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Martínez, Karina Mercedes; Martín Alegre, Sara , dir. Trouble on Tralfamadore : Sex and Gender in Slaughterhouse-Five from the Second World War to Second Wave Feminism. Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2024. 71 pag. (Màster Universitari en Estudis Anglesos Avançats / Advanced English Studies)

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Trouble on Tralfamadore: Sex and Gender in *Slaughterhouse-Five* from the Second World War to Second Wave Feminism

Treball de Fi de Màster / MA dissertation

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MA in Advanced English Studies: Literature and Culture

February 2024

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Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes out to family, friends, and faculty—especially Dr. Sara Martín Alegre for supervising this project, as well as Dr. Cristina Pividori and Dr. Nicholas Spengler for their evaluations. Thank you to anyone who engaged in conversation and provided inspiration.

Abstract: This dissertation conducts a close-reading analysis of sex and gender in Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969). It argues that the controversial depiction of Billy Pilgrim's listless relationships and escapist fantasies intentionally undermine hegemonic masculinity while reflecting the precarious state of gender relations between the Second World War and Second Wave Feminism. Through a black-humorist rendition of the feminine and masculine mystique, Vonnegut highlights the tragedy of middle-class families who were deceived into seeking traditional or exemplary gender conventions. Billy Pilgrim's insanity doubles as an anti-war and anti-sexist critique. His inability to engage with his family is a consequence of life-long emotional repression. Loveless dynamics, misogynist delusions, and the traumatized protagonist's flight from accountability into a prelapsarian (Edenic) cage indicate the regression that plagued post-war America. Apart from highlighting the perils of compliance to oppressive forces, *Slaughterhouse-Five* uses the example of a united Dresden couple and the Tralfamadorian revelation of seven Earthling sexes to nudge readers toward the incoming call for liberation.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five*, sex, gender, marriage, family, hegemonic masculinity, science fiction, Second World War, Second Wave Feminism

Introduction: Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Meets Mary O'Hare

After surviving the firebombing of Dresden in February 1945 as a prisoner of the Germans in the Second World War, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922-2007) returned to the United States burdened by questions about the cruel nature of humankind. For twenty-three years, he grappled against gaps in his memory, all the while growing distrustful of the government and the military. As he worked to build an identity as an American man, the task of writing *Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969) became a baffling riddle.

The novel's autobiographical first chapter details some events, conversations, and texts Vonnegut read, which inspired him to reflect on how to represent a traumatic void in his memory. When he visits an old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare, and his wife, Mary O'Hare, to trade war stories, Vonnegut encounters resistance. In a flare of frustration, Mrs. O'Hare confronts the writer with an accusation, highlighting two truths: that books and movies featuring "glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men" make war "look just wonderful" (Vonnegut 18) and that children like their own are the ones sent out to fight the battles these books and movies promote. She expresses herself with conviction, refusing to be silenced by the implied codes of femininity. Rather than dismissing Mary's input, Vonnegut embraces it, dedicating the novel to her. He notes the poignancy of her criticism and dissolves the tension between them by promising to title his un-heroic fiction "The Children's Crusade" (19) in honor of the fatal contract between imperialist history, hegemonic masculinity,¹ and senseless tragedy.

¹ Hegemonic masculinity, a concept coined by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, indicates the most dominant or exalted pattern of masculine conduct within a given culture. Masculinities are as diverse as the gender politics between them, comprised of relational practices such as "alliance, dominance, and subordination" (Connell 37) that exclude or include, intimidate and exploit, et cetera.

Many changes to U.S. gender dynamics ensued after World War II. Thanks to First-Wave feminists, women possessed the right to vote and to pursue higher education, so that “By 1920 about one-half of all college students and one-third of all employed Americans were women” (Kimmel 131). Nevertheless, competition between the sexes in universities and the workplace created confusion about how to reconfigure gender norms. This insecurity led to media backlash and a cultural backtrack to 19th century ‘separate spheres’² ideology, by which rigid nuclear families became a scapegoat solution for stability. Wives of veterans who had trouble reintegrating were taught that docile domesticity would help their husbands heal their trauma (Kimmel 148). Thus, women were short-changed and pressured into homemaking while men strained to prove themselves as breadwinners with scarce emotional support. In the context of political upheaval and nuclear threat, countless couples fell for the feminine and masculine mystique³ that would ultimately torment them.

Slaughterhouse-Five reached readers soon after the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., as the nation endured a daily “count of corpses” (Vonnegut 268) and the Government ignored protests against the war in Vietnam. Vonnegut outfits his anti-war argument in a dark comedic style, with plenty of black humor; his characters are neither hopeful nor heroic, though they are often absurd and alarming. The author deems his novel a “failure” (28) because, by turning his back on the future to examine the past, he finds “nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (24). Explicitly and implicitly, his writing contains evidence of the hardening of hearts and the closing of minds that resulted from the collective trauma of World War II. Though he affirms the importance of his endeavor to

² “The ideology and practice of ‘separate spheres’ (...) defined a domestic sphere of action for women, contrasted with a sphere of economic and political action for men” (Connell 195).

³ The feminine and masculine mystique says that “the highest value and the only commitment” (Friedan 28) for a woman or a man is the fulfillment of their own femininity or masculinity.

understand the past and its terrors, Vonnegut recognizes that his “famous book about Dresden” (23) fails to make sense of what he witnessed. Still, he manages to cast many oppressive systems into doubt, including sexism, a mission that multiracial feminists⁴ would continue expanding throughout the 1970s.

The novel follows the time-traveling experiences of Billy Pilgrim, whose Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder appears to be the result of childhood humiliations, the horrors of war, a plane crash in which he was the sole survivor, or a combination of the three. Like his author, Billy spent days wandering through a war zone before a months-long capture by the Germans, eventually emerging from an underground slaughterhouse in Dresden alongside fellow American prisoners, tasked to recover corpses from the rubble aftermath of the firebombing. Unlike Vonnegut, Billy is “unstuck in time” (29), meaning that his life occurs in unpredictable flashes of traumatic memory. When the alien Tralfamadorians abduct him, Billy welcomes their comforting insights to justify his fragmented, emotionally defunct reality. They introduce him to determinism, and Billy becomes a preacher for their gospel:

All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist (...) When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. 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.’ (34)

In this mode, Billy forfeits all responsibility to his relationships and fantasies as well as the wars he perpetuates through his passivity. He ignores his children and acts indifferently when his wife dies, renouncing them by dwelling in a Tralfamadorian zoo exhibit with a beautiful sex-film actress, also abducted like him. Erotic fantasy and science fiction become two ways

⁴ Combahee River Collective member Barbara Smith defined feminism in this way: “Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women—as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism but merely female self-aggrandizement” (cited in Thompson 340).

for one disillusioned man to reconstruct and escape reality. “So it goes” is the novel’s mantra, repeated after every death, but this dismissal of morality has a satiric, subversive purpose.

Scholars have studied Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* through many lenses. By narrowing sources down to those most relevant to this study, I found three critical currents to build from: Vonnegut’s anti-ambivalence, Billy Pilgrim’s mental illness, and masculinity at war. I take much from these analyses while filling a gap in academic discussions concerning the novel’s representation of historically situated gender relations; no one has studied the text as a satire of a sexist culture through the lens of feminism or gender studies.

Mary Elizabeth (Mimi) Loftus importantly recognizes Vonnegut’s use of stereotypes and exaggerations of sexist qualities in male and female characters to “draw attention to the processes that weaken women” (Loftus 2). Without discussing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Mimi debates whether Vonnegut’s writing is misogynistic and remarks that his fiction becomes increasingly inclined toward postmodern feminist values (2). Keeping in mind Loftus’s observations about Vonnegut’s tendency to stress the flaws of men, this dissertation demonstrates how Vonnegut’s illustration of stereotypes intentionally reveals the dangers of gendered performance. Each character is a unique reflection of a cultural, historical phenomenon, of which Vonnegut remains critical.

