

THE NEW MORALITY PRESENTED BY THE POST
WORLD WAR II AMERICAN WAR NOVEL

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The second World War was unlike any previous war in the history of the United States and produced a distinctive change in American life and thought. Weaponry had in the view of many reached the ultimate in destruction with the creation of the atomic bomb and its use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the same time, many of the former reasons for war--such as honor, duty, and patriotism--no longer seemed to be valid. Thus, the attitudes for some of those coming out of World War II are a distinct contrast to what was produced by previous wars.

According to Eric Solomon, the characteristics of the World War I novel can be denoted by five distinct qualities: the military group itself becoming a home for one's true loyalties (the trench in many ways resembles a womb); the mechanistic concept of an existence that denies free choice or logic; the split between generations, between those at home or in the rear and those to be killed in combat; the equally outrageous presence or absence of sexuality in war; and, finally, the religious, really Christian, overtones of war's sacrifice.¹ War was expressed as a noble duty. The concept of honor became a socialization process, a means for eradicating freedom of choice. The participants were content to be manipulated as parts of the great war machine, fascinated with the turning of the wheels of fate. As Guy Chapman has stated, ". . . in that fascination lies War's power. Once

you have lain in her arms you can admit no other mistress. You may loathe, you may execrate, but you cannot deny her."²

On the other hand, writers emerging from World War II show a notable lack of fascination for the war process. Accordingly, they generally express only horror-stricken attitudes of revulsion for the reality of the atrocities of war that had been produced. Only aversion remained to herald in an era of what Spiller has described as "disillusionment and re-evaluation."³ Man had become only a part of the vast war machinery. Now the expressed concern of the authors emerging from World War II was for the survival of the individual. For these writers, war was no longer something noble, and honor was reduced to merely a regulatory function to be forborne. These authors were not trying to be critics or philosophers in their search for new values to supplant their crumbling, traditional ones. Their main concern now was for the endurance of the individual and from this struggle they drew a new power. The war forced them to become aware in a new way of the continuing discrepancy between America's democratic ideals and their practice.

Because of the vast variety of post-World War II novels, I intend to limit my discussion to the novel as psychological catalyst, which is usually concerned with the individual's struggle to retain identity under the continuous bombardment of forces at large in the twentieth century.⁴ There is a re-definition of the American Dream expressed by the disillusionment found in the loss of traditional values in these novels. This is exemplified by the individual's alienation from the system and the development of a new morality. Society is pictured as an encompassing malicious conspiracy. This is an arrangement which presents an implied act of cooperation between opposite forces. The

individual has as much to fear from his own side as he does from the enemy. This paradoxical situation makes it impossible for the individual to embrace the group morality. These American war novels emerging from World War II illustrate a distinctive change in theme in comparison to previous war novels, such as The Iliad, The Red Badge of Courage, and A Farewell to Arms, in which the hero's option for a separate peace is viewed as ethically immoral or amoral. These post-World War II novels present the protagonist as a "hero-victim" who rejects the conventional, country-oriented morality and develops a new morality based upon self-preservation. The novels I have chosen to represent this idea are Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead, Joseph Heller's Catch-22, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade.

The Iliad, The Red Badge of Courage, and A Farewell to Arms are three war novels that cover a wide span of time, and illustrate some of the themes Solomon has indicated as distinctive of war literature. Their characters either embrace the conventional morality presented by the system, or they offer no alternative for its rejection. In The Iliad, there is the example of Achilles who finally decides not to reject the group morality and becomes a hero in the battle. There is a randomness of events in the work, suggested for instance by the quarreling of the gods, but there is no suggestion of a malicious conspiracy to reduce the characters to insignificant victims. Henry, in The Red Badge, is another example of the hero who re-embraces the group morality after a period of doubt. Henry decides that desertion is running away from his problems and returns to the battle to become an honorable hero. Again, a randomness of events can be seen in such things as battle

victories, but there is no cosmic plot to disrupt man's sense of noble purpose. A Farewell to Arms presents a relativized picture of war in which the events have become so random that there is an inability to determine morality. Fredrick Henry's decision to desert is viewed as an amoral choice offering no real solution to his dilemma. His option for a separate peace presents death as the only answer to the absurd situation he finds himself in.

