Trauma and Literature
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Lecture - 52
Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five - Part 3

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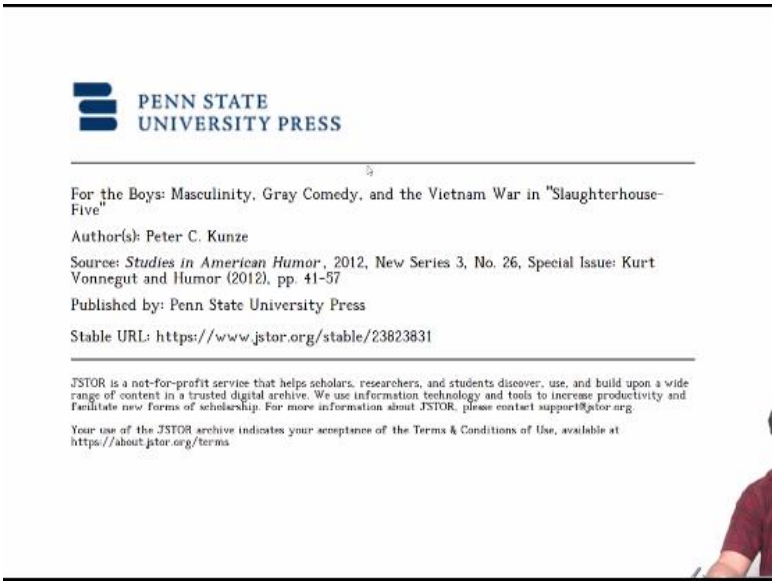

This NPTEL course titled “Trauma and Literature” on the critical essay on Kurt Vonnegut’s novel “Slaughterhouse-Five”. We were sort of looking at how the text, especially the opening of the text, and we spend some time on that, how that sets the tone in the philosophy of the novel, which is one of nihilism.

Cynicism and the loss of temporality, the loss of spatiality and how this being, sense of being unhinged in space and time begins to become almost a real corporeal condition in the novel. And which informs the storytelling process. Vonnegut is unhinged in time. Then, the protagonist becomes unhinged in time.

The protagonist in the novel becomes some kind of a counterpoint or alternate ego of Vonnegut the writer. The writer is very heavily present as we saw. He himself inserts himself in the opening of the novel and talks about his writerly difficulties, writerly processes and anxieties and how he constantly claims, he constantly considers his novel to be an act of failure.

Because he never could represent what he went through in words. The essay is called "Masculinity, Gray Comedy, and the Vietnam War and Slaughterhouse-Five" by Peter C. Kunze. We talked about how this novel becomes a parody of military masculinity.

This becomes some kind of a travesty of military masculinity, in a certain sense. There is this quality of gray comedy to it as well. This is published in the journal called "Studies in American Humor".

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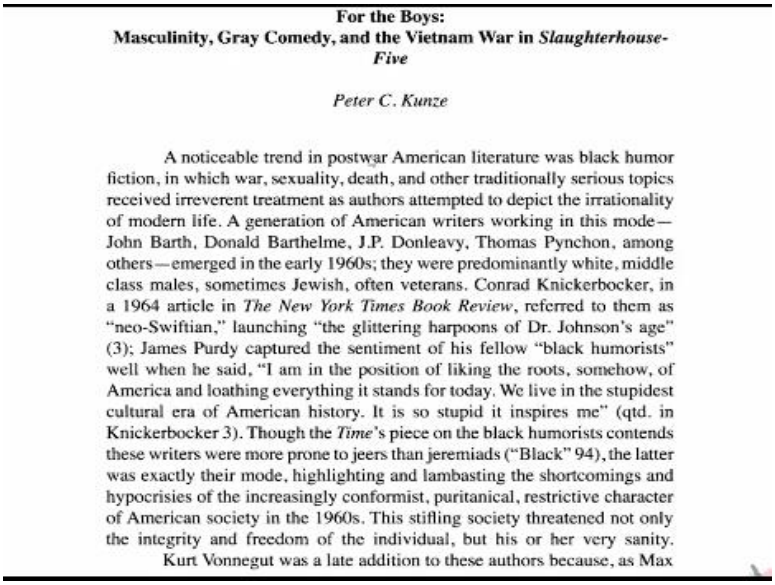

For the Boys:
Masculinity, Gray Comedy, and the Vietnam War in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Peter C. Kunze

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

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It starts off with the historical significance of post-war American literature where black humor becomes quite rampant, and he talks about other writers such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and the entire generation of writers who are practicing this black humor.