Some scholars focus on the novel as a critique of ambivalence or a pessimistic portrayal of our culture and Billy as this unheroic anti-role model figure. Ruzbeh Babae and colleagues point out that Vonnegut intentionally paints a dark picture of our world to convey disillusionment with scientific powers, presenting Tralfamadore as a dubious utopia that degenerates human beings into unthinking machines (Babae et al. 238). Arnold Edelstein similarly theorizes that Tralfamadore is a “geodesic womb” designed to soothe Billy’s anxieties and allow him to envision himself as a savior, foreseeing a future with meaning

(Edelstein 135). Billy's desire to crawl "back into the egg" (136) is instrumental in discussing Billy's longing for a pre-knowledge utopia where his manhood remains intact.

Ankit Raj and Nagendra Kumar coin Billy's quest as *anti-monomyth* by reading the novel according to Joseph Campbell's monomyth (or hero's quest) pattern (Raj and Kumar 239). Recognizing how Tralfamadore takes Billy's conscience hostage, the reader senses that his "call to adventure" is false, offering comfort without salvation (241). This idea is helpful in the argument that Vonnegut does not always represent optimistic outcomes but lessons on the opposite. As Kathrine Hume demonstrates in her analysis of Vonnegut's subsequent works, each of Vonnegut's protagonists is a symbolic step toward the conclusion that suffering is neither meaningless nor hopeless. In *Jailbird* (1979), Vonnegut writes from the point of view of compelling female characters about an "idealistic form of communism" (Hume 188). Still, by the close of *Slaughterhouse-Five* ten years prior, his revelations remain sketchy and doubtful. In agreement that there is a lack of hope by the novel's conclusion, I expand upon Hume's ideas, highlighting that Vonnegut's protagonist, like his representation of women, is an essential critique of masculinity, needed to convey an anti-war message.

The second group of scholars tend toward an analysis of Billy's strange behaviors in connection to his isolation and mental illness by tying in outside philosophical, scientific, or aesthetic concepts. Alexandra Berlina argues that Vonnegut evokes *ostranenie* (or estrangement) in his reader to promote critical reflection through emotional reconnection by "making strange" the institutions we take most for granted (Berlina 20). Maria Beville observes something else, proposing that the science-fictional Tralfamadoreans offer "an inverted portrait of ourselves" in the mode of Victorian monsters (Beville 18). These critics compel me, but I find it pertinent to emphasize that—in addition to making war and religion strange, pointing out the dangers of loneliness, or forcing readers to grapple with the

unrepresentable nature of sublime terror—Vonnegut’s techniques firstly denaturalize our taken-for-granted beliefs about the meanings of sex and gender⁵.

Another scholar, Kevin Brown, reads Billy’s lonely life as a response to anomie (or alienation) rooted in and prolonged by childhood traumas. They interpret Tralfamadore as a reaction to a lack of loving connection, a state of “anomic isolation” that stands for the separateness afflicting post-war American culture (Brown 102). This argument pertains directly to my analysis of the novel as a critique of the dire consequences of hegemonic masculinity. While Ciarán Kavanagh acknowledges that Vonnegut wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five* to apprehend the perils that war poses to humanity, they read Billy’s experiences of emotional inaccessibility as a result of the plane crash, not the war (Kavanagh 9). Given the novel’s symbolic structure, this connection seems too limited and literal. It is critical to consider how Billy’s psychological stress, its effects, and the roots these scholars have discovered can all be traced back to patriarchy as an oppressive power.

The third group analyzes the novel’s anti-war stance by touching on themes of masculinity, but only slightly or superficially. Many discuss the destructive effects of war but do not extend their critique to hegemonic masculinity—the ultimate investor in and benefactor of military power. Christina Jarvis, for instance, defends that literature written during the Vietnam War subverted and reimagined cultural narratives surrounding masculinity. By emphasizing civilian deaths and concentration camps, the “Vietnamization” of World War Two served to deconstruct the binary myth of good versus bad wars (Jarvis 2). Jarvis also notes that Vonnegut’s narrator deliberately describes women according to their

⁵ The difference between sex and gender, simply put, is the difference between biology and culture. Science can define a person’s sex, but gender experiences constant redefinition depending on social custom (Goldstein 2). Gender is stratified and reinforced by stereotypes. The constancy of gender roles in war is generally attributable to sex discrimination (4).

reproductive value, since “militaristic conceptions of bodies are integral to the wholesale slaughter of civilians” (4). My analysis amends the fact that Jarvis does not mention how challenges to gender stereotypes are required to convey a comprehensive anti-war vision.

Peter C. Kunze attempts to analyze masculinity, arguing that the novel appeals to “young men” fighting and igniting the “wars of tomorrow” (Kunze 48). Nevertheless, their research suffers from mishandled plot details and lacking foundation in Gender Studies. Kunze’s main takeaway is that war “emasculates” young men, “revealing their ultimate *impotence* in the face of death” (53, my italics). It is defensible to argue that war denies living beings their agency, but to argue that the military is *emasculating* suggests that men can preserve their “birthright as leaders of the world” (53) by resisting participation. Such an assertion altogether neglects the contingency of masculinity and ignores how Vonnegut’s black comedy renders war and gender entirely absurd.

There is a fourth category of works cited that do not directly deal with *Slaughterhouse-Five* but involve adjacent topics such as feminist humor or the feminization of futuristic technology. I also reference some of what Vonnegut shares in an interview with *Playboy* magazine from 1973. These studies supplement my understanding of the author’s dense array of unflattering allusions to American culture.

Precedents considered, no scholar has yet adequately answered the following questions: how does Vonnegut choose to represent sex and gender in a novel that seeks to send an anti-war message? How does that representation help or hinder the transmission of his message? What commentary might these depictions make, and how is the reader meant to respond? How does the novel mirror contemporaneous discourse about sex and gender in the United States of America between 1945 and 1969?

This dissertation argues that the controversial depiction of Billy Pilgrim's listless relationships and escapist fantasies intentionally undermine hegemonic masculinity while reflecting the precarious state of gender relations between the Second World War and Second-Wave Feminism. Through a black-humorist rendition of the feminine and masculine mystique, Vonnegut highlights the tragedy of middle-class families deceived into seeking traditional or exemplary gender conventions. Billy Pilgrim's insanity doubles as an anti-war and anti-sexist critique. Loveless dynamics, misogynist delusions, and the traumatized protagonist's flight from accountability into a pre-knowledge utopia indicate the regression that plagued post-war America. The feminist frustration toward sexism and misogyny is a necessary reaction, required by an author using black comedy to invite readers to think critically about culture. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an intentionally sardonic tale, a white middle-class American veteran man's tongue-in-cheek critique of a sad, sexist, war-making society.

To support these claims, I place *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) in conversation with various critical texts to ground my discussion in Gender Studies and because all three are cultural historical analyses of gender relations within the relevant time frame. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a watershed for Second Wave Feminism, describes the plight of middle-class white women after World War II. The parallels between *The Feminine Mystique* and the life that surrounds Billy Pilgrim are uncanny and deliberate. *Masculinities*, by Raewyn Connell, discusses the effects of hegemonic masculinity in the lives of men and presents possible paths to liberation, putting into words many things that Vonnegut admittedly fails to explain. Michael S. Kimmel's book, *Manhood in America*, bridges Friedan's discussion of American women and Connell's discussion of hegemonic masculinity, offering a chapter specifically on American manhood during the 1960s. By weaving these sources into my close reading analysis, I present solid evidence of Vonnegut

grappling with anxieties about the state of humanity at his time of writing. Specifically, I examine Billy Pilgrim's life through a feminist lens to showcase the author's concerns about patriarchy's traumatizing consequences. I also pay close attention to the way Vonnegut's representation of women conveys an anti-war message through its critique of hegemonic masculinity's perpetuation of personal horrors and global atrocities.

