

The Twinge of Conscience: Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*

While civilization has been improving our house, it has not equally improved men who are to inhabit them.

--Thoreau, *Walden*

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut is hailed as one of the most popular contemporary novelists in America, whose novels are taught and discussed in both high school classrooms and college literary seminars. In his literary career that has already lasted for more than half a century, from the first novel *The Sirens of Titan* (1952) to *God Bless You, Dr. Kevorian* (1999), Kurt Vonnegut has made endless efforts to explore the inner conditions of humanity manifested in various facades of modern life and the influences of science and technology in modern life. Narration has been the essential means of Vonnegut's thinking and exploration, which has been characterized by his innovative techniques. His unique characterization, metafiction and dark humor make great contributions to the dynamic postmodern literary world. His narration aims to persuade people, not into any pedantic moral codes but the awareness of our own limitations and in many cases the stupidity we tend to overlook so as to transform ourselves into better human beings who respect and reassure the common decency between people regardless of their race, ideology, cultural background, sex, age and social status. Therefore, I argue Kurt Vonnegut is basically a moralist and humanist though he projects no commitment to any fixed moral codes. His humanist attempts to ameliorate the inner conditions

of human beings contribute to his popularity among readers all over the world.

Based on his unusual childhood experiences which the Great Depression casts shadow on, his involvement in World War II and his miraculous survival of the Dresden bombing by the Allies whose causes he fought for, Vonnegut's fictional world is seeped with bone-deep sadness. Contrary to some critics' claim that he is a nihilist and pessimist, Vonnegut conveys his care for humanity through laughter, which to a great extent mitigates the so-called "negative" sentiments. The efforts he makes to improve morality and humanity in an age dominated by commercialism and consumerism prove him to be a humanist that is hopeful for ennobled humanity. What he is pessimistic about is how to change the political, cultural and economic institutions that hinder this process. We find elements of pathos, fantasy, didacticism and black humor in Vonnegut's novels which provide an arresting mixture of entertainment and biting social satire.

Mother Night is Vonnegut's third novel published in paperback series. This novel centers around the hero Howard Campbell's experiences simultaneously as a Nazi propagandist and an American agent during the Second World War. Spies, macabre but funny Nazis abound this book, through whom Vonnegut's important moral questions that have been haunting modern humanity are induced. Vonnegut's narration in *Mother Night* does not designate a clear-cut distinction between the right and the wrong, the good and the evil, or any easy answers to these questions. However, Vonnegut describes the mental pictures of people trapped in the mire of war and critiques the various modern conditions of humanity---the disintegration of self, schizophrenia, totalitarian minds and absolute notions about ideology, race, truth and literature. Vonnegut's literary efforts echo what he says about writers' function---to serve the people, which for Vonnegut undoubtedly means his uncompromising struggle against ideological,

political and cultural totalitarianism and absolutism so as to glorify humanity. This paper aims to analyze Vonnegut's moral research into the inner worlds of people trapped in the Second World War and the post-war years in order to illustrate that morality needs to be ameliorated for it is essential to the well-being of humanity and the most important suggestion Vonnegut gives us is common decency between people.

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Chapter one Kurt Vonnegut and His *Mother Night*

1. The Label of Science Fictionist

Kurt Vonnegut was born into an affluent family in Indianapolis. Both his grandfather and father were architects, with his grandfather being the first registered architect in Indiana. His mother was the daughter of a rich brewer in Indiana. All the Vonnegut children were sent to the prestigious private school but Vonnegut was later transferred to Shortridge High School as a result of the Great Depression's influence on the architecture business. In Shortridge High School he edited the daily newspaper, *The Echo*, from which he cultivated his interest in writing.

In 1941 Vonnegut enrolled at Cornell University where he majored in Chemistry to satisfy his father's stipulation that he major in something useful. He gravitated to the *Cornell Daily Sun*, where he began editing the college humor column "Innocent Abroad." As a fourth-generation German, he was very sensitive about the growing anti-German sentiment on campus; and he felt compelled to write a column critical of the growing war hysteria.