"A noticeable trend in postwar American literature was black humor fiction, in which war, sexuality, death and other traditionally serious topics received irreverent treatment as authors attempted to depict the irrationality of modern life. So the irreverence comes from irrationality."

The irreverence cynicism, the flippancy, that informs the depiction of the actual events in the novels are partly larger reflection of the irrationality of war, the purposelessness of futility of war. Vonnegut falls squarely in this tradition along with people like Donald Barthelme, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon.

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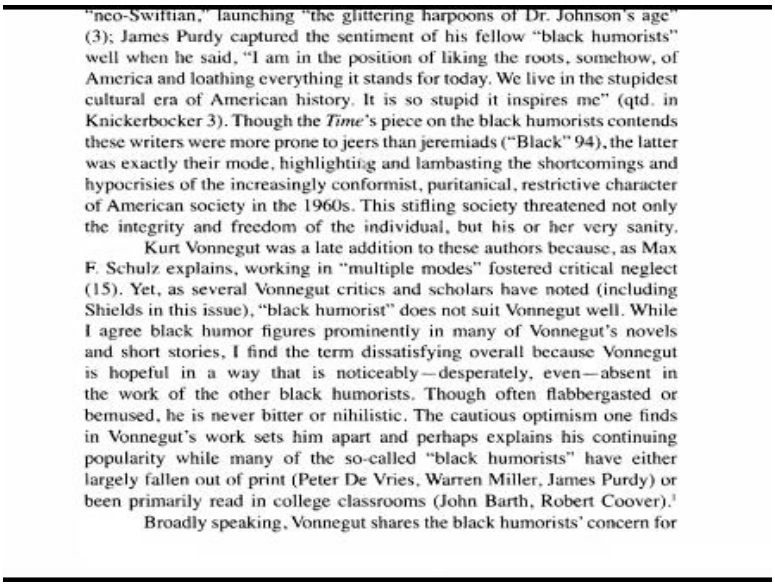

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Kurt Vonnegut was a late addition to these authors because, as Max F. Schulz explains, working in "multiple modes" fostered critical neglect (15). Yet, as several Vonnegut critics and scholars have noted (including Shields in this issue), "black humorist"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

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But Vonnegut's addition is a little bit more complex compared to the earlier writers and this is where though the essay says. "Kurt Vonnegut was a late addition to these authors because as Max F. Schulz explains, working in multiple modes fostered critical neglect. Yet, several Vonnegut critics and scholars have noted black humors does not suit Vonnegut well.

The purpose of this essay or the theory the essay is trying to promote over here is how gray comedy is perhaps more suitable form, more suitable description of Vonnegut's writing none compared to dark comedy or black humor. Black humor figures prominently in many of Vonnegut's novels and short stories, I find the term dissatisfying overall.

Because Vonnegut is helpful in a way but it is noticeably desperately even absent in the work of the other black humorists. There is always this kernel of hope, there is always this kernel of transformation, the possibility of transformation that Vonnegut talks about."

We saw that when we finished Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel "Nervous Conditions" that this possibility of hope, a possibility of change despite the traumatic conditions, despite the nervous conditions and that is where literature comes in, fiction comes in as a very interesting genre and as a very interesting medium.

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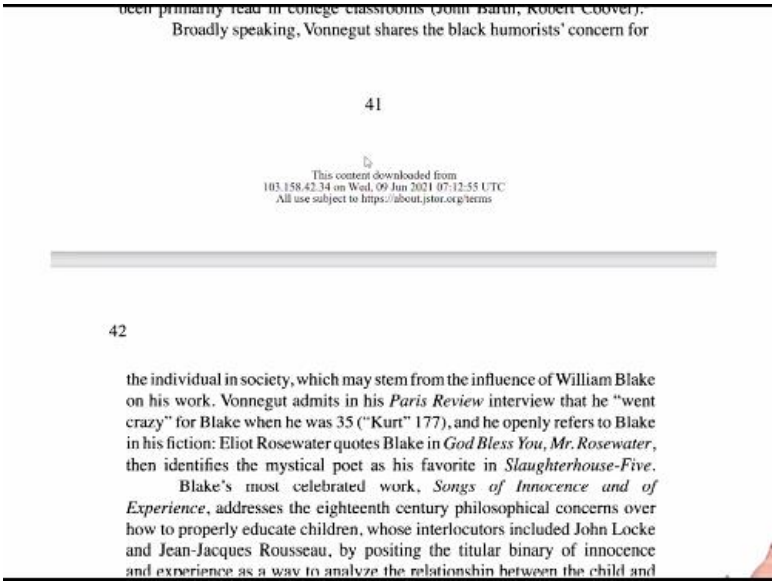

been primarily read in college classrooms (John Barth, Robert Coover).
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the individual in society, which may stem from the influence of William Blake on his work. Vonnegut admits in his *Paris Review* interview that he "went crazy" for Blake when he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