Section One of this study discusses the marriage and family life of Billy Pilgrim. He is a child of the Depression, science fiction, and nuclear weapons—a martyred mother, a hyper-masculine father, and an ultra-conservative father-in-law. Billy's mother is a source of contradiction; both self-sacrificing and overbearing, Billy resents her for giving him a life he is not keen on keeping (Vonnegut 130). The effect of this relationship reflects issues men encounter when they are brought up in deeply gendered households. Billy's father, who dies in a hunting accident, is an example of the lethal traps of American manhood. His "sink-or-swim" (55) method of teaching survival scars young Billy for the rest of his life. Lionel Merble, Billy's father-in-law, is a white-collar conformist whose power lies not in physical dominance but in technical expertise. An authoritarian personality, Lionel sets Billy up in business, tells him who to be and what to believe, establishing a generational chain of wealth that eventually passes on to Billy's son-in-law. The linkage demonstrates how hegemonic patriarchy perpetuates itself within a particular socioeconomic context.

The novel's depiction of Valencia Merble's marriage with Billy Pilgrim is the opposite of idyllic. They go through the motions of a traditional married couple, bringing children into the world, though they are unable to help the other heal. Billy is distant and unstable, while Valencia is erratic and naive. This imbalance is evident during their honeymoon scene when she cries after intercourse and begs Billy to tell her a war story, which triggers him to time-travel to a traumatic memory (151-157). She harbors escapist

fantasies which indicate a struggle to cope with reality. In the scene when Valencia dies because she believes Billy may be dead (234), we sense the profound disorientation many women shared after the mass movement back to their dependence upon men.

Billy's daughter Barbara is twenty-one, married, and burdened by responsibility. Forced into early adulthood, Barbara has no choice over her life path. Losing her mother and looking after her father turns her into a "bitchy flibbertigibbet" (Vonnegut 36). Barbara values social standing over compassion, and her care resorts to condescension. She refers to Billy as "Father" when she means to appear assertive but defaults to "Daddy" when she feels afraid. Billy's relationship with his son, Robert, is hardly traceable, indicating a prolonged emotional absence. Contrary to Billy's clownish experience as a chaplain, Robert does a "great job" as a "famous" Green Beret in Vietnam (77). Paradoxically, Robert's transition from delinquent to specialized soldier conceals Billy's failure as a father from other men. Nevertheless, Robert's voice is only ever a question—an echoed doubt: "Dad—?" As if to ask: *Who are you?*

Billy undermines the American code of masculine conduct. He cannot embody hegemonic expectations correctly, for this is not simply a matter of sex but of gender identity, which is variable across cultures and communities. Suffering loneliness and a painful lack of dignity, Billy fails to imagine a more restorative form of masculinity. To do so demands an admittedly complex journey, as no example of manhood may ever exist in perfectly definable terms. Second Wave Feminism and the Liberation movements of the 1970s would not have yet paved a path to freedom for the male sex, to help them build identities that allow for expression rather than oppression. Furthermore, Billy's inability to identify as an exemplary son, husband, or father leaves him socially disembodied and forces him to seek solace in other forms.

Section Two of this study discusses Billy Pilgrim's regressive masculine fantasies, especially concerning Montana Wildhack and their dome-shaped home on Tralfamadore. Seemingly saved by an alien race that presents him with the Eve to his Adam, Billy opts to imagine a prelapsarian utopia as the solution to his damaged identity. This couple is trapped, permanently naked, in a zoo exhibit on an alien planet. I also discuss misogyny as a site for masculine bonding by interpreting the pornographic image of a pony (51), Billy's morphine-induced giraffe dream (126), and his obsession with Adam and Eve (68, 95). Finally, I disclose themes of gender vertigo, exit politics, and the problem with self-absorbed or single-issue projects of reform.

Under the dome, we meet Montana, erotic object turned domestic goddess, and her powerlessness to escape Billy's sexist prison. When she is first abducted and caged with a man twice her age, Montana screams in protest, but she soon submits to the situation, sedated by her dulled awareness of life before enclosure (170). Her tolerance of captivity emphasizes how pornography serves to comfort the male ego and objectify the body. Still, Montana's invitation to tell her a "story, Billy Boy" (228) allows Billy to imagine himself revisiting the destruction of Dresden without being triggered to time-travel. In other words, he fabricates a compassionate lover to process parts of his past. Much more than a trope, Montana uses her incisive wit to bring attention to war as a sexual hangup (265).

Like men and women steeped in the mystique, Billy and Montana are ambivalent about their autonomy. Apparently satisfied with their stifled lives, they directly parallel the sexist paradigm of the American nuclear family. Far from finding paradise, they fall for the Tralfamadorian ethos that free will does not exist, believing that any resistance to the system that contains them is fruitless. Billy's passivity seems hopeless unless we read more deeply into the meaning of the Tralfamadorian revelation that there are, at minimum, *seven sexes*

essential to reproduction on Earth (145). This bombshell blows Billy's conception of sex and gender to bits. Ironically, the idea sprouts from his delusion; thus, the possibility of breaking out of a gender binary arrives from *his* imagination.

When a pair of married obstetricians in Dresden reproach Billy for neglecting the bleeding horses drawing his carriage, Billy bursts into tears (252). His inability to respond constructively to cruelty, compared to the resilience of that united husband and wife, presents further critique of human resignation. The inspiring example of this couple, who defy gender norms by delivering babies without having their own, dismantles preconceived notions about reproduction and matrimony (251). Their picnic near the ruins of what was once their home sets into suspicion any justification for the abandonment of hope. In a novel that lacks heroes, these two lovers dispute everything Billy's life represents.

Through Billy Pilgrim's tragically inadequate response to atrocity, *Slaughterhouse-Five* signals that raising cultural consciousness beyond sexist paradigms would require awakening from submissive sheepishness and intimidation-based illusions. Liberation means renouncing the idealization of clichés such as the macho husband and the clinging wife, the brave soldier and the demure actress. Rather than avoiding transformation, we must be willing to recognize creative structural changes and encourage global progress. We should extend ourselves to help others embrace education about the unknown rather than adhering to our "mistaken choice" (Friedan 146) or fatal dream.⁶

⁶ In "The Hero at a Thousand Places," Raj and Kumar point out Lawrence Boer's discovery of the word Tralfamadore as an anagram of the phrase OR FATAL DREAM (250, original capitalized text), which helps connect the feminine mystique to Billy's deluded decisions.

1. Marriage and Family: Son, Husband, Father

The significance of the roles of father, son, and husband in the 1950s American middle class was monumental. Men had to establish identities that avoided strict conformity to the “march of the empty gray flannel suits” without risking the abandonment of their familial and professional obligations (Kimmel 155). Lost illusions of heroic masculinity and the sober responsibility of domestic retreat left men feeling restless. Vonnegut’s response was to combine caring fatherhood with creative writing. It may be worth adding that Vonnegut’s mother committed suicide in 1944, a year before the end of the war. Coming to terms with this pain undoubtedly shaped Vonnegut’s attitude toward gender relations and, thus, how to represent them, but as Hume points out (182), these perceptions transform and improve throughout his subsequent novels.

Vonnegut’s *Playboy* interview provides a peek into his role as a husband and father of six. Though the magazine is typically related to men’s flight from commitment (Connell 279), this particular piece reveals that Vonnegut has known his wife, Jane Cox, since kindergarten; theirs was a dedicated partnership rooted in friendship. Apart from raising three biological children, the Vonneguts adopted Kurt’s sister Alice’s three kids after she and her husband James passed away within a day of each other in 1958 (Vonnegut, “*Playboy* Interview”). While Billy emotionally disengages from fatherhood, Vonnegut takes this role to heart. The first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* shares the story of a road trip in which his daughter and her best friend stop to stand in awe of waterfalls (Vonnegut 15). He teaches his sons not to support companies that build or finance “massacre machinery” (24). No comparably loving connections exist for Billy Pilgrim, suggesting a conscious effort by Vonnegut not to submit to hegemonic patterns, nor to Billy’s listless ways.