Shortly after transferring to the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Vonnegut enlisted in the army and became an infant combat scout. He obtained leave to visit his parents on Mother's Day, 1944; but just on that day his mother took a fatal overdose of sleeping pills. Almost thirty years later, he expressed his painful feelings about the suicide in *Breakfast of Champions*. After his mother's funeral, Vonnegut returned to his regiment in time for the Battle of the Bulge, where he

was captured. As a prisoner of war, he was sent to the open city of Dresden, where he was expected to earn his keep by working in a factory that produced vitamin supplements for pregnant women. Vonnegut heard the Allies' firebombing of the city from the safe confines of an underground slaughterhouse locker. He miraculously survived the Allies' bombing.

As he claimed in his later years that he inherited bone-deep sadness from his parents because of the Depression and the death of his mother's suicide on Mother's Day. Moreover, the holocaust he saw with his own eyes colored his entire career, and it took him twenty years to achieve the esthetic distance necessary to describe the event without tears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Despite his fame and economic success, Vonnegut has long been categorized as science fiction writer in literary scholarship, a label he strongly dislikes. In various occasions, he claims that he wants to get out of the "sci-fi drawer" which many critics have taken as an "urinal" (Wampeters 1). Debates have been going on in the literary scholarship for years as to what kind of writer Vonnegut is, some insisting he is a science fictionist in the conventional sense of science fiction; some others also insisting he is, based on the transformed understanding of science fiction; some arguing he is not a science fictionist. Admittedly, machines, outer space and other planets are frequent elements in his works. However, it seems they are mainly devices Vonnegut uses, through which he is able to convey his understanding of this planet and the inhabitants in the hope to improve both the physical conditions of the earth and the spiritual conditions of the inhabitants. His ultimate focus is on people rather than the fancy ideas about the workings of machines and planets.

Kurt Vonnegut is basically a humanist and moralist, who cares about the conditions of humanity and the forces threatening to destroy it. He sees clearly that

science and technology bring about the increase of productivity and all kinds of conveniences that make life “easier” but at the same time people lose invaluable things—their jobs, when piano players are replaced by player pianos, the machines that automatically produce music, and the consequent loss of their dignity. The increase of productivity fails to bring happiness to human beings. Instead human beings are confronted with alienation and the unbearable loneliness. Therefore he contends the traditional big extended family and community life are indispensable for improving the conditions of humanity.

Vonnegut argues for the amelioration of humanity at an age when morality is considered arbitrary, and even oppressive. As David Goldsmith argues “it is difficult to understand why Vonnegut was dismissed for so long with the disreputable title of sci-fi writer, since from the very beginning he has been dealing with metaphysical, ethical and epistemological questions in his works”(6). Vonnegut’s narrative search for a workable moral and ethical system infects the readers with a similar drive to ask moral questions when faced with the wrong use of science and technology in the global war.

2. *Mother Night*

Mother Night is Kurt Vonnegut’s third novel published in paperback series. Together with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut deviates from the subject matter---the mechanization and industrialization of the society and its negative effects on man’s life, and tries his hand on the Second World War, with the highlight of Dresden bombing, one of the biggest disasters in human civilization that he witnessed and fortunately survived. The historical horrors are dealt with by teary laughter through his masterful use of irony and humor.

Five years after the novel was published, Vonnegut added an introduction to

Mother Night, summarizing his own experiences of Nazis, dwelling mostly on his being in Dresden during the Allies' intensive bombing of that city. As the essential moral Vonnegut claims the novel offers, "we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be," the story centers on the "pretension" of various characters, bringing up the issue of self and identity.

Then comes an "Editor's Note" which explains that what follow are the confessions of an American Nazi, Howard Campbell, Jr., deceased. The title, it explains, comes from a speech by Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, in which he proclaims his affinity with the universal darkness (Mother Night), which precedes the first light.

The confessions begin with Campbell in an Israeli prison not long before his being set free. Three levels of narrative are developed simultaneously: Campbell's early life, tracing his stay in Germany and services as Nazi propagandist and American agent during the war; his life in New York from the end of World War II up to his surrender to the Israelis; and the present of his detention in Israel. There are important interrelationships between these threads of the narrative, which the immediate juxtaposing of events years apart often emphasizes.