Blake's most celebrated work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, addresses the eighteenth century philosophical concerns over how to properly educate children, whose interlocutors included John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by positing the titular binary of innocence and experience as a way to analyze the relationship between the child and

He talks about how Vonnegut shares a lot of traditions on black humorists but then he also has several departures on it. So broadly speaking, Vonnegut shares a black humorists concern for the individual in society, which may stem from the influence of William Blake on his work. Vonnegut admits though in his Paris review that he went crazily for Blake when he was 35.

He openly refers to Blake in his fiction. Blake is part of the romantic tradition, but then or poetry but then he is also quite dark and cynical and hollow in terms of his depiction of hollowness in industrial England. Blake forms a large part in Vonnegut's writerly imagination.

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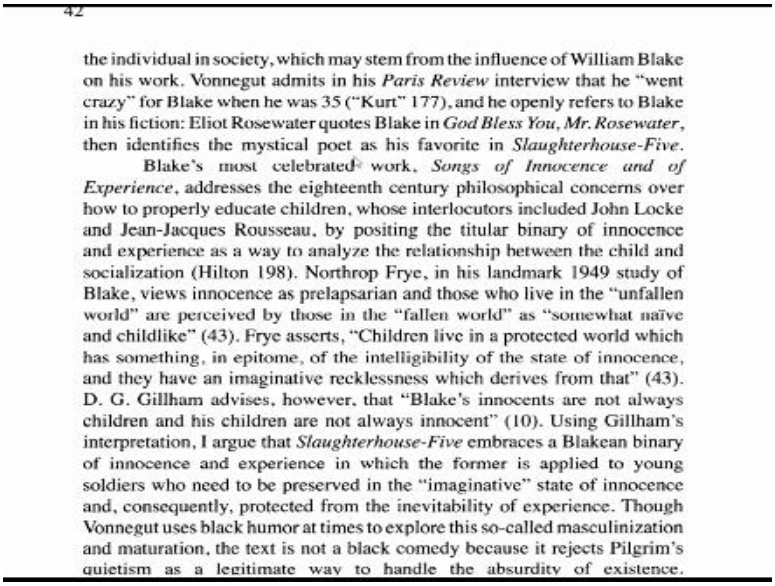

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Blake's most celebrated work, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, addresses the eighteenth century philosophical concerns over how to properly educate children, whose interlocutors included John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by positing the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

So and of course, Blake's poetry if you read it is all about the abuse on children into the industrial age, the Industrial Revolution, how children are so bereft of education, denied education, made to work in a very menial settings, in hard labor settings, and how it just forms the dark underbelly of industrial revolution.

In one hand, this is so narrative of prosperity, progress, growth, rationality, which is all there, but beneath all that there is a sort of shadowy spectral presence of abused children, in Blake's poetry. The sense of being abused child is there in Vonnegut's writing as well.

The whole idea of Billy Pilgrim, and the subtext and subtitle of the novel if you remember is about children, pilgrimage, and children's quest. It is also a duty dance with death. So that sense of being abused by honor, being abused by the supposed corner of or code of honor, is there in Vonnegut's writing as well.

Because if we take a look at the age of the people who go and fight in the wars, there are hardly more than 18 or 19 year old boys. They so come back from the war, either crippled or paralyzed, or mentally hurt to such an extent, mentally damaged to such an extent they cannot recover the rest of their lives.

The sense of being bruised by time, the sense of being damaged by time is very much there in Vonnegut's fictions. In that sense he is also a writer about abuse. Someone who is addressing the abuse to young people in a bodily mental level.

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soldiers who need to be preserved in the "imaginative" state of innocence and, consequently, protected from the inevitability of experience. Though Vonnegut uses black humor at times to explore this so-called masculinization and maturation, the text is not a black comedy because it rejects Pilgrim's quietism as a legitimate way to handle the absurdity of existence.

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

Vonnegut falls more closely to the idea of gray comedy, and that is something that this essay advocates. "A more accurate term for what Vonnegut often does in this fiction would be gray comedy, a blend of absurdist black humor with guarded sense of hope. A light exists at the end of the tunnel or at least a belief in it exists.