1.1. Billy as a Son of the Mystique: Sink or Swim

Billy was brought up during the Great Depression (1929-1939) by a self-sacrificing mother with a “terrific hankering for a crucifix” (Vonnegut 49). Metaphorically nailed to her cross as a housewife, she identifies with Christ’s passion, a martyr to the needs of her family. When she catches pneumonia, the loved ones she devoted her life to leave her in an assisted living facility, surrounded by strangers and sickness. During a visit from her son, Billy’s mother gathers “energy from all over her ruined body” to ask before collapsing: “How did I get so *old*?” (Vonnegut 56, original emphasis). Her tears signify the sadness that many mothers feel once they pass their reproductive years. When women are valued purely for their caretaking function, patriarchal culture pushes to discard them once those functions cease. A hollow symbol with no name, Billy’s mother is described as a “standard-issue, brown-haired, white woman with a high-school education” (130). Accordingly, the feminine mystique encourages women to disregard their identity, for it claims that they “can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘Tom’s wife (...) Mary’s mother’” (Friedan 53). Approaching death, Billy’s mother examines the void in her life history, longing for a stronger sense of self.

As Friedan points out, emptiness is an issue suffered by women trapped in the mystique, and all family members feel its effects. We sense this after Billy enters a concentration camp for Russian prisoners, where the Germans corral the naked Americans into a communal shower. To convey their defenselessness, the narrator selects a distinctly gendered image: “Their penises were shriveled and their balls were retracted” (Vonnegut 107). Given that this could have been an execution—their clothes pass “through poison gas” in allusion to the Holocaust death chambers—it is unsurprising that Billy’s submission to the will of an unseen hand suddenly transports him to his life as an infant, freshly bathed and

coddled by mom. In a “rosy room (...) filled with sunshine” (107), he is no longer forced to face his present fears, though other dangers lurk here.

Billy “gurgled and cooed” while his mother “laid him on the tickling towel, powdered him between the legs, joked with him, patted his little jelly belly” (107). A vulnerable baby, Billy can bask in the glory of his mother’s attention, but something still threatens him. This amusing display of affection could imply that his mother “joked with him” innocently touching the private place “between the legs.” Because Billy time-travels to witness this moment, it may inform him of his discomfort toward his mother as an adult. In effect, it betrays the insecurity that men experience from being raised by mothers who, despite their total authority over them as children, teach their sons to strive for a superior position over presumably weaker people, usually women.

According to Friedan, “The Second World War revealed that millions of American men were psychologically incapable of facing the shock of war, of facing life away from their ‘moms’” (Friedan 151). She explains that when a society does not value maturity in its women, it will not regard its absence as a loss or potential source of distress (164). Americans became aware of something amiss within women only when their sons proved incapable of braving the battlefield. Billy’s return to infancy as a way to escape the “shock of war” is alluded to in the shower-and-powder scene above, though we note that, even in his mother’s arms, Billy’s so-called manhood cannot protect him. As the novel explores its anti-war argument through the lens of family life, it illustrates the insult of scapegoating women for the faults of hegemonic masculinity.

During his final year at optometry school, Billy commits himself to a veterans’ hospital because he is “alarmed by the outside world” (Vonnegut 127). He wakes up in a ward for nonviolent mental patients with his mother nearby, speaking to the man in the next

bed about how a “boy *needs* a father,” but “Billy’s father is dead” (132, original emphasis). Indeed, Billy’s mother clings to the post-war idea that a boy cannot become a stable man without a sufficiently masculine father. She does not recognize how her late husband’s exaggerated parenting permanently damaged Billy’s development.

In December 1944, during the “last mighty German attack of the war” (Vonnegut 40), Billy’s father, a barber, is shot dead by a friend in a hunting accident. Billy’s father fits the description of a man whose interest in violent sports camouflages an underlying vulnerability, where hypermasculinity leads to higher death rates and lower life expectancy for men. Male-centric literature between the 1970s and the 1990s offered profound insights into issues related to the male body, including impotence, aging, violent injuries, and premature mortality (Connell 51). Hegemonic masculinity places men in charge of its deadliest missions and encourages self-destructive behaviors despite its counterintuitive claim to reason.

The same year that his father dies, the army deploys Billy to fight on the frontlines in Luxembourg. Billy’s regiment is destroyed before he ever reaches them. The circumstances budget no time for grief—death is already everywhere surrounding him. Lost and lucky, still wearing the dress shoes he had bought for his father’s funeral, Billy is a “dazed wanderer far behind the new German lines” (Vonnegut 40). The passing is as fresh as the snow numbing his feet, and the fear of being so young amid war and fatherlessness compels Billy to stand frozen in the direct line of fire of some distant sniper. Despite being saved, Billy begs to be left behind, telling them to “go on” (60) without him.

The situation sends Billy traveling through “the full arc of his life” (54), bouncing between a series of traumatic memories, the first of which involves Billy’s father teaching him to live by the method of “sink-or-swim” (55). A terrified young boy taking a shower with his hairy father at the Y.M.C.A., little Billy knew he would soon be thrown into the

swimming pool's deep end. His father had made it clear that "Billy was going to damn well swim" (55). Numbly accepting execution, Billy reaches the bottom. Rather than resist, Billy embraces the "beautiful music" of the other side until he senses someone rescuing him from drowning: "Billy resented that" (55). Hence, while Billy's father attempts to raise his child according to hypermasculine schemes, Billy refuses to fight, forfeiting his willpower beneath the pressure of harsh parenting.

This "sink-or-swim" problem and how it relates to Billy's passivity is similar to what most men experience when thrown into combat. Regardless of the amount of training received, most soldiers preferred to avoid the constant threat of violence and death. The idea that men are born to fight positions them in perpetual survival mode, requiring continuous confrontation with the world as if it were made up of enemies. It is important to observe that the absence of family affection deprives Billy of a desire to survive and that this also "leads to his lack of ability to love" (Brown 103). Hence, Billy's boyhood indicates how the imposition of insensitive masculine ideals can atrophy a young man's ability to give or receive affection and cause arrested emotional development.

His father's bravery falters at the rim of the Grand Canyon when he "manfully" kicks a pebble into space as if to dispel the overwhelming emotions one faces at the edge of such an abyss (Vonnegut 112). While Billy's mother's rapt expression contrasts with her husband's dull indifference, twelve-year-old Billy Pilgrim shivers in fear of falling in. He is clearly still affected by the time he was thrown into the pool's deep end as swiftly as his father launched a pebble into space. Overcome by the unspeakable terror of his "sink-or-swim" trauma, his mother's touch causes Billy's to "wet his pants" (113). Thus, Billy's mental instability is shown to be aggravated by the presence of his parents.

Later on, in the pitch-black caverns, Billy's father reveals a similar childlike insecurity when he resists total darkness by pulling out his pocket watch (114). As Beville notes, "the suspense-killing radium dial of his father's watch" (Beville 15) references an image from the war of a Russian man "all alone in the night," whose face "glowed like a radium dial" (Vonnegut 104). This old man, so close to death, echoes the same "ghostly" light that floats by young Billy as he doubts whether he is still alive in the cave (114). The radium dial blends Billy's father's fear of darkness with Billy's proximity to the "terrifying cruelty behind man's inhumanity" (Beville 16). Thousands of innocent civilian deaths connect symbolically to the men who kick pebbles into the abyss rather than sitting with their complex emotions, averting the unknown rather than questioning their need always to appear brave. Billy's father is just as incapable of handling the fate that Billy cannot bother fighting; the difference lies in the lengths that a man will go to live up to the guise while trying to teach his son what's subjectively right. But this is not the only father figure in Billy's life, for, after the war, he meets Lionel Merble, owner of the Ilium School of Optometry, whose daughter, Valencia, becomes Billy's wife.

