lack of confidence in any ability to influence the state of affairs in a world gone mad, Yossarian runs away and Billy Pilgrim goes insane. Thus the Black Humor texts of Vonnegut and Heller have no suggested solutions and illustrate that individual action is useless. In this world gone mad, most subjects find comfort in focusing on customary concern, even while in imminent peril. Revealing the imaginary relation most individuals, or subjects, have to reality, removes all suggested normatives while clarifying the “death” of the Enlightenment notions such as the liberal individual.

Many years ago I was so innocent I still considered it possible that we could become the humane and reasonable America so many members of my generation used to dream of. We dreamed of such an America during the Great Depression, when there were no jobs. And when we fought and often died for that dream during the Second World War, when there was no peace. But I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reasonable. Because power corrupts us, and absolute power corrupts us absolutely³⁶⁶.

By the representation of “subjects” who are preoccupied with their fictional version of reality, these authors separate themselves from the political satirists in Hodgart’s terms. The level of free speech is limited in the novels and there is no “general readiness of the educated classes to take part in political affairs”. The satirist does not seem to have any hope of influencing the state of affairs as they indicate that individual action is useless in post-World War II society.

³⁶⁶ Vonnegut and Simon, *A Man without a Country*, 71.

The ideological duplicate mirror structure has, as Vonnegut proposes in *Slaughterhouse Five*, left most of humanity in a determinist representation of the world where it is best to spend eternity looking at pleasant moments, whereas both *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22* express clearly the importance of also considering memories and facts that are unpleasant.

The expression of hopelessness is turned to comedy in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22*, the result being an expression of gallows humor. The only weapon of the modern satirist is the continued production of satiric material, and the most prominent message seems to be that the next generation is undeniably worth protection and salvation. Even if there is no hope for an audience “sophisticated enough” to enjoy “wit, imagination and the graces of literature” and their application to “serious topics”³⁶⁷, then laughter as a primal expression can still be used as an alternative. Both Heller and Vonnegut could be said to have adopted Orr’s technique as a satirist. As the apparent outsider, Orr is the true genius of *Catch-22*. Illustrated by the nonsensical crab apples in his cheeks, rubber balls in his hands and buck teeth he is able to plan and execute a grand scale plot to escape from Pianosa, and he does so right under the noses of his opponents. The Black Humorist is regularly the outsider, and in his quest to remind the public of what it should not forget, it would be clever for the ad executive with combat experience to write novels with a brutal and grotesque satiric message of war and public manipulation and dress it in a look of stupid innocence.

³⁶⁷ Hodgart, *Satire : Origins and Principles*, 77.

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