We also often see gray comedy in mainstream cinema. There is examples of mainstream cinema referred here as well. It talks about how different kinds of art forms such as novel, fiction, cinema, they are also advocating a sense of possibility for change, a sense of transformation, a sense of mutation in a positive sense. In that the gray comedy genre sub-genre becomes more suitable for someone like Vonnegut, especially when it comes to the novel "Slaughterhouse-Five.""

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show that this experience does not masculinize, but rather mentally and emotionally stunts these young soldiers. While humor cannot prevent this result, it can draw the audience's attention to the ongoing problem in the hopes that they will actively resist its perpetuation by resisting the war.

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

Vonnegut's effectiveness fueled his popularity among teenagers and college students, who catapulted him into the national spotlight from the damning obscurity afforded to those miscategorized as genre writers (in Vonnegut's case, science fiction). A photo caption accompanying a *Newsweek* article just prior to *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s publication deemed Vonnegut "A Campus Orwell" (qtd. in Shields 247). Indeed influential literary critic Leslie Fiedler read Vonnegut's work at the insistence of his young son (5). The acclaim heaped on the novel as an antiwar statement, a playful formal experiment, and a jeremiad against human indifference led critic

Now just some historical representation and in terms of how it was received, ""Slaughterhouse-Five" appeared in 1969, as dissent towards the Vietnam War began to peak. So that was also a time where the American popular making resentment against the war was in its high point. It was beginning to peak." So, Jerome Klinkowitz observes an anti-war novel would not have done so well much earlier.

Not until the Tet Offensive in 1968 showed Americans how badly the war in Vietnam was going. The knowledge of the Vietnam War going terribly wrong, the knowledge that it was an immoral, illegitimate, illegal war, that knowledge infuriated the Americans. There was a lot of resentment against the war.

And in that kind of setting, in that culture milieu, that cultural time is where exactly Vonnegut's novel is situated in "Slaughterhouse-Five". A postmodernist tour-de-force the novel chronicles and the misadventures of Billy Pilgrim. It was very much a misadventure novel and that sense of being unhinged by time, that sense of being not positioned in time, always outside of time, always dislocated by time that is always there.

On the contrary to the empowering narrative of time travel, we have over here time travel as an act of disempowerment, where it is an absence of agency, where agency is taken off instead of handed to the character. The novel chronicles the misadventures of Billy Pilgrim, a reluctant time traveler, ricocheted between his experiences in World War II, his captivity on a planet Tralfamadore and his post-war ennui in the fictional city of Ilium.

We can see how the two fictional cities of one the planet being Tralfamadore and the city of Ilium, they all represent this otherworldly dimension of ennui of exhaustion of tiredness. And therein lies the hollowness of this character.

He is just a reluctant time traveler. The word reluctance is important over here because the ontology of reluctance, the politics of reluctance is something that, Vonnegut talks about quite clearly. That people are reluctant to fight the war and that reluctance is very quickly and conveniently equated with cowardice, with lack of honor, with lack of military masculinity.

And that was often denigrated and also punished and there is an example over here where at prison Eisenhower at that time he ordered a soldier to be court martialed because he denied he rejected and refused to fight in the war. And that reluctant soldier, the figure of the reluctant soldier becomes very important in popular American fiction and cinema are emerging around that time.

We find that reviews initially around Slaughterhouse-Five were very ambivalent to make as with many works of great literature. Some of the reviews were positive. Robert Scholes and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt separately gave the novel positive reviews in the New York Times while Alfred Kazin chided. And that was impishly sentimental humor.

It is this humor however that performs a noble effort of unsettling the reader and drawing attention to the plight of young male soldiers overseas, boys very much like Vonnegut and the fictional Billy Pilgrim some twenty-five years later. There is this idea of impishly sentimental humor. The word impish is interesting over here.

An imp is a mysterious person, a mysterious young person normally addressed to boys, naughty boys. Boys, which who rot or who wreck havoc, who just run errands and do naughty things and cause discomfort or inconvenience to other people. The idea of imp as being wicked, as being mischievous, as being unhinged.

This impish sentimental humor is exactly what makes this novel so disconcerting. There is no steady flow of humor, there is no steady supply of humor, and there is no emergence of humor as a transformative happy category. This is a distinction that I also made if you remember, when we were reading “Catch-22”. The humor in “Catch-22” is not a humor of happiness.

It is actually humor of exhaustion. The humor of being unhinged. The humor of being abundant. The humor of exhaustion and hollowness put together. There is a similar quality of humor in “Slaughterhouse-Five” as well. The novel is about impishly sentimental humor what Alfred Kazin actually did was praise the novel, was really get to the heart of the novel, the pulse of the novel, so to speak.