Born in Schenectady, Campbell moves to Germany when his father is transferred there by General Electric. He becomes a playwright of considerable reputation, and marries a German actress, Helga Noth, whose father is the police in chief of Berlin. Campbell writes plays for her, and later a pornographic novel called *Memoirs of a Monogamous Casanova*, based on their imaginative sexual role-playings. As war draws near, Campbell is approached by an American who identifies himself as Major Frank Wirtanen, and asked to serve as an American agent. Partly because he cannot resist playing roles, Campbell agrees. As an American and a playwright, he fairly easily works into a position advising the

Nazis on the propagandizing of America and broadcasting Jew-baiting diatribes. In public Campbell becomes known as a vicious anti-Semite, an enthusiastic Nazi and an open traitor to his native country, while in secret he is transmitting messages from Allies agents. He knows nothing of the messages himself—he even unknowingly transmits the news of Helga’s death—being simply instructed to deliver his speeches with certain pauses and inflections that comprise the code. Actually, Campbell sustains this conscious schizophrenia fairly comfortably, but when he needs a refuge he finds it in “the nation of two, “ the private world of love” he and Helga create and in which they find peace from the horrors of Nazi Germany.

Later in the war Helga disappears while entertaining troops on the Russian front. Soon afterwards, Campbell takes the treasured motorcycle of his close friend Heinz Schildknecht (who, Campbell learns after the war, has also been an underground agent all along) and pays a final visit to his father-in-law and Helga’s younger sister, Resi. Two minor but significant episodes occur here—the father chastises a Russian woman slave-laborer for her careless handling of a vase, and Resi tells Campbell that she has always loved him. Many years later Campbell reads how Werner Noth died—hanged nine times by a group of slave-laborers.

Campbell eventually surrenders to American forces, who have just occupied their first extermination camp. His captor, Lieutenant Bernard B. O’Hare, forces him to look at the trappings of the camp and at six German guards strung up on their own gallows. Major Wirtanen secretly intervenes to save Campbell from having to face war crimes charges, though American intelligence will not publicly acknowledge his spying mission.

Campbell takes up a life of seclusion in Greenwich Village, sustained in his solitude by the memory of Helga. By chance he has contact with some residents in

his building. One is “foxy” George Kraft, reformed alcoholic, painter, and Russian spy. The other two are former inmates of Auschwitz, a Jewish physician, Dr. Epstein, and his mother. While the son wishes only to forget the past, the mother remembers and is suspicious on hearing Campbell’s name. Shortly after this, Campbell’s seclusion is broken, at first only by his mail. He receives an abusive letter from his old captor, O’Hare, and copies of an American Nazi periodical, *The White Christian Minuteman*. The publisher of this racist tabloid, the Reverend Doctor Lionel Jason David Jones, has been put in touch with Campbell by foxy old Kraft, of course, and shortly afterwards pays a visit. *The Minuteman*, meantime, has betrayed Campbell’s whereabouts not just to O’Hare but also to the Israelis, who plans an Eichmann-style kidnapping. This threat drives Campbell into the protection of the “Iron Guard of the White Sons of the American Constitution,” a pathetic fly-by-night outfit led by Jones, an old time American Nazi named August Krapptauer, and Robert Sterling Wilson, self-styled “Black Furher of Harlem” and former Japanese agent.

Events now move quickly for Campbell. First, the neo-Nazis headed by Jones miraculously resurrects Helga, who has supposedly worked her way from Russia, East Germany and then to Berlin. The reunion proves short lived---Helga turns out to be amatory little sister Resi. Then, during a meeting of the Iron Guards, Campbell is called out by a message and meets the elusive Major Wirtanen again. This “blue Fairy Godmother” reveals to Campbell that Kraft is a Russian spy, that Resi is, too, and that their plan to smuggle him to Mexico to escape the Israelis represents only the first step of a trip to Moscow. When Campbell returns and confronts the pair, Resi pleads that she loves him anyway, but at that point, the meeting is raided. Resi commits suicide to prove her love, the others are arrested, but Campbell once more goes free under the aegis of mysterious governmental

agencies.

Yet for Campbell, freedom holds only weariness and fear. He returns to his room, now sacked by righteously indignant haters of fascism, only to confront ex-lieutenant O' Hare once more. In an upset, the former Nazi-spy breaks the arm of the former hero and sends him packing. But now, with neither love nor curiosity to sustain him, Campbell gives up. He badgers the reluctant Dr. Epstein into contacting Zionist friends, and delivers himself into the hands of the Israelis.