The basic conflict expressed by Mailer, Heller, and Vonnegut in their novels is that of man in conflict with himself. These writers describe the war as an inner condition of their lives, instead of an exterior event. The problem that they present deals with the development of a new morality based upon individual choice, as opposed to the inherent morality of the war machine which is pictured as being morally absurd. The nature of war becomes for them a metaphor for society as a machine. Therefore, the images to emerge from the chaos of the war experience and its senseless violence take on mythical, as well as symbolic, proportions. War becomes the symbol for an absurd society which can be viewed as a malicious conspiracy supported by a system of victimizers and victims. There is a new self-awareness expressed in these works and a resistance to conformity. This new morality can be seen primarily in terms of the reach for an individual concept of self. The dehumanization of man and his alienation from society and the individuals in it, can therefore be seen as one of the central themes to be dealt with. These works show a bitter understanding of cultural determinism and the problems of human consciousness created by it. These authors do not seem to be concerned with primitive animal dignity, as found in such writers as Hemingway. Traces of nihilism can also be

seen in the relations of the private lives of the soldiers involved to the vast, impersonal military actions.

Characters fall into three basic categories. There are the victimizers who desire to manipulate and control others without any regard for human dignity. They support the malicious conspiracy and the conventional system of morality. The victims are those who are incapable of producing any effective change in their situations. They are the tools of the absurd society. The hero is portrayed as the innocent; his controlling image is that of the "hero-victim," the "victim-culprit," an outsider. He is never confirmed in his initiation; there is no real rite de passage as was found in the war novels before.

These protagonists come to understand the absurdity of the paradox of war: "you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't." Unlike most other rebels, they have given up hope that the world is going to change for them, or that they themselves can change it. "If the war doesn't kill me, I'll live till I die," becomes their prevailing philosophy. Their heroism is based upon an act of nonconformity. They arrive at a moment of truth when they reject the group-oriented morality and shift their moral concern to the worth of the individual and assume responsibility for only themselves. They fear that the conventional system has become a malicious conspiracy and they share an apocalyptic sense of the possible destruction of mankind, which destroys their previous assumptions of a rational universe. Their characterizations demonstrate the growing parallel between the quality of modern life and the fundamental atmosphere of war. They illustrate the dilemma of contending with a world made totally absurd; one in which war has become the normal, omnipresent condition of their daily living.

NOTES

¹Eric Solomon, "From Christ in Flanders to Catch-22," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 11 (1969), 853.

²Ibid.

³Robert E. Spiller et al., eds., Literary History of the United States (New York: Macmillan Co., 1963), p. 1395.

⁴Peter Jones, "The Developing Voice: An Appraisal of the Modern American War Novel," DAI, 32 (1972), 437A.

CHAPTER II

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

The Naked and the Dead was Norman Mailer's first novel, published in 1948. It is a pessimistic, realistic view of men at war with death omnipresent. Criticism of the novel varies, ranging from labeling it the "Granddaddy of the War novels" to being what Hemingway called "poor cheese, pretentiously wrapped."¹ The novel is notorious for its coarse language and copious four-letter words; but as Robert Flesch has noted, it is a work of complex prose, interlaced with elaborate Dos Passos-like devices and containing many passages of almost Proustian introspection.² Concerning characterization, John W. Aldridge has noted that, "the good are humiliated or suffer a fatal deception; the evil are made ridiculous, and the mediocre ride to victory on an accident. . . . the novel descends through a series of reductions to an absolute zero."³ According to Andrew Gordon's analysis of characters, every male, without exception, is unsure of his potency and terrified of castration.⁴ Gordon believes that the essential characteristics of the protagonists are fear of impotence and castration coupled with anal regression and latent homosexuality.⁵ The novel can readily be viewed as a struggle between the potent victimizer, or one who at least believes he is potent, and the impotent victim. The characters attempt to cope with their unresolved anxiety through a drive toward omnipotence. Each is

striving to obtain power and control over their situation, but instead they all encounter failure and are left with only impotent rage.

There is a random, but not encompassing, malicious conspiracy in The Naked and the Dead which is illustrated by the breakdown between cause and effect. Distortions of time and space exemplify the absurd universe. To avoid the realities of the atrocities which surround them, the characters attempt to escape into their own "time machines" of thought which transport them back into reflections of their past conditions. But they are always returned to find their situations virtually the same. "They were still on the treadmill; the misery, the ennui, the dislocated horror. . . . Things would happen and time would pass, but there was no hope, no anticipation. There would be nothing but the deep cloudy dejection that overcast everything."⁶ The ineffectiveness of control and manipulation also serves to reinforce the absurdity of the situation. The battle for Anopopei is perhaps the principal illustration of the randomness of events and the breakdown between cause and effect. When the decisive victory of Anopopei Island is secured by the mechanical decision of a bumbling staff bureaucrat while the general is away from the campaign trying to get help from the Navy, Cummings comes to realize that "he had no more to do with the success of the attack than a man who presses a button and waits for the elevator" (p. 436).

