The Glass Tree

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In Slaughterhouse Five, Paradise, and The Left Hand of Darkness, authors Kurt Vonnegut, Toni Morrison and Ursula Le Guin attempt to dismantle the romanticized wartime images that have been used to fuel rationalizations for participating in war. Tropes such as the always-heroic soldier, the end-goal of paradise, and the righteousness of nationalist pride are shown to be myths, at best, and often dangerous deceptions. By shattering national meta-narratives which ignore the savagery and tragedy of war, these postmodern novels reveal the less glorious truths behind the idealized fantasy of fighting, ultimately questioning the validity of war in general.

Written at the time of the conflict with Vietnam, Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse Five re-vises classic linear narrative and connects all wars by reflecting back on World War II. The novel offers a portrait of the war soldier by presenting a cast of young men who take up arms outside of Dresden, Germany. Though these soldiers are inexperienced and inadequate figures acting as heroes, they imagine themselves to be risking their lives for the love of their country. They appeal to the myths of the John Wayne hero in an effort to imitate a fantasy of wartime heroism and effectively raise war out of its savagery by idealizing it. Vonnegut’s representation of this problem with the way war is justified through meta-narrative can be connected to other post-modern texts, including Toni Morrison’s Paradise and Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Left Hand of Darkness.

Like the idealized hero in Slaughterhouse Five, these novels present romanticized figures which fuel our rationalizations for participating in war. Why do postmodern novels like these address the phenomenon of war? Do they simply wish to nod to those historical conflicts whose consequences helped shape the literature of postmodernism as a whole?

All three aforementioned novels focus on the national ideology of war in an attempt to shatter those meta-narratives which ignore the inconsistencies between the romanticized concept of war and the true nature of fighting. Rather than uphold the accepted ideologies, these postmodern novels challenge them by revealing the less glorious truths behind the idealized fantasy of war. Slaughterhouse Five challenges the romanticized image of war heroism central to its characters’ motivations for participating in war by offering alternative, disturbing visions of the soldier. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of Vonnegut’s work, represents a ridiculous soldier unfit to stand at the front; stripped of his masculinity and apathetic to his cause, Billy mocks the war effort as a whole. While Vonnegut shatters the idealization of war heroism through exposing the image of the inglorious soldier, Morrison critiques war meta-narratives by addressing the desire for paradise, what we fight our wars to finally achieve. Through rooting Paradise in the historical wounding of African Americans, she presents the desire to establish an isolated, exclusive utopia as a form of militaristic black nationalism. In their effort to maintain racial purity within Ruby, these families which hold community power police their paradise and suppress those