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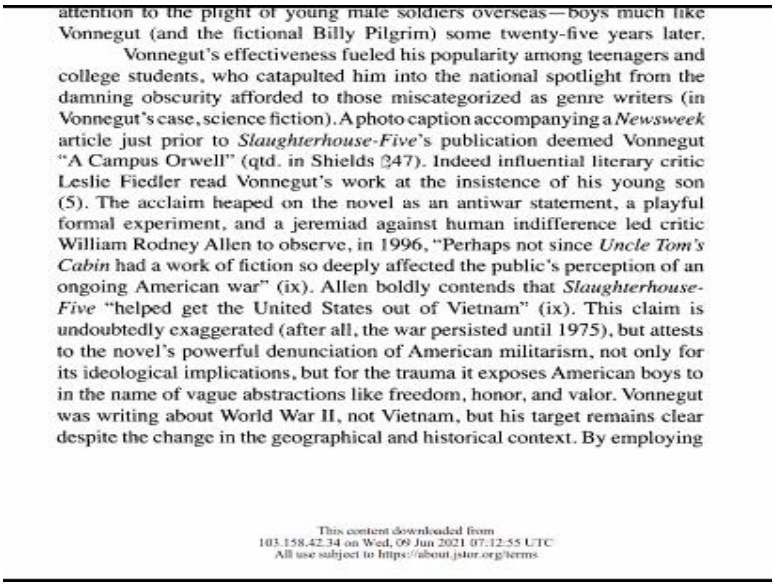

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The whole idea of Vonnegut's magnificent popularity was there and the time when the novel was written, it was seen as something of a profoundly political text. But Vonnegut does much more than just critique the Vietnam War in talking about trauma, in talking about represent trauma and fiction.

What he also does he decries and debunks and undercuts commonly considered notions of masculinity, of valor, of heroism. And all of that, which are commonly consumed as traditional categories of heroism or military masculinity, etc.

The entire machinery, the entire package of masculinity, which is commonly consumed and considered to be heroic and noble and glamorous in quality is entirely decried. And that is exactly what Vonnegut aims at. Vonnegut was writing about World War II, not Vietnam. But his target remains clear despite the change in the geographical and historical context.

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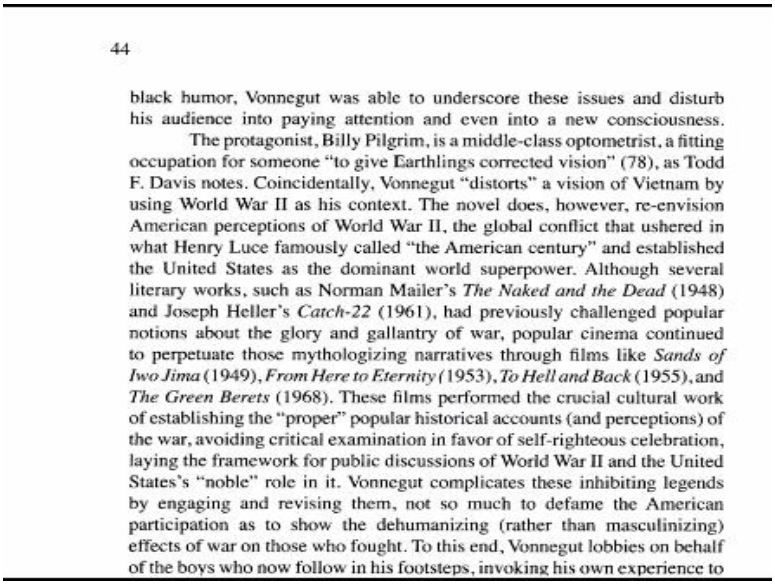

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black humor, Vonnegut was able to underscore these issues and disturb his audience into paying attention and even into a new consciousness.

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

By employing black humor Vonnegut was able to underscore these issues and disturb his audience into paying attention, and even into a new consciousness. And that is again the hallmark of any great work of literature, to usher in a new consciousness, to create a new consciousness, to talk about something which is radically different at an epistemic level, at an imaginative level, at a collective level.

This novel does that and in that it becomes a hallmark. It becomes a major milestone in great literature around that time. There is reference to Norman Mailer's "The Naked and the Dead", and Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" and how there were novels ready changing the notions of war and military masculinity.