Mailer's characterization of General Cummings is the best example of the victimizer who is continually striving for omnipotence and complete domination. He is the psychopathic professional soldier who views war as the ultimate expression of our society. Cummings is used by Mailer as a one-sided mouthpiece for the type of philosophy that

views "the natural role of the twentieth-century man [as] anxiety" (p. 187). He believes that "the only morality of the future is a power morality," and that "the only way you generate the proper attitude of awe and obedience is through immense and disproportionate power" (pp. 255-56). General Cummings is a brilliantly delineated scoundrel, who treats men like automatons, minus any human dignity. "I find Freud rather stimulating," he says. "The idea is that man is a worthless bastard, and the only problem is how best to control him" (p. 330). He believes that the nations whose leaders strive for Godhead apotheosize the machine, and that in battle, men are closer to machines than to humans. He is continually striving for omnipotence and complete control, even telling his aid Hearn, "You know, if there is a God, Robert, he's just like me" (p. 145). Cummings acknowledges that, "Man's deepest urge is omnipotence. When we discover that the universe is not us, it's the deepest trauma of our existence" (p. 282). He is forced to face such an emotional shock when his battle is decided without him.

To leave his battle front on a quiet morning and return the next day to find the campaign virtually over was like the disbelief with which a man would come home to find his house burned down. . . . For a moment he almost admitted that he had had very little or perhaps nothing at all to do with this victory, or indeed any victory--it has been accomplished by a random play of vulgar good luck larded into a casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend. He allowed himself this thought, brought it almost to the point of words and then forced it back. But it caused him a deep depression (p. 555).

The enlisted men are the prominent victims of the novel. They are always in friction with one another or their environment--battling, pushing, swearing--and this personal emotion has not the slightest effect on the actual course of the fighting. The privates, no matter

where they come from, have been given such a fundamental sense of insecurity that they take constant advantage of those who seem in any sense weaker. All of Mailer's victims function only as tools of the absurd society which manipulates them at random and discards them with a meaningless abandonment. Ridges and Goldstein, for example, represent those who are broken down by the system and become completely demoralized by their experiences. Ridges loses his faith in God and becomes bitter and frustrated when he comes to realize that everything for him has become meaningless. Goldstein comes to believe that it is his duty to suffer because he is Jewish and alienates himself from the others, considering them to be "just a bunch of Anti-Semiten."

Hennessey and Wilson exemplify men who are destroyed by the system.

Hennessey is the young innocent who views war as a noble, patriotic duty and only wants to obey the rules. Wilson is the easy going individual who only wants to get by with the least amount of trouble. They both break the cardinal rule of the soldiers, which is "Keep a tight asshole, and the rest of you'll take care of itself," and are rewarded with death. Eventually, all of the victims are broken down one way or another and reduced to frustration, self-disgust, and insignificance.

When the Company returns from their reconnaissance, they are told of the end of the campaign and realize the worthlessness of their patrol, and they come to understand the absurdity of their situation. "It all seemed perfectly fitting to them. . . . It confused them, irritated them, they didn't know whether the news pleased them or not. The patrol should have been worth something. In their fatigue this conflict brought them close to hysteria and then shifted them over to mirth" (p. 549). "And tomorrow the endless routine of harsh eventless

days would begin once more. Already the patrol was unfamiliar, unbelievable, and yet the bivouac before them also was unreal. In transit everything in the Army was unreal" (p. 552).

The only real hero of the novel in any sense is Red Valsen, because he is the only character who finally discerns the truth and is able to live with its consequences. Red is the "hero-victim;" the victim of the military machine that absorbs everything into itself, and the hero who comes to realize that the world will not end with his death and is thus able to repudiate the system that offers death as its only reward and the only means of escape. "He understood it all, knew he could do nothing about it any longer, and was not even tempted. What was the use?" (p. 16). When Red is looking at a corpse of a Japanese soldier, he becomes aware of his own weakness and impotence.

Very deep inside himself he was thinking that this was a man who had once wanted things, and the thought of his own death was always a little unbelievable to him. . . . Red was realizing with surprise and shock, as if he were looking at a corpse for the first time, that man was really a very fragile thing . . . and it remained in him for a long bad moment in which he looked at the body and didn't look, thought of nothing, and found his mind churning with the physical knowledge of life and death and his own vulnerability (p. 171).