Lionel un-names Billy by telling him to go by his nickname "because it would (...) make him seem slightly magical, since there weren't any other grown Billy's around" (Vonnegut 59). Accordingly, Lionel manages to keep his son-in-law stuck in perpetual immaturity. Rather than instilling a sense of freedom, Lionel ensures that his daughter is provided for by finding her as compliant a husband as possible. Benefiting from Billy's perfectly pliable mixture of competence and ambivalence, Lionel sets his daughter up with a man in the top three of his graduating class, someone who never complains and would be willing to marry unattractive Valencia when no one else would. Billy's only parent with a full name, Lionel Merble, represents the *white-collar conformist* of Kimmel's research. From

1945 to 1960, embodying the role of the “breadwinner and family provider” defined middle-class masculinity (Kimmel 161). This necessitated sacrificing heroic ambitions for a monotonous routine, a compromise that distinguished “the mice from the men” (161).

Because Billy lacks a heroic vision, he is an easy target for Lionel, who understands that the ideal provider is unfazed by “dull routine” (161). In the narrator’s words, “Lionel Merble was a machine” (Vonnegut 196). Thus, he represents a man whose dominance resides in technical expertise and whose authority extends from setting Billy up in business to setting him up with Valencia, all the way to imposing his politically conservative beliefs onto Billy, whose car bumper displays stickers, gifts, that state “Support Your Police Department” and “Impeach Earl Warren” (Vonnegut 72). As a member of the John Birch Society, an American right-wing political advocacy group, Lionel also enacts an authoritarian personality who, according to psychologists at Berkeley and Yale, masks gender insecurity through a form of pseudo-masculinity which includes “racism, anti-Semitism, and (...) bigotry” (Kimmel 161).

Details like the bumper stickers and Billy’s un-naming makes a case against those who go along with whatever the powerful men in this post-war world expect without examining their values. Lionel’s decisions result from the pressures he is also under to maintain a masculine image. He grants Billy the privileges of nepotism, continuing Valencia’s subordination under the authority of another man. Billy does the same to his daughter, Barbara, by setting her husband up in business as well. Closer inspection of the gender dynamics between all of them uncovers the depths of their dissatisfaction.

1.2. Billy as a Husband to Valencia Merble: Traumatized and Hysterical

Billy Pilgrim’s marriage to Valencia Merble provides a look into the tragedy of a gendered relationship steeped in trauma. Billy’s inability to enact loving affection makes him

indifferent to his adoring wife. Meanwhile, Valencia struggles with emptiness and escapist tendencies. The narrator describes her as “ugly” (Vonnegut 137) and “as big as a house because she couldn’t stop eating” (136). Admittedly, Billy is no less “funny looking” (154); of “preposterous” (41) height and shaped like a matchbox or a “filthy flamingo” (42), yet his lack of attractiveness is overlooked.

Though Billy believes Valencia to be “one of the symptoms of his disease,” he nevertheless “begged her to take the diamond ring and be his companion for life” (137). Ironically, Billy’s sign of insanity is not the *engagement* but his inability to emotionally *engage* with Valencia as an individual. There is a disparity between what Billy claims to feel and language like “begged” or “companion for life,” which display an intense longing for love. The sentence “He knew he was going crazy when he heard himself proposing” (137) implies that Billy passively experiences the event as though programmed to go through the motions of marriage. This discrepancy reflects some consequences of the rote mechanics of the patriarchal middle-class family. Married to someone who hardly understands her in a culture that urges her to raise children and stay in the kitchen, it is unsurprising that Valencia exhibits traits reflective of an affliction that a doctor once called “the housewife's syndrome” (Friedan 10):

Sometimes a woman would say ‘I feel empty somehow (...) incomplete.’ Or she would say, ‘I feel as if I don’t exist.’ Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquilizer (...) Sometimes, she went to a doctor with symptoms she could hardly describe: ‘A tired feeling (...) I feel like crying without any reason.’ (Friedan 10)

It is evident that Valencia’s attachment to food, materialism, and men stems from her life before marriage, just as Billy’s trauma dates to his early family life, as well. Thus, based on a vicious cycle of separateness, they recreate the same gender dynamics as their parents: a marriage reenactment rather than an actual relationship built on love and compassion.

Along with her love of chocolate, Valencia seems to have a voracious sexual appetite and strange erotic fantasies of her own, as during sex, “she imagined that she was a famous woman in history (...) Queen Elizabeth the First of England, and Billy was supposedly Christopher Columbus” (Vonnegut 151). While her husband opts for science fiction, Valencia prefers an equally improbable slice of historical romance. The scenario alludes to Valencia’s hunger for wealth and prestige; she wants to believe that the two of them will prevail as powerful characters. Meanwhile, the word “supposedly” casts doubt on Billy’s capacity to conquer anything. Valencia engages her imagination in a way that Vonnegut pokes fun at but does not condemn.

On the other hand, Billy is painted in a distasteful, unappealing light—his orgasm is “a noise like a small, rusty hinge” (151). The narrator reminds us that Billy’s post-coital satisfaction comes not from the pleasures of physical intimacy but from the fact that “He was rich now. He had been rewarded for marrying a girl nobody in his right mind would have married” (151). This is a profoundly disheartening thought on Billy’s part, considering the vulnerability required from Valencia to share her heart and body with this person forever. Aside from being an appalling thing to say, it acknowledges Billy’s unearned privilege and smugness. By insulting Valencia, the narrator creates resentment around Billy’s complacency and sympathy for Valencia’s vulnerable position in the gendered power dynamics controlled by her father and husband. This representation of gender relations intends to take credit away from the complicit male.

The silence after sex is so thick that only Valencia’s tears can cut through it. These tears call back Friedan’s observations of women who cried seemingly “without any reason” (Friedan 10), though the cause directly relates to the mystique. Valencia’s helplessness is transparent as soon as the act ends when she responds by saying “thank you” (Vonnegut 152).

This should inspire the question, *For what?* But Billy does not inquire, instead opting for the presumptuous response, “You’re welcome.” Because she begins to cry, he asks her what the matter is, and she says that these are happy tears because she “never thought anybody would marry” her (153). Whether her joy is real or not is difficult to judge, though by looking at her life at large, this happiness appears to be superficial; she may be materially wealthy and provided for, but she is hungry for true love. During “the ‘back-to-the-kitchen’ movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the prevailing ethic stressed woman’s fulfillment as wife and mother” (Walker 98). Hence, Valencia’s anxiety about being desirable is intensified by her need to fulfill those coveted categories. Her admission of insecurity stumps Billy, who does not have the emotional capacity to comfort her. Unsure of what to say, incapable of saying anything, Billy dumbly mutters, “Um” (153).

Nevertheless, Valencia attempts to bridge the distance through methods that, to her, seem correct. She questions her husband about the war: “It was a simple-minded thing for a female Earthling to do, to associate sex and glamor with war” (154). This is a highly ironic statement, intentionally so because the words come directly from Mrs. Mary O’Hare who connects these themes in her biting critique of “war-loving, dirty old men” (18). This demonstration unfolds in the following way: Valencia lays a hand on Billy’s thigh, as if to signal some erotic undercurrent to their conversation and asks Billy to share things he wouldn’t “want to talk about” (155). Billy says no, but Valencia insists, coercing a story through a self-centered appeal: “I’m proud you were a soldier (...) Would you talk about the war now, if I wanted you to?” (155). As though to challenge his loyalty, Valencia’s request is a test to see if Billy will play the part of the dutiful husband and satisfy her wishes.

On the other hand, this interaction reflects the common post-war notion that women can help their husbands heal their war trauma by talking about it or by having babies (Kimmel

148). Valencia mistakenly thinks that her pride can bolster Billy's confidence and make him feel more manly. In a sense, it is Valencia who wishes to feel more equal to him, in that she would like Billy to share stories with her the way he has with her father (Vonnegut 155). She had overheard him sharing the story of Derby's execution and berates Billy with details she already knows. Billy offers single-word responses until he retreats "into the darkness of the bathroom," where he travels "back to 1944, to the prison hospital again" (157). While Valencia lacks the tools to connect with her traumatized husband without relying on appeals to hegemony, Billy cannot communicate about his past without being transported there. Their understanding of how to healthily relate as a married couple is severely stunted. The absence of healthy, authentic love weakens and triggers them both inside and out of the bedroom.

