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POSTMODERN CRITICISM OF NATIONAL PROPAGANDA FOR WAR

LIANA DIAMOND

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. TROPOS 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 Vonne- gut’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, those families which hold community power police their paradise and suppress those
Vonnegut’s critique of heroism

The romanticized military hero, who characterizes meta-narratives on World War II, is marked by his qualities of bravery and strength during wartime. Supported by myths of the John Wayne hero, the idealized soldier risks his life for the love of his country and gallantly fights with a maintained appearance of heroism, a conscious rejection of the violence of war. In his novel Slaughterhouse-Five, Kurt Vonnegut sets out to revise this meta-narrative about war by providing an unconventional depiction of a soldier, characterized by emotional detachment from the suffering of others.

Vonnegut’s portrayal of those fighting in World War II shatters the romanticized notion of masculinity that surrounds the portrayal of those fighting in World War II. He represents two meta-narratives on World War II, is valid in war in general.

One of the most significant figures in the novel is Roland Weary, a pseudo-soldier who openly displays desire and difference in his outward masculinity for the appearance of a hero. Weary “delivering dumb messages which nobody was pleased to receive,” believing that his war knowledge has made him the leader of his group. Vonnegut’s use of parody in his descriptions of Weary highlights an error in equating the Englishmen with true war heroes; a well-kept appearance has no true value for a soldier in war, for it is ultimately not enough to save the men in Dresden.

In addition to his image of the pathetic anti-hero, Vonnegut offers an opposing, yet equally unsettling vision of the robotic soldier in war. During his wartime hospital stay, Billy delights in reading themselves as soldiers together in war when he acts on his bitter hatred for Billy: in the final moments of his life, Weary blames Billy for his death and sets into motion a plan to revenge which ultimately succeeds. West Point, Billy, the Englishmen, and Trout, who imagines robots that look like human beings, do not care about fighting and their only concern is to escape.

Vonnegut includes descriptions of the English officers residing in the Russian prisoner camp as a direct contrast to the pitiful images of Billy and Weary. The Englishmen’s image of themselves is delusional, overly military man stands as evidence of Billy’s access to bomb gas. Adorned in such ridiculous, effeminate apparel, Billy exchanges his outward masculinity for the appearance of a woman. Rather than lose his strength in a time of need, Billy recovers from asserting his masculinity; against all that his heroism stands for, he accepts an absurd costume and part of Cinderella—to the role of a soldier.

Vonnegut’s depiction of the ridiculous soldier also serves to underline the illusion of masculinity and war. The idealized hero’s most celebrated characteristics are those linked to his masculinity: courage, aggression, physical strength, and determination. Billy, apathetic and unfit for the war effort, possesses none of these qualities. In the moments when Billy is expected to act most like a soldier, or at the very least expected to feign the masculine ideals traditionally expected of him, he fails. Vonnegut turns the meta-narrative about glorified masculinity on its head and further exaggerates Billy’s inability. He writes, “The Americans, especially, with such a fine impression given by Billy and the rest of his company, are not the only ones to underestimate their enemy.” In this, Vonnegut implies that the notion of masculinity that surrounds the romanticized image of the soldier, Vonnegut offers an opposing, yet equally unsettling vision of the robotic soldier in war. During his wartime hospital stay, Billy delights in reading themselves as soldiers together in war when he acts on his bitter hatred for Billy: in the final moments of his life, Weary blames Billy for his death and sets into motion a plan to revenge which ultimately succeeds. West Point, Billy, the Englishmen, and Trout, who imagines robots that look like human beings, do not care about fighting and their only concern is to escape.

WITH SUCH DISTURBING IMAGES OF THE ABSURD AND ROBOTIC SOLDIERS, VONNEGUT ASSERTS THAT THERE ARE NO TRUE GLORIFIED HEROES IN WAR—A CLAIM WHICH SERVES TO QUESTION OUR PARTICIPATION IN WAR IN GENERAL.
For Vonnegut, then, the actual image of the hero is reflexive, as it not only testifies to his virtue but also questions the meaning of heroism in general. The figure of the tragic hero, ultimately dying for a pointless crime and shattering the fantasy, can be used to critique our national ideology about heroism. Significantly, however, Vonnegut does not suggest that his criticism incites us to reject heroism entirely. Instead, he offers an alternative vision of heroism that might be more sustainable and less destructive. His novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, revises the fantasy of the hero celebrated in an actual historical war, *Catch-22*, and offers a different kind of national heroism.