Red is alienated from the rest of the group because of this special knowledge of life which he is unable to clearly articulate to the others. When Wyman, for instance, is telling Red of his girl back home and asking his advice on marriage, Red is unable to express himself. "He wanted to be able to tell Wyman something more comforting than the fact that it didn't matter. But he could think of nothing. . . . Like a relapsing fever, Red had again the familiar ache of age and sadness and wisdom" (p. 203). He is often aware of his situation, but has

trouble reconciling himself to his fate. "As often happened when he was very tired, his mind had become clear and he felt as if he understood everything, but at times like this the knowledge was always wistful, burdened with the exhaustion of living" (p. 448). Even when he attempts to escape his brooding thoughts by reflecting upon his past, he realizes that he doesn't give a damn about anything and has always felt that way. "Aaah, you don't look back. . . . When you're a kid they can't tell you a damn thing, and when you ain't a kid no more there's nothing new for you. You just got to keep pushing it, you don't look back" (p. 186). When Red was feeling very drunk and very profound, he tries to expound his theories. "I'll tell you guys something . . . none of ya are ever gonna get anything. You're all good guys, but you're gonna get . . . the shitty end of the stick. The shitty end of the stick, that's all you're gonna get" (p. 160). When asked if GIs die in vain, Red demonstrates his absurdist point of view.

He snorted. Who didn't know the answer? Of course they died in vain, any GI knew the score. The war was just t.s. to them who had to fight it. "Yeah, fighting a war to fix something works about as good as going to a whorehouse to get rid of a clap." Maybe it did count for something. He didn't know, and there was no way he'd ever find out, no way any of them ever would. Aaah, just chalk it off, it's down the drain and who gives a goddam. He wouldn't live long enough to find out anyway, he thought (p. 450).

Red's moment of truth occurs when he finally yields to his feelings of hopelessness and uselessness, and arrives at the understanding that death as a matter of principle is meaningless. He confronts Croft about his decision to continue the patrol and realizes that Croft would simply shoot him down if he doesn't obey orders. Red becomes aware of his inability to change the system or influence the society which has no regard for human identity. "You carried it alone as long as you

could, and then you weren't strong enough to take it any longer. You kept fighting everything, and everything broke you down, until in the end you were just a little goddam bolt holding on and squealing when the machine went too fast. Aaah, fug. There were no answers. . ."

(p. 548). He is then able to throw off the conventional system of the group-oriented morality with its concepts of honor and duty, and shifts his concern instead to the worth of the individual, assuming responsibility for only himself. His new morality is based upon his decision to establish self-preservation as the only goal worth retaining.

NOTES

¹Alfred Kazin, "War Novel: From Mailer to Vonnegut," Saturday Review of Literature, 6 Feb. 1971, p. 13.

²R. Flesch, "What the War Did to Prose," Saturday Review of Literature, 13 Aug. 1949, p. 37.

³Andrew Gordon, "The Naked and the Dead: The Triumph of Impotence," Literature and Psychology, 19, iii (1969), 7.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 8.

⁶Norman Mailer, The Naked and the Dead (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1948), p. 282. All other references are from this volume and parenthetically noted.

CHAPTER III

CATCH-22

Joseph Heller published Catch-22 sixteen years after World War II. It has been described as a lunatic Armageddon or the script of a Marx brothers film as it might have been written by Kafka. The idea of a comic war novel is in itself paradoxical, but Heller achieves just that in his satiric attacks on psychiatry, racism, security trials, patriotism--aimed at the Protestant Ethic and the American Dream. Heller displays a pessimism toward war and society in general as he questions the justice of the universe and the myth of "the real America," which maintains a faith in a transcendent American spiritual reality independent of actual American politics.

Perhaps no other modern war novel has produced such an abundance of criticism concerning man's moral dilemma in an absurd universe. Norman Podhoretz thinks that Heller is attempting to make a credible depiction of the insane realities of twentieth-century American life.¹ Along the same lines, David Galloway considers that World War II is for Heller only a microcosm of the dehumanizing aspects of modern society.² Jesse Ritter, Jr. has extended this idea and proposed that the novel is "a fusion of surrealist and realist-naturalist fictional techniques for purposes of social satire."³ Jim Castelli asserts, however, that Heller is not only criticizing society and its institutions, but is also presenting an alternative solution to the absurd morality of war

which can be seen as a "new heroism" featuring a reliance on self above all else, placing individual human life over honor, duty, and glory.⁴