When Valencia dies tragically of carbon monoxide poisoning after colliding against another vehicle on her way to the hospital, Billy doesn't mind; he is too busy time traveling and thinking about Tralfamadore, too immersed in his delusions to ground himself in reality long enough to mourn anyone. The accident follows the plane crash that kills Valencia's father, many other optometrists, and their partners, but not Billy. He is a survivor, yet again. Believing that Billy would be a "vegetable (...) Valencia was hysterical" (Vonnegut 233). She rushes to the hospital in the Cadillac and crashes, completely wrecking the car. Determined to see her husband, she blabs "hysterically" and keeps driving, "leaving her exhaust system behind" (234). By the time she arrives at the hospital, she is "unconscious" and "a heavenly azure" (234), having been poisoned. It is not uncommon to find the words "hysterical" and "hysterically" used to describe a woman's reaction to tragedy.

Hysteria was largely connected with femininity, both because it usually affected female patients and because its symptoms played into the notions of unpredictability and emotionality traditionally associated to feminine nature (...) psychiatrists made a clear distinction between the traumatic experiences of women, known as 'hysteria', and the traumatic neurosis of soldiers, which was popularly known as 'shell shock' (...) These

traumatic experiences were not only heavily gendered, but often triggered or worsened by the individual's inability to fulfill society's expectations in regards of gender. (Carcas 13)

Correspondingly, Valencia's death stereotypes that women are emotionally volatile and a danger to themselves. Her arrival at the hospital, after all her perseverance, is compared to the definitive arrival of death at the sound of an aircraft that's been shot out of the sky: "a heavy bomber coming in on a wing and a prayer" (Vonnegut 234). Thus, though their identities fit into separate spheres, their trauma is intertwined. While Valencia held on to the promise of marriage and family for as long as she could, the bleak fact of her gruesome passing emphasizes the hopelessness of the gender relations practiced between herself, Billy, and the world. Valencia's devotion to Billy is a reflection of her life-threatening lack of autonomy. Neither of them is capable of a well-balanced response to grief and loneliness.

Furthermore, while Valencia escapes these pressures in death, Billy misses her funeral because he is "still so sick (...) preparing letters and lectures about flying saucers, the negligibility of death, and the true nature of time" (243). In other words, after losing an airplane of fellow optometrists, his father-and-law, and his life partner, Billy's mental energies shift entirely onto Tralfamadore. In this realm, he can attempt to salvage his dignity and escape a life of countless tragedies, or, at the very least, fulfill his erotic fantasies. Kimmel observes that symptoms of "War Shock" in WWII soldiers became normalized; "learning to live with it" emerged as a dominant method to preserve American manhood in the subsequent decade (Kimmel 148). In the following subsection, I examine Billy's effect on his two children, Barbara and Robert, and how they, too, are forced to "live with it."

1.3. Billy as a Father to Barbara and Robert: Daddy—? Dad—?

The narrator describes Billy Pilgrim's life post-marriage and his two children as such:

Billy became rich. He had two children, Barbara and Robert. In time, his daughter Barbara married another optometrist, and Billy set him up in business. Billy's son Robert had a lot of trouble in high school, but then he joined the famous Green Berets. He straightened out, became a fine young man, and he fought in Vietnam. (Vonnegut 31)

Billy's daughter, Barbara, is introduced in the first scene of the second chapter, which begins the novel's action and sets the tone for the representation of gender dynamics throughout. In this first scene, Barbara frantically searches the house for her father, who is typing a letter about Tralfamadore in his nearly freezing basement. Hearing no sign of her forty-six-year-old father, Barbara expresses conflicted emotions about how to regard him. "Father? Daddy, where are you?" she cries, "nearly hysterical, expecting to find his corpse" (35).

Chronologically, this scene takes place after the plane crash and, therefore, after her mother's tragic accident. Barbara has one parent left, who she believes to be senile (36). When she finds Billy distracted in the basement writing about Tralfamadore, Barbara switches from worried "Daddy" back to frustrated "Father" and fixes his identity in that colder, more emotionally distant position. She confronts Billy with mildly coercive statements that presuppose his guilt, like "Don't lie to me" (37), and threatens to pen Billy with his mother if he doesn't behave: "Father, Father, Father (...) Are you going to force us to put you where your mother is?" (37). The choice of "your mother" rather than "my grandmother" indicates how little Barbara places value in her family relations.

Barbara is only twenty-one, but she has undertaken a great deal of responsibility since her mother's passing, organizing the funeral while her father was hospitalized—"All this responsibility at such an early age made her a bitchy flibbertigibbet" (36). The diction here is distinctly gendered and derogatory, but not without purpose. When the adjective "bitchy" is paired with the whimsical noun "flibbertigibbet" (meaning flighty or excessively talkative), the phrase successfully describes a character who is childlike inside but hardened by grief

and premature adulthood. In this way, the narrator discloses that Barbara suffers from emotional imbalance due to factors outside her control. These burdens fall on her and not anyone else because the concurrent culture assumes that a woman's role is that of caretaker and caregiver. Friedan explains that "By giving absolute meaning and a sanctimonious value to the generic term 'woman's role', functionalism put American women into a kind of deep freeze" (Friedan 100). Barbara is frozen in a role that robs her of her youth and prevents her from developing a joyful life. She is both without a family and stuck within one.

The way Barbara talks down to Billy, emphasizing his ineptitude, reflects the way a parent would speak to a child in an attempt to discipline them. Questions like, "What are we going to do with you?" (37) and statements like "If you're going to act like a child, maybe we'll just have to treat you like a child" (167) follow the cruel and condescending logic of discipline and punishment. These aggressive expressions of frustration treat Billy as a dysfunctional machine, an inconvenience better off discarded. Barbara appears to mean that Billy cannot take care of himself or live alone; and if a child is to an adult as a boy is to a man, then Barbara is asserting that she does not consider Billy a man. The extent to which he deviates from the masculine ideal is the extent to which Barbara drives in how incompetent he is. Barbara can weaponize a patronizing yet motherly tone to strip her father of a sense of manhood while at the same time infantilizing him. This process of "taking his dignity away in the name of love" is "very exciting for her" (168) because it inverts the gender order by positioning her as the powerful one in their relationship. She can unburden her despair at being the only one around to take care of Billy, at being a woman in a culture where she is discouraged from creating an identity outside of her gender role. On the other hand, it reveals their loveless dynamic and Billy's failure to become someone his daughter can admire.

This relationship reveals a weak, superficial bond between family members, naturalized over generations. Therefore, it follows that Barbara cannot address Billy's emotional needs, as her upbringing also lacked emotional attentiveness. What matters most to her in this situation is the same thing her mother prioritized when she bragged that Billy had gifted her expensive jewelry (222) while he recovered from a traumatic episode. In essence, Barbara covets a stable social standing—precisely what her father, who she believes is “making a laughing stock of himself and everybody associated with him” (37), puts at stake by spreading his abduction narrative.

Nevertheless, Barbara's attitude toward Billy shifts significantly by the novel's end. When she visits her father in the hospital just after the plane crash and Valencia's death, Barbara can utter only “Daddy—?” (241). During this sensitive moment, when she is “all doped up,” wearing the “same glassy-eyed look that poor old Edgar Derby wore just before he was shot in Dresden” (241), she unveils her need for the soft and nurturing type of father who can pacify her fears. Barbara's “glassy-eyed” state is an effect of the tranquilizers given to her by doctors so that she can “continue to function, even though her father was broken and her mother was dead” (241). Here, the word “function” recalls the functional freeze that Friedan critiques in *The Feminine Mystique*:

Some doctors, finding nothing organically wrong with these chronically tired mothers, told them ‘it's all in your mind’; others gave them pills, (...) or put them on diets (the average housewife is twelve to fifteen pounds overweight), deprived them of drinking (there are approximately a million known alcoholic housewives in America), or gave them tranquilizers. (Friedan 203-204)

In effect, women were unable to self-regulate their emotions because they suffered from deep-rooted dissatisfactions that caused them to feel restless and desperate. They could not be tranquil because they did not feel at ease with themselves at the level of personal identity. Likewise, Barbara is not in command of her destiny; she is at the whim of a patriarchal culture

that prescribes the right way to behave like a lady. Housewives across America were fed tranquilizers specifically so that they could “continue to function” (Vonnegut 241), even as the functional freeze was breaking them mentally and depriving them spiritually.