In Israel, Campbell writes his confessions while he awaits trial. His guards interest him. Eighteen-year-old Arnold has never heard of Goebbels. Arpad Kovacs despises “briquets,” people who did nothing to save the lives of themselves or others under the Nazis’ control. Arpad himself plays a double role of spy and viciously anti-Semite S. S. member. Among his guards, however, Andor Gutman interests Campbell most. He has been a “briquet,” a volunteer for the *Sonderkommando*, the corpse-carriers who are themselves always killed after finishing the mission of carrying the corpses. Campbell asks Gutman why he volunteered—Gutman does not know, but says the explanation would take “a very great book.” The one thing that could save Campbell from a death sentence would be some positive evidence that he was in fact an American spy during World War II. Finally comes the “blue Fairy Godmother” Frank Wirtanen, who now reveals himself as U. S Army Colonel Harold J. Sparrow, breaking all his oaths to secrecy to save Campbell. But too late. Campbell finds the prospect of freedom “nauseating,” and attempts suicide by hanging, self-convinced of “crimes against himself.”

Vonnegut claims that *Mother Night* is “more personally disturbing to me, because of the war and because of my German background and that sort of thing” (Allen 129). Born into a German immigrant family and cut off from any cultural

ties with Germany, Vonnegut has complicated and ambivalent attitudes towards the war because the traumas he experienced are two-fold. One is he witnessed the biggest massacre in European history and survived it. The other is, as an American soldier, he was fighting against his own people—the German. What he has seen “cleaning out the shelters are as fancy as what they would have seen cleaning the crematoria” (Allen 34). Six million Jews were killed in the Second World War and as a revenge an unmilitarized “open” city with 135,000 civilians was completely incinerated in several hours, first by high explosives, then incendiary bombs. The attempt to balance off Dresden against Auschwitz is not heroic and they can never be. The revenge ended up with only more deaths.

Mother Night is the first Vonnegut novel to deal directly with the Second World War, and it challenges the commonly accepted version of the war as a battle between good and evil by showing that the real moral battle ground is inside every human being and actually we can never find any clear distinction between the right and the wrong. Readers can always sense the presence of Vonnegut, the writer himself in the confessant-narrator Howard Campbell. Both are of German origin. Both appreciate the paradox of language and feel deeply about the accidents of race and the horrors of war. Both are faced with the moral dilemma that is hard to resolve. Campbell’s inability to make the right moral judgment when overwhelmed by the dehumanizing forces of the gears of the war machinery enables him to be an actor for “grand acting in espionage.” Vonnegut, acting as the editor of Campbell’s confessions, warns the readers that Campbell, a playwright with a moderate reputation, is a professional liar because the grand art of acting demands they artificially bring life and passions onto stage. Therefore, we encounter the “unreliable narrator” before his confessions start. Through the whole reading, the readers struggle in the blurred “boundary region” between

determinacy and indeterminacy, fiction and reality.

Not only do the literary critics differ in their opinions when categorizing Kurt Vonnegut as a writer, but also when they classify *Mother Night* differently. Whatever the classification is, a spy novel or a war novel, what really counts are the messages the writer conveys to us, the masterful use of irony and satire, and most important of all, Vonnegut's black humor.

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Chapter Two The Modern Conditions of Humanity

1. Self and Identity

Vonnegut's early fiction explores various ways in which personal identity has suffered in the twentieth century, but in his later fiction, the self tends to find meaning and purpose in its impulse to orient itself in relation to moral questions. Moral questions provide a framework for self. The scaffolds of identity, then, are formed primarily by the question we choose to ask, not necessarily the answers we find. Therefore, the loss or fragmentation of the self in modern times can be seen as a result of not knowing which moral questions to ask and what moral stand one takes.

To understand Kurt Vonnegut's legacy as a twentieth-century artist, one must understand how identity and morality are manifested in his work through the central importance he places on literature as an act of communication and persuasion. Vonnegut understands that narrative involves a fundamentally rhetorical process. Indeed, his focus on audience and persuasion can be seen very early, and becomes one of the most important aspects of his later works.