Heller utilizes a more surrealistic portrayal of his characters than does Mailer, but both writers are employing characterization to underscore and enhance their depiction of an absurd society dominated by a malicious conspiracy. Heller's victimizers fall basically into two categories. There are the real bastards who advocate immorality in the name of reason, and then there are the comic bastards who are exaggerated to the point of becoming allegorical. Colonels Cathcart and Korn are representative of the ambitious men, the corrupted villains, who desire to control and manipulate others without any regard for human dignity. They are the real bastards and in many aspects resemble Mailer's General Cummings. Captains Piltchard and Wren are like Mailer's Sergeant Croft and are exemplary of the type of man that find war to be the one big, circumstantial experience of their lives. "Nothing so wonderful as war had ever happened to them before; and they were afraid it might never happen to them again."⁵ Milo Minderbinder and ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen represent the comic bastards whose characterizations become humorous caricatures of the victimizers. They are illustrative of the opportunists who prey on others to advance their own positions. Milo is the comic personification of omnipotent capitalism and the competitive work ethic. Wintergreen represents the concept of absurd authority. "Wintergreen is probably the most influential man in the whole theater of operations. He's not only a mail clerk, but he has access to a mimeograph machine. But he won't help anybody. That's one of the reasons he'll go far" (p. 311).

Heller's victims are incapable of producing any effective change in their situations and are governed by a random system which reduces their actions to insignificance. Dr. Stubbs portrays the individual who becomes totally demoralized by the atrocities he has experienced and his attitude is much like that of Ridges and Goldstein. "I used to get a big kick out of saving people's lives. Now I wonder what the hell's the point, since they all have to die anyway" (p. 113). When asked what he thinks of Yossarian's increasing rebelliousness he replies, "That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left" (p. 114). Dunbar and Natelly represent men destroyed by the system, and their characterizations are comparable to those of Wilson and Hennessey. As Yossarian's friends, they function as aids in leading him to his decision to desert. Dunbar is "disappeared" at the hospital, while Natelly is killed in a mid-air collision. Like many of his victimizers, several of Heller's victims also serve as allegorical representations. Major Major Major, for example, functions as a symbol of the absurdity of the war machine. He receives his rank not because of any personal competency, but because of a quirk of the system. "Actually, Major Major had been promoted by an I.B.M. machine with a sense of humor almost as keen as his father's" (p. 88). The Soldier in White, whom Yossarian encounters in the hospital, is the perfect symbol of the reification of man and the horror of depersonalization.

Changing the jars for the soldier in white was no trouble at all, since the same clear fluid was dripped back inside him over and over again with no apparent loss. When the jar feeding the inside of his elbow was just about empty, the jar on the floor was just about full, and the two were simply uncoupled from their respective hoses and reversed quickly so that the liquid could be dripped right back into him. Changing the jars was no trouble to anyone but the men who watched

them changed every hour or so and were baffled by the procedure (p. 174).

Catch-22 is basically divided into three nearly equal parts separated by the rhythmic repetition of the hospital scenes. The hospital is Yossarian's retreat and offers him a temporary reprieve from the dangers of combat. The trips to the hospital become Yossarian's symbol of alienation from the system and provides him with a limited chance to escape the malicious conspiracy. Yossarian even goes so far as to study Reader's Digest for symptoms of diseases and ailments so that he can emulate them successfully and prolong his sojourns there.

There were usually not nearly as many sick people inside the hospital as Yossarian saw outside the hospital, and there were generally fewer people inside the hospital who were seriously sick. There was a much lower death rate inside the hospital than outside the hospital, and a much healthier death rate. Few people died unnecessarily. People knew a lot more about dying inside the hospital and made a much neater, more orderly job of it. They couldn't dominate Death inside the hospital, but they certainly made her behave. They had taught her manners. They couldn't keep Death out, but while she was in she had to act like a lady. People gave up the ghost with delicacy and taste inside the hospital. There was none of that crude, ugly ostentation about dying that was so common outside the hospital (p. 170).

The psychological development of Yossarian's new morality is directly related to the rising number of combat missions he is expected to fly and his consequent escapes to the hospital. When Dunbar is "disappeared" from the hospital, Yossarian realizes he is no longer safe there from the conspiracy and is forced into finding another means of escape which leads to his decision to desert.