MORRISON’S CRITIQUE OF BLACK NATIONALISM

Whereas Slaughterhouse-Five revises the fantasy of the hero celebrated in an actual historical war, *Catch-22*, and offers a different kind of national heroism, *Paradise* by Toni Morrison also revises the fantasy of the hero celebrated in an actual historical war, *Catch-22*, and offers a different kind of national heroism.

In her novel, *Paradise*, Morrison writes about the historical plight of African Americans in the Reconstruction era. In this period, the ideals of the old generation were being prote...
TO DISRUPT THE META-NARRATIVE ABOUT WAR THAT IDEOLOZIES PATRIOTISM TO A PARTICULAR DELINEATED REGION, LE GUIN OFFERS A REPRESENTATION OF PATRIOTISM IN KARHIDE THAT REFLECTS UPON WHAT IT MEANS TO CORRUPT THE NOTION OF LOVE FOR ONE’S COUNTRY

The older generation argues that the Oven’s message demands that they accept the master narrative that has consistently defined the national identity. Morrison, like Vonnegut, offers proof of Ruby as a kind of national propaganda that justifies fighting. To disrupt the meta-narrative about war that idealizes loyalty to a particular delineated region, Le Guin offers proof of Ruby as a failed paradise and shows the great lengths to which the Oven tries to maintain their fantasy. Morrison writes, “How exquisitely human was the wish for revenge, for the suffering of others, and how thin human imagination became to achieve it.” Catalysing the histories of the families seems to only exacerbate Pat’s regret, suggesting that Ruby as a dystopia serves to criticise the nationalistic idealization of the town. Patria, a light-skinned woman who resides in Ruby as an outsider, represents a threat to the purity demanded by this belief system. Despite being an ally to those in Ruby, she is hated by the 8-rock men because her father violated the rule and married a white woman. Through an investiga- tion of the stories of the families in Ruby, Pat discovers that certain names are crossed out from the town’s history; their erasure signifies that those who stepped out of the utopian vision of Ruby in the same chapter, Pat attends a Christmas pageant that publicly displays this ritual erasure as it acts out the founding of the town and yields only to the seven families from the original nine. Morrison writes, “Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fuck’s who? All those generations of 8-rocks, all kept going, just to end up narrow as bale wire? Well to stay alive maybe they could...” Erased from Ruby’s history are those families who breached Ruby’s desire for racial purity and suppression of desire. Pat’s gaze, then, serves as a counter-narrative of Ruby’s history; in exposing the strict regulation of race and desire, along with the growing need for wealth, the novel critiques the town’s community spaces has been corrupted. For Mor- rison, the inability to come to terms with the utopian paradise and grow through human connection signifies that Ruby is actually a failed paradise. By showing Ruby as a dystopia, Morrison is critical of the nationalistic idealization of the town, and she ultimately burns her history to assert her own identity. Morrison’s novel foregrounds the untranslatable and all-important principle as “prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, other which for much of the novel hinders their struggle to bridge their divide. As suggested in Mor- rison’s novel, perceived sexual deviance is impossible to categorize and therefore an untrust- able category to consider and therefore an untrust- able ally. Similarly, Morrison’s gender is a constant state of kemmer, marks him as a kind of changeling that is neither human nor alien. Shifgrethor is first mentioned in the novel that governs the interactions between the Gethenians. Shifgrethor is first mentioned in the novel Karhide that reflects upon what it means to cor-rupt the notion of love for one’s country. Genly Ai, an envoy sent from Earth to make contact with the alien planet in the hope of fostering trade and re- vision, Morrison, like Vorougou, describes her own vision of an alternative to Ruby. Through shattering the idealized notion of the town, Morrison is critical of the nation. Karhide’s advancement and superiority over other nations—the one thing King Argaven ar- dently desires for his nation—because it prevents Ai from convincing those in Karhide of his truth. Le Guin parodies the sense of paranoia in Karhide in an attempt to show how the national ideology about patriotism ignores the very power- ful role of imagination in encouraging people to act in their own interest. Though Argaven resists Ai’s desire for interplanetary exchange for fear of losing his power and Karhide’s dominant sta- tus, he expresses his desire for the reawakening of what is happening within his own government. Le Guin writes, “It seemed to me as I listened to the fear and to the silenced fear that what he sought to do was to show them that in order to change the meaning of the alien world, one must change their idea of the way people change a choice that had been before their history began...” A member of the King’s council easily manipulates Karhide’s concept of patriotism for his own benefit. In Mor- rison’s novel, perceived sexual deviance is impossible to categorize and therefore an untrust- able ally. Similarly, Morrison’s gender is a constant state of kemmer, marks him as a kind of changeling that is neither human nor alien. Shifgrethor is first mentioned in the novel