For Vonnegut, narrative is the fundamental means by which we encounter the world, understand the self, and inquire about moral questions. It is the narrative self in his work that reasons about beliefs, makes choices, and finds its orientation within a framework of questions about what it means to be human. In this sense, Vonnegut's work is value-centered and provides a potentially positive response to contemporary problems of identity. In each of his novels and throughout many of

his essays, moral thinking is clearly displayed. The fact that his characters raise moral questions indicates a belief that moral decisions are possible, making Vonnegut one of the few postmodern writers maintaining hope in an age when the concept of a coherent identity is in question. It is not surprising that we find Vonnegut's characters at odds with the worlds they inhabit. Vonnegut critiques culture, society, and history as if they were villainous characters who work against the happiness of the individual.

Vonnegut's concern is morality in ordinary life; the values he asserts stem from his belief in what Charles Taylor refers to as the "worth of ordinary human desire and fulfillment" (23). Human dignity comes from "the life of production and reproduction, or work and the family" (29). Thus, for Vonnegut, the affirmation of self will necessarily be the affirmation of community if the affirmation of self is moral.

1.1 The Disintegration of Self

We usually describe the issue of self as the question of identity. Obviously one's understanding of self is closely related to his identity. We speak of it in these terms because the question is often spontaneously phrased by people in the form: Who am I? But this cannot necessarily be answered by giving name and genealogy. What answers this question for us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a part of knowing where I stand. One's identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which one can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what one endorses or opposes. In other words, it is the horizon within which one is capable of taking a stand.

People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual

commitment, say as a Catholic, or an anarchist. Or they may define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to. What they are saying is not just that they are strongly attached to this spiritual view or background; rather it is that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on question of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. Put counterfactually, they are saying that were they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn't know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them. And this situation does, of course, arise for some people. It's what we call an "identity crisis", an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed or undetermined. This is a painful and frightening experience.

But to be able to answer for oneself is to know where one stands, how one wants to answer. And that is why we naturally tend to talk of our fundamental orientation in terms of who we are. To lose this orientation, or not to have found it, is not to know who one is. And this orientation, once attained, defines your identity.

The issue of self and identity is an extremely hard one for Campbell since as a spy, he basically lacks a coherent self and his identity cannot be strictly defined, but "collaborative". He is, first of all, a notorious Nazi propagandist and then an American agent working for the cause of the Allies, or vice versa. The way we judge the identity of Howard Campbell is decided by the moral stance we take. Faced with the pressure of Nazi Germany, Campbell takes a solace not unusual in

Western culture: he retreats to art and then to love. Crucial to this solace is that man has a self to flee to, a self which cannot be reached and abused by others. Like any fictive artist of the ages, Campbell offers “lies told for the sake of artistic effect.” His self knows that on the deepest level his fictions are “the most beguiling forms of truth” (MN ix). Can his efforts involved in sending coded messages for the Allies compensate his vile anti-Semite diatribes? Obviously, morality has always been in operation when judging the identity of Campbell.

How does Campbell, knowing better, get into his position of double jeopardy? To start with, association with Nazis of greater and lesser importance came easily. The political and governmental people liked to look cultured by associating with arty people, while to Helga and Campbell the Nazi officials were simply important society people and an enthusiastic part of their audience. Campbell and Helga did not admire the Nazis, nor did they hate them, he says: “they were people. Only in retrospect can I think of them as trailing slime behind. To be frank—I can’t think of them as doing that even now. I knew them too well as people. Worked too hard in my time for their trust and applause” (MN 39). *Too hard*, he admits, but easily at first and perhaps naturally for a man concerned with the success of his career who regards the things going on in Germany—“Hitler and the Jews and all that”—as beyond his control and therefore none of his concern (MN 38).

In fact, Campbell’s easy acquiescence, even his later trying “too hard” to please the Nazis, seems easier to understand than his accepting the dramatic but distinctly tricky proposition “major Wirtanen” makes for him. To the proposal that he become an ardent Nazi while working as an American agent, Campbell at first gives the logical answer: “‘No—hell, no’” (MN 40). But Wirtanen knows how to appeal to the dramatic artist. First, Campbell would become an “authentic hero” of

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