Yossarian is the "hero-victim" of the novel who finally rejects the system in favor of assuming moral responsibility for himself. He views the society as an absurd, malicious conspiracy in which "Men

went mad and were rewarded with medals" (p. 16). He decides "to live forever or die in the attempt" (p. 30). Yossarian realizes he cannot change history, but he is also unwilling to be manipulated by it, understanding that "It doesn't make a damned bit of difference who wins the war to someone who's dead" (p. 127). "That men would die was a matter of necessity; which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance, and Yossarian was willing to be the victim of anything but circumstance" (p. 69). His attempt to escape death by asserting insanity is obstructed, however, by Catch-22. Catch-22 becomes Heller's primary symbol of the malicious conspiracy. "Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy. 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 process of a rational mind" (p. 47). When Yossarian pleads "They're not going to send a crazy man out to be killed, are they?" he is calmly told "Who else will go?" (p. 314). Yossarian's moment of truth occurs when he is forced to decide between being exploited by the unjust system of war which perpetrates the devaluation of human life or enacting a moral responsibility centered on the question of human identity. He concludes that Catch-22 doesn't exist, "but it made no difference. 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" (p. 418).

Like Red, Yossarian comes to realize the fragility of life and his own vulnerability from viewing a corpse. The death of Snowden is a critical event in the novel. Yossarian's desertion is structured around

the revelation of Snowden's "secret" which leads directly to his expanding moral awareness. "He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. 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. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all" (p. 450). Orr, Yossarian's tentmate who is shot down and lost at sea, turns up alive and well at the end of the novel after having rowed to Sweden. This act is the impetus which provides Yossarian with the hope and the confidence that he will persevere. "It's a miracle of human perseverance, I tell you. And that's just what I'm going to do from now on! I'm going to persevere. Yes, I'm going to persevere" (p. 459). He decides to fight to save himself, to survive through defiance, and his desertion becomes for him a positive moral act opposing the inhumanity and irrationality of the system. When told that it is a negative move and escapist, Yossarian replies scornfully "I'm not running away from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life" (p. 461). So like Red, Yossarian assumes a new responsibility for himself by rejecting the conventional system of the group-oriented morality.

NOTES

¹Norman Podhoretz, "The Best Catch There Is," in Doings and Undoings (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girouz, Inc., 1964), pp. 228-35.

²David D. Galloway, "Clown and Saint: The Hero in Current American Fiction," Critique, 7 (Summer 1965), 46-65.

³Jesse P. Ritter, Jr., "Fearful Comedy: The Fiction of Joseph Heller, Günter Grass, and the Social Surrealist Genre," DAI, 28 (1968),

⁴Jim Castelli, "Catch-22 and the New Hero," Catholic World, 211 (1970), 199-202.

⁵Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), p. 401. All other references are from this volume and parenthetically noted.

CHAPTER IV

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. has been called "the artistic canary in a cat-house."¹ His world has become familiar to his readers as they are drawn in by the yarn-spinning of the "old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls."² In Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade, Vonnegut takes the serious subject of the Dresden fire-bombing and treats it with a comic technique. The novel has a paradoxical humor based on the sheer helplessness, the total ineffectuality, of anyone caught up in such a massacre as the Dresden disaster. Vonnegut states early in the novel that "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, San, 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?'" (p. 19). Vonnegut's perspective is haunted by the fact that he was actually in Dresden as an American prisoner of war when the city was bombed and escaped death by taking shelter in a slaughterhouse meat locker. The destruction of Dresden by the U.S. Army Air Force was the worst single incident of bombing during the war, killing more people than either atomic bombing, and was perpetrated for no apparent military reason. That he escaped virtually unscathed from this ordeal has

given Vonnegut a special awareness of death which he attempts to portray in the novel.

Criticism of Slaughterhouse-Five has produced an assortment of interpretations concerning Vonnegut's thematic intent and his writing technique. David Goldsmith, for example, believes that Vonnegut is illustrative of a trend away from pessimism toward a more sanguine view of life.³ Taking this idea a bit further,³ Alfred Kazin proposes that Vonnegut's fixed social idea is a human vulnerability too innocent in the face of war to offer any political explanation or protest; his amiable self-deprecation finally becomes a picture of the whole human race.⁴ Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer assert that in Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut has fused together the fiction of experience and the techniques of the literature of ideas.⁵ Their contention is not that he is a "science-fiction writer" as he has often been labeled, but rather that Vonnegut is a writer who uses the techniques of that form to delineate human experience--a human experience of necessity broadened to include within its scope the technology which forms a goodly part of that experience.⁶ Raymond Olderman, however, provides an interpretation that seems closest to the actual spirit of the book when he suggests that Vonnegut demonstrates a sense that fact and fiction have become completely indistinguishable; a fear of some force--an institution or a malicious conspiracy--that has seized control over the life of the individual; and the driving need to affirm life over death no matter how radical an act is required for that affirmation.⁷