Although just as gendered and shaped by emotional absence, the relationship between Billy and his son is vastly different from Billy’s with his daughter. This discrepancy is recognized partly through the exclusion of Robert from Billy’s memories, as well as Robert’s identification with his father through a reshaping of his personality from delinquent to soldier. As Connell explains in *Masculinities*, “Fatherhood is feared, because it means commitment, but also desired, especially if the child is a boy” (Connell 108). Paradoxically, there are no scenes to show Billy and Robert bonding. It appears that fatherhood is not a source of fear for Billy because it does not mean commitment; Billy reveals no interest in raising his son at all. On the other hand, Robert does become a source of strength for Billy, because of Robert’s role as a Green Beret, a member of the United States Special Forces. This doubles as a reminder of Billy’s comparative clownishness in the war as well as a way to salvage his pride.

After Billy’s frightful episode of PTSD (Kavanagh 4) during his dance with Valencia at their wedding anniversary, Billy goes to the upstairs restroom of their home and leaves the light off. “Dad—?” his son says in the dark. “Robert, the future Green Beret, was seventeen then. Billy liked him, but didn’t know him very well. Billy couldn’t help suspecting that there wasn’t much to know about Robert” (Vonnegut 225). Here, through the literal darkness, we glimpse a lonely teenager who is a stranger to his father. In suspecting that there is not “much to know” about Robert, Billy denies his son’s deep and distinct personality, projecting his lack thereof. Brave enough to break away from masculine stereotypes by owning a “nacreous pink” electric guitar and quirky enough to have it “slung around his neck” as he sits “on the toilet” (225), Robert appears rebellious and unconventional.

Before we meet Robert the Green Beret, we learn about his stint as a high school delinquent. Through manly discipline, Robert goes from being the “boy who had flunked out of high school, who had been an alcoholic at sixteen, who had run with a rotten bunch of kids, who had been arrested for tipping over hundreds of tombstones in a Catholic cemetery one time” to being “all straightened out now (...) a leader of men” (Vonnegut 242). One could postulate about the multiple meanings implied in “all straightened out” given hegemonic masculinity’s alliance with compulsive heterosexuality (Connell 196). However, what Robert most vividly represents is what Connell describes as protest masculinity, from Alfred Adler’s concept of the “masculine protest” (111).

Presumably ignored by his father and overpowered by his mother as a child, Robert protests through a typically “frenzied and showy” (110) rebellion, including but not limited to “violence, school resistance, minor crime” (110) and alcohol abuse. As Connell explains, the masculine protest does not simply adopt the conventional stereotype of masculinity; it rejects the stereotype by breaking the law. Thereby the rebel can claim “a gendered position of power” (111) through an exaggerated performance of masculine aggression. In a way, protest masculinity is an attempt to deny a “stereotyped male role” (112) by playing the part of an outcast, a rebel who cannot be governed by rules. It is a reconfiguration of masculinity, one that makes a false claim to power where “there are no real sources for power” (111).

The juvenile rebellion was a phenomenon closely observed during the postwar years. Kimmel notes that, in the 1950s, delinquency studies were a “growth industry” in social science and psychology (Kimmel 160). While American culture developed a fear of “the feminized, potentially homosexual son,” there was also the potential of the dangerous “juvenile delinquent” (160). To guarantee a stable American boyhood, free from the “temptations of gender nonconformity,” experts argued that men must “be dedicated fathers

to offset overdominant motherhood” (160). Nevertheless, studies traced “hypomasculine” homosexuality and “hypermasculine” juvenile delinquency to “the same familial roots: the absent father and overdominant mother” (160). What does this tell us about Robert Pilgrim? If his mother spoke to him the same way Barbara addresses her father, then it is fair to assume that Valencia was a lot like the stereotyped mother who, through her frustration, dominated her son and contributed to his rebellion. And if Billy’s absent mind betrays the attention he offered his son, then it is clear that Billy was not a present parental figure. Therefore, Robert’s high school experiences are a reflection of the neglect he felt in his family, and the powerlessness caused by an oppressive gender order.

Following the pattern of many young adult men, Robert eventually gives up the protest. He joins the forces of patriarchy instead, engaging enthusiastically with a project of personality aligned with hegemonic masculinity. The transition is realistic, as Jarvis remarks, “in the sense that many men who fought in Vietnam were sons of World War II veterans” (Jarvis 3). In addition, delinquency is not a sustainable long-term practice because, as boys mature, their masculinity is shaped to fit the needs of the corporate economy and its “tamed culture” (Connell 165). As a highly skilled member of the special forces, Robert sets the standard for other soldiers, adopting an exceptional type of masculinity, one that satisfies the dominant ideology’s need for both direct domination and technical knowledge. As Connell explains,

Historically there has been an important division between forms of masculinity organized around direct domination (e.g., corporate management, military command) and forms organized around technical knowledge (e.g., professions, science). The latter have challenged the former for hegemony in the gender order of advanced capitalist societies, without complete success. They currently coexist as inflections or alternative emphases within hegemonic masculinity. There are specific settings where masculinities organized around technical knowledge predominate, particularly in the occupational world of the ‘new middle class’. (Connell 165)

Accordingly, Robert merges his highly skilled, technical knowledge of military weaponry with direct domination through military command, rendering him an exemplary masculine figure. The mythic status of the exceptional soldier ranks even higher than Lionel's success in both corporate management and professional science. Even though Billy is also a business owning optometrist, since hegemonic masculinity establishes itself "partly by its claim to embody the power of reason" (Connell 164), Billy cannot be counted as a member of this milieu. Because Billy's delusions are utterly irrational, he fails to establish any firm footing on masculine grounds. Still, Robert's success as a man can socially affirm Billy's success as a father, making Robert an extension of Billy's masculinity. When a member of the Lion's Club tells Billy that he "should be proud of his son," Billy confirms: "I am. I certainly am" (Vonnegut 77). But to what extent can an emotionally disengaged father claim to be proud of his son, especially if that pride results from the approval of other men?

Despite his attempts, Robert's transformation fails to inspire a more intimate connection between himself and Billy, to whom Robert always asks, "Dad—?" The tentative pause, interruption, or emphasis denoted by the dash signifies an obstacle obstructing their relationship from developing further. Billy's emotional absence persists despite Robert's return from Vietnam, "decorated with a Purple Heart and a Silver Star and a Bronze Star with two clusters" (242). Adopted by a military system that rewards him for his active submission, Robert proves himself to be nothing like his father whose passive submission made him a clown. Billy cannot celebrate his son's return nor thank him for his service, for Billy is decorated with a broken brain and deployed on a distant planet. Robert continues to propose the same question he had at sixteen, which, like Barbara's "Daddy—?" wavers between concern for their father's wellbeing and hope that Billy will bridge the distance.

2. Montana Wildhack: Misogynistic Science Fiction

The second section of this dissertation extends beyond Billy's marriage and family life to explore Billy's escapist fantasies, especially his relationship with Montana Wildhack on Tralfamadore. This section also pays particular attention to Billy's use of science fiction as a solace for the disappointment of the masculine mystique. The decomposition of the mystique in the 1950s and the use of science fiction or erotic fantasies as a comfort or a bonding site for men led to self-absorption and sexism, a further sinking into separateness. By the 1960s, the "masculine mystique"—an unattainable blend of responsible breadwinner, valiant hero, and "stoic master of his fate"—was "finally exposed as a fraud" (Kimmel 173). The ceaseless pursuit of a solid masculine identity had led to a gradual erosion, turning unstable ground into an overwhelming landslide.