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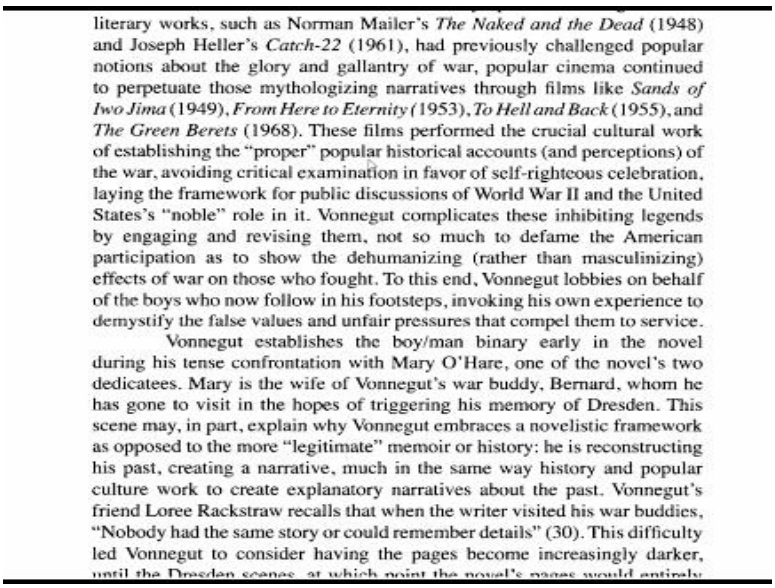

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Vonnegut establishes the boy/man binary early in the novel during his tense confrontation with Mary O'Hare, one of the novel's two dedicatees. Mary is the wife of Vonnegut's war buddy, Bernard, whom he has gone to visit in the hopes of triggering his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

But Vonnegut complicates it further, by infusing the idea of magic realism, infusing the idea of pseudo magic, some kind of a supernatural machinery of time travel, which instead of empowering the character it takes away agency from the character as we see it.

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We talked about the sort of compulsory masculinity, the compulsory conditional heroism that the idea of war generates in popular imagination. We find Vonnegut offering a very fragile model of masculinity, a very numbed model of masculinity, a vulnerable model of masculinity.

And equating vulnerability to masculinity he offers a very radical repositioning, a radical representation of the war and which is very radical at that point in time because we were looking at a, we were talking about a condition a cultural condition, which is constantly celebrating and consuming this idea of military valor and this impregnable, stoic masculinity and against that Vonnegut offers the more vulnerable model.

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effects of war on those who fought. To this end, Vonnegut lobbies on behalf of the boys who now follow in his footsteps, invoking his own experience to demystify the false values and unfair pressures that compel them to service.

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The whole idea of Dresden becomes interesting. It is the sort of the centerpiece in the whole novel. Vonnegut's friend, Loree Rackstraw recalls that when the writer visited his war buddies, nobody had the same story, or can remember the details. This difficulty led Vonnegut to consider having the pages become increasingly darker, under the Dresden scenes at which point the novels pages would entirely darken.

The experimental stylistics of the novel where so time traveling back and across, and how the pages depicting Dresden will just fade from memory, will just become so dark that it cannot even be remembered. But the larger point over here is the affordability of memory, the unreliability of memory, and that is something which Vonnegut constantly talks about.

He himself he cannot remember things properly. And when he revisit this his war buddies, they cannot remember the same thing in the same way. The difference in remembering and the sort of difficulty in remembering details is exactly what frustrates him as a storyteller but also what ironically makes the story authentic in quality, makes this so legitimate in quality.

The sort of sense of legitimization drawn from unreliability is exactly what makes it such a classic war novel where it is a very legitimate and authentic representation of war precisely because there is unreliability and uncertainty. In that sense, it is sort of comparable to some of Joseph Conrad's novel about colonial masculinity and his misadventures.

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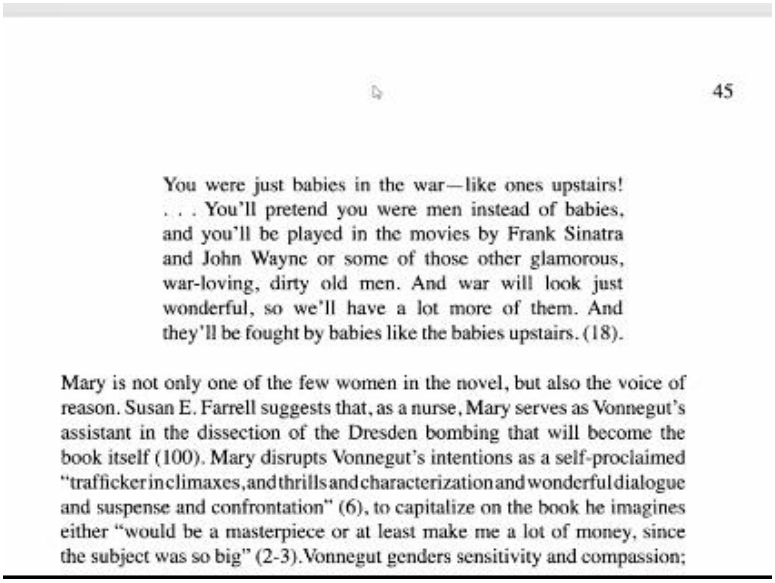