Concerning characterization, Vonnegut writes, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, 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" (p. 164). Vonnegut does, however, present several characters who serve to support his views of a disturbed, paradoxical society. There are few victimizers in Slaughterhouse-Five and those that are presented function only as tools of the absurd society in which they are found, and eventually become its victims themselves. Howard W. Campbell, Jr. is perhaps the best example of the person who attempts to manipulate others, and may be paralleled to such characters as Mailer's General Cummings and Heller's Milo Minderbinder. Campbell was a former American playwright who had become a Nazi and who had risen high in the German Ministry of Propaganda. He writes monographs directed to American prisoners of war ridiculing the American system and attempting to encourage the prisoners to defect. "Campbell told what the German experience with captured American enlisted men had been. They were known everywhere to be the most self-pitying, least fraternal, and dirtiest of all prisoners of war, said Campbell. They were incapable of concerted action on their own behalf. They despised any leader from among their own number, refused to follow or even listen to him, on the grounds that he was no better than they were, that he should stop putting on airs. And so on" (p. 131). Campbell even creates a German military unit called "The Free American Corps," and comes to the slaughterhouse in an attempt to recruit Billy and his fellow prisoners by offering them food, "steaks and mashed potatoes and gravy and mince pie, if they would join" (p. 163). He is later caught in the war machinery and hangs himself while awaiting trial as a war criminal.

Roland Weary characterizes the young man who leaves home for the adventure and romance of war inspired by visions of dominance and power. Weary is a mixture of such characters as Mailer's Hennessey, Stanley, and Croft, and Heller's Nately, Piltchard, and Wren. Weary dreams of becoming a great war hero, of being promoted to command, and romanticizes his position to the others around him. "He had so much energy that he bustled back and forth between Billy and the scouts, delivering dumb messages which nobody was pleased to receive. He also began to suspect, since he was so much busier than anybody else, that he was the leader" (p. 41). "He was able to pretend that he was safe at home, having survived the war, and that he was telling his parents and his sister a true war story--whereas the true war story was still going on" (p. 42). His real character, however, is actually far removed from his own vision of himself.

Roland Weary was only eighteen, was at the end of an unhappy childhood spent mostly in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He had been unpopular in Pittsburgh. He had been unpopular because he was stupid and fat and mean, and smelled like bacon no matter how much he washed. He was always being ditched in Pittsburgh by people who did not want him with them.

It made Weary sick to be ditched. When Weary was ditched, he would find somebody who was even more unpopular than himself, and he would horse around with that person for a while, pretending to be friendly. And then he would find some pretext for beating the shit out of him (p. 35).

Weary's attempt at control and manipulation actually leads to his own victimization. Weary and Billy are captured by the Germans and he blames it all on trying to save Billy's "God-damned hide for him." His boots are taken from him and he later develops a fatal case of gangrene, and in his delirium before he dies, Weary continuously tells his fellow prisoners that it is Billy Pilgrim who has killed him. Another

characterization is that of Wild Bob who is a parody of the noble war leader who attempts to inspire his men with a sense of honor. He demonstrates a more pathetic characterization of types like General Cummings and Generals Dreedle and Peckem. He is also a victimizer who becomes the victim of his own machine. He is a colonel who had lost an entire regiment of about forty-five hundred men, and who is dying of double pneumonia. He mistakes the American prisoners for his own dead men. "'It's me, boys! It's Wild Bob!' That is what he had always wanted his troops to call him: 'Wild Bob.' . . . the colonel imagined that he was addressing his beloved troops for the last time, and he told them that they had nothing to be ashamed of, that there were dead Germans all over the battlefield who wished to God that they had never heard of the Four-fifty-first" (pp. 66-67).

Most of Vonnegut's characters are the victims of an absurd society. The character Eliot Rosewater, for instance, portrays the individual who finds life to be meaningless, partly because of what he has seen in the war, so he tries to re-invent himself and his universe. Billy meets Rosewater in a mental hospital where they had come voluntarily, alarmed by the outside world. Rosewater's view of life is much like that of Dr. Stubbs. He tells a psychiatrist, for example, that "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (p. 101). Edgar Derby exemplifies the victim of the conventional, country oriented morality. He resembles Hennessey and Nately in many aspects. He is the innocent who believes that something honorable can still be salvaged from war, and yet his death functions to illustrate the absurdity of war and the insignificance of individual human life. Derby

is a forty-four year old high school teacher, with a son who was a marine in the Pacific theater, who is drawn into the war by his instilled sense of patriotism and duty. "Derby had pulled political wires to get into the army at his age. The subject he had taught in Indianapolis was Contemporary Problems in Western Civilization. He also coached the tennis team, and took very good care of his body" (p. 83). Vonnegut states early in the novel that, "the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby. The irony is so great" (pp. 4-5). Derby's death epitomizes the ultimate absurdity of war. "A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad" (p. 5).