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ized vision of patriotism. She writes, “It was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that the love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us.” It is only once Estraven and Ai recognize the opportunity for growth and change in accepting each other’s differences that a state akin to true patriotism is achieved.

By means of Estraven’s voice in the novel, Le Guin upholds an alternative idea of loyalty, which demands that love for a country extend across national lines. Estraven’s view of patriotism goes beyond concern for one’s own self and one’s own nation; he cares for the betterment and progression of Gethen as a whole, assuming a planetary vision for mankind. Describing all that he knows and loves about his home country, Estraven says, “But what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one’s country; is it hate of one’s uncountry? Then it is not a good thing.”

Patriotism for Estraven means looking past fear of the other, risking vulnerability for the sake of bettering all of humankind through open trade of knowledge and technology. For having these beliefs and supporting Ai’s cause, Estraven is denounced as a traitor. It is only when Estraven sacrifices himself at the end of the novel, the ultimate proof of his loyalty to all humanity, that the truth of his vision for Gethen is acknowledged.

The Left Hand of Darkness differs from Slaughterhouse Five and Paradise in that it does work beyond just problematizing idealized war ideologies like “heroism,” “black nationalism,” and “patriotism.” Le Guin’s novel is most successful in that it offers a clear alternative in Estraven’s patriotism which values personal connection, recognizing the potential for delight in accepting the unfamiliar other. Though the story’s end promises progression for Gethen as the king sees past his own fear-based patrio-
tism, it has come at the cost of a truly loyal man’s life. Le Guin recognizes the potential for man to embrace Estraven’s patriotism, but her novel also cautions the tragedy that can come from mistaking fear of the other as true love for humankind. Through offering an alternative patriotism devoted toward an all-embracing form of progress, Le Guin shatters the national meta-narrative which idealizes loyalty to one’s country. Patriotism, then, only holds true meaning when it is rooted in personal connection and human understanding—a lesson Le Guin compels us to heed on our planet.

Slaughterhouse Five, Paradise and The Left Hand of Darkness demonstrate the potential for postmodern literature to encourage readers to reconsider the meta-narratives which propagate romanticized national ideologies about war. Though Vonnegut and Morrison’s novels raise criticism and argue a need for reevaluation of our accepted cultural justifications for war, they provide no clear sense of what is truly worth fighting for. In a similar way, while Le Guin suggests that the acceptance of difference and the formation of relationships are necessary to incite change, she also does not let her readers forget how difficult achieving these ideals can be. Yet, it may be enough for postmodern art to just offer us a critique of our society; the stories of Vonnegut, Morrison and Le Guin go beyond celebrating or demonizing our world in an attempt to foster real conversation about our national ideologies.

One of postmodernism’s primary goals is to compel us to imagine for ourselves alternative ways of being in the world. By not offering us easy solutions, these postmodern authors encourage us to commit to human connection—the only means by which we can recognize each other’s needs and bring about universal change. War, in the context of the aforementioned novels, is what we have turned to in our inability to understand each other’s differences. In addition to exposing the ways in which we rationalize war, the postmodern shattering of master narratives allows for the multiple voices and conflicting perspectives, which communicate those stories and lessons and are not heard often enough. Like Estraven and Ai, we must reach out and touch each other across difference in order to truly rebuild our world.