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You were just babies in the war—like ones upstairs! . . . You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look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

Mary is not only one of the few women in the novel, but also the voice of reason. Susan E. Farrell suggests that, as a nurse, Mary serves as Vonnegut's assistant in the dissection of the Dresden bombing that will become the book itself (100). Mary disrupts Vonnegut's intentions as a self-proclaimed "trafficker in climaxes, and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontation" (6), to capitalize on the book he imagines either "would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big" (2-3). Vonnegut genders sensitivity and compassion;

There are certain sections from the novel which are quoted and the reason why this essay is chosen because as mentioned, it is quite a comprehensive coverage on this kind of masculinity. This is page-418 quoted from the book, where the idea of masculinity, is talked about. This is Vonnegut's remembrance of how young he was, he and his companion called Bernard during the war.

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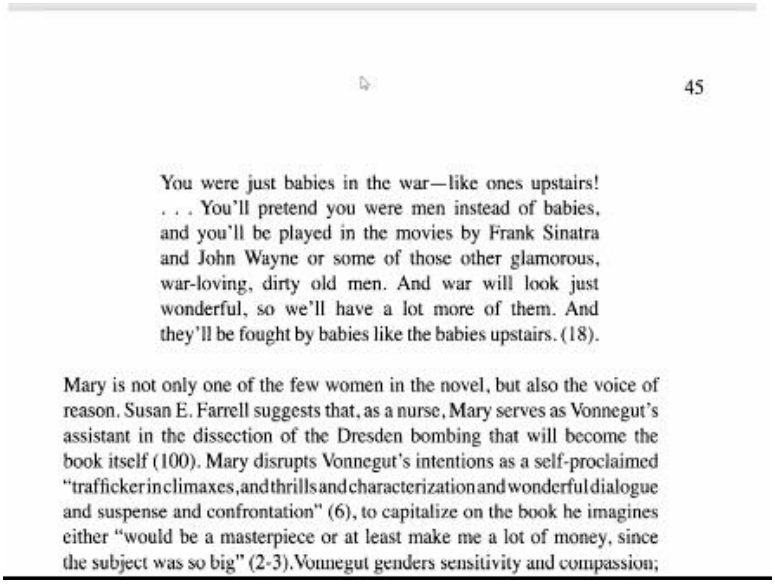

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"You were just babies in the war, just like the ones upstairs. You pretend you are men instead of babies. And you will be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra or John Wayne, or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will just look wonderful. We will have a lot more of them and they will be fought by babies, that the baby's upstairs."

We see how this is a very deliberate and stubborn depiction of how unprepared the war, how vulnerable the war, how fragile the war, they fight the war. And how the entire industry of representation popularly represented by cinema, the Hollywood cinema, we have seen in the previous session as well, even inside the novel, the cynicism about film, the cynicism about cinematic representation of war is very much there as part of Vonnegut's writerly discourse.

He talks about how the war as represented in cinema will be embodied by masculinity, will be embodied by this good looking, much older, more matured men. Well, the reality is the war was fought by little boys who hardly knew what was happening or hardly any idea, were just sent as fodder to be sort of slayed in the war.

We just came back, most of them died in the war and ones who came back were just damaged forever and they could not remember, they could not forget, they could not sort of move on in their lives, most of them. But contrary to the reality the representation of this masculinity was done by much older, good looking movie stars who completely embellished the project. It was a strategic embellishment, strategic beautification or statisticization of the war and that just becomes the problem.