Billy Pilgrim is the "hero-victim" of Slaughterhouse-Five. He is characterized as a figure of unreproachful innocence who never has any idea what point in his life he is going to be at next or what planet he will be on. The novel is structured in terms of Billy's ability to travel in time. He is so alienated by the war that he becomes "unstuck in time," creating his own fiction within a fiction to escape his reality. This inner-fiction is Billy's travels through time.

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between.

He says.

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 state of stage fright, he says, because he

never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next (p. 23).

Time-travel becomes Vonnegut's sign of the absurd universe. Fantasy and reality are portrayed side by side. Billy's trips to Tralfamadore are his basic defensive actions to the realities and atrocities he observes around him. The Tralfamadorians provide Billy with an interpretation of Darwin which functions to illustrate the moral absurdity of our society. "On Tralfamadore, says Billy Pilgrim, there isn't much interest in Jesus Christ. The Earthling figure who is most engaging to the Tralfamadorian mind, he says, is Charles Darwin--who taught that those who die are meant to die, that corpses are improvements" (p. 210). In his first encounter with the Tralfamadorians, Billy learns there is no free will, no real control, and that we are all simply individuals trapped by the moment in time we happen to be experiencing. "'Welcome aboard, Mr. Pilgrim,' said the loudspeaker. 'Any questions?' Billy licked his lips, thought a while, inquired at last: 'Why me?' 'That is a very Earthling question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why you? Why us for that matter? Why anything? Because this moment simply is. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber? . . . Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why'" (pp. 76-77). "'All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I've said before, bugs in amber'" (p. 86). The idea that one has no real control over any situation is the essential spiritual dilemma of contemporary man. Billy's own philosophy of life provides him with a basic guide line which enables him to develop his

individuality and new morality overcoming this dilemma. "It went like this: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference. Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (p. 60). From the Tralfamadorians, Billy acquires a new morality which allows him to overcome his fear and develop a casual approach to death. He comes to understand that there is nothing to be done about death and war, and that if he tries hard enough, he can ignore or escape the awful times by concentrating on the good ones. Billy's moment of truth occurs when he, like Red and Yossarian, is able to reject the moral system that offers death as the only reward for patriotism and the only means of escaping the war machine.

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. . . . It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. . . . Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is "So it goes" (pp. 26-27).

By discovering there is nothing to fear in death, Billy frees himself from the obligations to society and shifts his moral responsibility to the individual concern.

NOTES

¹Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer, eds., The Vonnegut Statement (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 3.

²Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 2. All other references are from this volume and parenthetically noted.

³David Goldsmith, "The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," DAI, 31 (1970), 2916A.

⁴Kazin, p. 15.

⁵Klinkowitz and Somer, p. 3.

⁶Ibid., p. 153.

⁷Raymond Olderman, "Beyond the Waste Land: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties," DAI, 30 (1970), 4998A.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The main thematic question posed by these novels is, how can man face death without ruining himself? For Red it is a sense of living with an absurd society by reconciling his morality to it, for Yossarian it is his physical escape to freedom in Sweden, and for Billy it is a type of schizophrenia. Collectively, the novels delineate a growing parallel between the quality of modern life and the fundamental atmosphere of war. They share a peculiarly modern consciousness of war, and of society in general, which consciously reflects the absurdity of contemporary life. These novelists conclude that war is not itself a cause, but is simply a symptom of a greater malady that afflicts mankind. They have constructed a fictional meaning, a narrative logic, out of a system in which virtually everyone but the hero assents to madness and willingly poses as mad. Their concern has shifted from the group-oriented morality to an individual morality based upon a reliance on self above all else. The inner conflict that emerges is between each character's sense of individuality and his sense of duty and respect for others. These writers, demanding simultaneously a high degree of individual freedom and a mass base free from the stultifying effects of negative social conditioning, in the end are defeated by the contradictions inherent in their beliefs and abandon all hope of political change, retreating into an individual isolation which they find to be a

positive conclusion. Their characters refuse to give in to what they generally view as an absurd country-oriented morality in the hope of raising society to their level of awareness, nor do they relinquish individualism as an ideal to embrace the group morality. They do, however, offer hope and direction to an absurd world. There is no escape from absurdity, but there is survival through defiance. The new hero is the person who carries through his struggle for individuality, who places self above the conventional morality with its concern for honor, duty, and glory.

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