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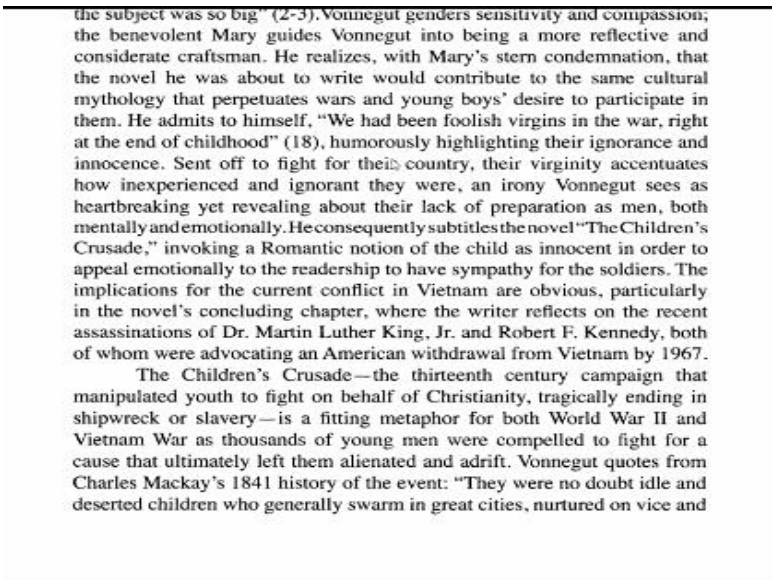

the subject was so big" (2-3). Vonnegut genders sensitivity and compassion; the benevolent Mary guides Vonnegut into being a more reflective and considerate craftsman. He realizes, with Mary's stern condemnation, that the novel he was about to write would contribute to the same cultural mythology that perpetuates wars and young boys' desire to participate in them. He admits to himself, "We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood" (18), humorously highlighting their ignorance and innocence. Sent off to fight for their country, their virginity accentuates how inexperienced and ignorant they were, an irony Vonnegut sees as heartbreaking yet revealing about their lack of preparation as men, both mentally and emotionally. He consequently subtitles the novel "The Children's Crusade," invoking a Romantic notion of the child as innocent in order to appeal emotionally to the readership to have sympathy for the soldiers. The implications for the current conflict in Vietnam are obvious, particularly in the novel's concluding chapter, where the writer reflects on the recent assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom were advocating an American withdrawal from Vietnam by 1967.

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

This subtitle of the novel requires some unpacking. He mentions he consequently, we see the essay also reference to that. He consequently subtitles the novel "The Children's Crusade", invoking a romantic notion of the child as innocent in order to

appeal emotionally to the readership, to have sympathy for the soldiers. In a certain sense he is representing the soldiers as they really are. He is not infantilizing the soldiers.

He is representing the real age of the soldiers, the real, mental, physical, emotional condition of the soldiers. This barely young man who was just sent to the war and do not have any idea of what was going on. But it was a children's crusade, it was fought by children. The quality of abuse comes in when the reference to William Blake was done.

Even in Blake's poetry you find the children are being so sensitive to this menial, dirty, dangerous jobs during the Industrial Revolution in England. So beneath this progress and prosperity and this economy that the Industrial Revolution was bringing is also the question of child abuse, the question of sending children to do works which are dangerous for them, which often have very serious health hazards and replications.

Similarly, we find that the Vietnam War, the Second World War, all the wars fought by Americans and other countries in the world, just center in our young men to fight the war. And we saw that in the beginning of this course when we read, even a short story like Katherine Mansfield's "The Fly" where the boss's son who was just sent to the war without his will.

He just got killed, barely a boy out of his boyhood, just on a cusp of becoming a man who got tragically killed, tragically taken. So that sense of being taken, that sense of being consumed by the war is very much there. "The Children's Crusade" invoking a romantic notion of the child as innocent in order to appeal emotionally to the readers. The implications for the current conflict on Vietnam are obvious.

Particularly in the novel's concluding chapter where the writer reflects on the recent assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom were advocating an American withdrawal from Vietnam by 1967. We can see the way in which despite being magic realists, despite being having this sort of time travel across different destinations, this sense of political reality is very much there.

The sense of the connecting to political movements, political moments, political figures, is very much there in Vonnegut's novel. This is a profound novel about an anti-war sentiment, anti-war moral message. But the reason why it is such an important novel, especially for a course like "Trauma and Literature", it talks about the uniqueness of the literary medium, the literariness of this piece of writing, because it opens up as being some kind of a memoire where Vonnegut is sort of writing about himself and how he can talk about his Dresden experiences.

He very quickly moves on to almost like a magic realist mode where he brings in Billy Pilgrim as a protagonist who is some kind of a foil to Vonnegut's persona. And who is this inadequate, insufficient, fragile character, very vulnerable, very precarious, hardly able to sort of administer what is happening around him. He becomes the protagonist in the story.

The fragility of Billy Pilgrim is reflective of the fragility of the young men sent to the war. All this magic realism, time travel, etc., all situated within the context of political reality. And the reference to Kennedy's, the reference to Martin Luther King, reference to people being executed because there are protesting against the war is very much there. This makes the novel a profound work of political fiction, as well as being a novel about "Trauma and Literature".