Men disillusioned by the crumbling masculine mystique, seeking to redefine themselves and their world due to a sense of life's meaninglessness, found refuge in science fiction (Vonnegut 128). For Billy, "science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read" (128). The disappointment lay not in any flaw within science fiction itself but rather in Billy's lack of critical reading. Kilgore Trout, "Billy's favorite living author" (128), crafted tales that aided Billy in envisioning his ideal world. The fantasy of Tralfamadore emerged from the blend of highly symbolic and satirical elements from two specific Trout stories.

The first, *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension*, delves into the plight of individuals afflicted with mental disorders rooted in the fourth dimension, invisible and incomprehensible to three-dimensional doctors (132). This narrative offers solace to traumatized soldiers with unaddressed mental health issues. It also echoes the Tralfamadorian philosophy, identifying seven sexes on Earth, "each essential to reproduction" (145) yet

“sexually active only in the fourth dimension” (146). In another Trout novel, *The Big Board*, an Earthling couple is exhibited in an alien zoo on Zircon-212, coerced into managing stocks to secure supposed wealth upon their return to Earth (257). The extraterrestrials manipulate the market to study the humans’ reactions, paralleling Billy’s retreat to Tralfamadore. This comparison critiques the illusion of safety in the nuclear family in connection to the capitalist exploitation of human emotions. Overall, Trout’s writings highlight the absurdity of our commonly accepted beliefs and behaviors.

Rather than using Trout’s satirical works for critical examination of life’s unpleasant systems, Billy absorbs Kilgore Trout’s science fiction, treating it as reality, and seeks refuge in a fabricated world. In other words, “the Tralfamadורים train Billy in a cruel philosophy of denial” (247). This entire progression, both comical and sorrowful, epitomizes a key aspect of the novel’s style: black humor. Termed in his *Playboy* interview as “people laughing in the middle of political helplessness” (Vonnegut, “*Playboy* Interview”), black humor serves as Vonnegut’s primary mode of presenting and processing tragedy:

It goes against the American storytelling grain to have someone in a situation he can’t get out of, but I think this is very usual in life. (...) There is that implication that if you just have a little more energy, a little more fight, the problem can always be solved. This is so untrue that it makes me want to cry—or laugh. Culturally, American men aren’t supposed to cry. So I don’t cry much—but I do laugh a lot. (Vonnegut, “*Playboy* Interview”)

Is it wrong to favor laughter over tears? The text suggests both emotions hold significance. Vonnegut does not advocate for men solving problems solely through masculinity; he argues that a lack of emotional depth or critical imagination renders people more susceptible to control. He critiques the suppression of creativity while asserting that these issues do not demand mere “energy” or “fight.” Because societal conditioning discourages men from

crying, perceiving tears as a sign of weakness, Vonnegut presents gruesome truths in a manner digestible even for men who repress their emotional vulnerabilities.

However, men are not alone in their solemn chuckling. As one study of “funny feminism” in post-war women’s fiction shows, women writers of the 1950s also relied on humor to subvert social expectations and “provide a text” for middle-class concerns (Walker 113). While the overt message in these works may appear to embody an “acceptance” of their assigned role, beneath the humor lies a secondary message expressing substantial discontent with the status quo—a rejection of rigid role definitions foreshadowing the issues central to the women’s movement (113). Just as women’s humor dissembles its discontent through a passive attitude, Vonnegut’s depiction of women and men as “listless playthings” (Vonnegut 208) camouflages a deep disapproval of ambivalent, half-hearted engagement with life.

While the novel seemingly contends that war and trauma are inescapable, it stresses a gender order that exaggerates differences and fosters division. The characters, calloused by wartime trauma and societal gender norms, mirror historical patterns that influenced generations, propelling feminist critics to the forefront of sociological debate. After all, the unraveling of masculinity’s legitimacy became apparent with “Western” feminism’s challenge to male privilege, sparking intricate negotiations with “third world” feminism about colonialism and racism’s legacy (Connell 202).

2.1. Listless Playthings of Patriarchy

Montana Wildhack meets Billy Pilgrim while under heavy sedation. She is brought to the zoo, where a vast crowd of Tralfamadorians excitedly wait to “see the Earthlings mate” (Vonnegut 168). Naked under a dome, Billy and Montana are reduced to their reproductive

roles. Their bodies are paired together because of their sex function, and their enclosure is simulated to resemble a 1950s home. In this way, they are treated like actors in a play, animals in a cage, or machines, programmed to cohabit and make babies.

The creatures on Tralfamadore⁷ expect to be entertained by basic human behaviors, which gives Billy a sense of accomplishment since he is celebrated for his most basic bodily functions. For example, the Tralfamadorians erupt into cheers whenever he urinates, resembling the response that a mother would give her child during potty training. In this way, “Billy’s episodic hallucinations reveal his longing for an infantile pre-knowledge utopia where he is loved and cared for” (Raj and Kumar 242). In this innocent state, Billy can escape the atrocities of war and the horrors of traumatic memory.

While on Earth, Billy faces predominantly negative attention, prompting him to create a world where he feels cherished and “no longer alone” (Brown 105). By turning away from his bleak and solitary existence on Earth, he seeks refuge on a different planet, where the Tralfamadorians cannot perceive his physical imperfections. This newfound perspective leads Billy to appreciate his body for the first time (Vonnegut 144). Although Billy experiences overwhelming sorrow on Earth, on Tralfamadore he embodies the noble and authoritative figure capable of comforting and respecting the distressed damsel, Montana, until she feels prepared for a sexual encounter. Through his imagination, Montana becomes a source of love and acceptance unlike anything he has ever experienced on Earth (Brown 106). She is not just an object of desire, but a way to assuage Billy’s tragic isolation. He can

⁷ The Tralfamadorians are an extraterrestrial species from the planet Tralfamadore. They communicate telepathically or through an electric machine mimicking speech sound (Vonnegut 97) and stand two feet high, shaped like toilet plungers with suction cups touching the ground under a flexible shaft attached to a “little hand with a green eye in its palm” (33). These creatures perceive everything in 4D, meaning all things, from a star to a human being, appear simultaneously in every life stage.

temporarily evade the harsh realities of a frightening world by envisioning himself alongside a captivating, intricate, yet conflicted woman who readily submits to her traditional sex-role.

Montana and Billy are exposed to observation and opinions about their bodies—an allusion to the rise in discourse on human sexuality from the advent of psychoanalysis to the popularization of pornography, as well as the invasion of gender expectations into people's private lives and relationships. Though Billy's personality prevents him from being a masculine hero, he appears fit for the reproductive arena in terms of his "tremendous wang" (Vonnegut 169). Likewise, Montana's features are feminized, with focus placed upon the flutter of her eyelids and her lashes "like buggy whips" (169)—a reference to the whips used in horse buggy races. The binary power at play between Billy's masculinity and Montana's femininity is best revealed through these bodily descriptions. Sexual conquest is often treated as a masculine sport, but Montana is the one who wields the whips. The narrator's sarcastic remark on the "tremendous" size of Billy's penis is a nod to men's obsession with the phallus and their fear of castration. Given Billy's failure to prove his dominance in the context of war, the fact that he has a large sex organ is a joke about the incongruence between gender practice and human anatomy.

Furthermore, Billy's body presents a false picture of masculine power that does not correspond to his identity, while Montana's eyelashes contradict the vulnerability of her feminine physique. That her body reminds Billy of the "baroque detailing of (...) fantastic architecture in Dresden, before it was bombed" (170) is more than a cliché comparison of the female figure to man-made structures. Montana's naked vulnerability also reflects the violence done to innocent civilians because of hegemonic masculinity, and the interconnected nature of sublime beauty and sublime terror in the face of tragedy. Billy sees Dresden in the body of this adult films' actress, whose image had been used "for lonesome

men to jerk off to” (Vonnegut 262). This is another one of many connections drawn to criticize the perverse sexualization of women and violence.

To achieve liberation from his mental prison, Billy must be able to apprehend oppression and construct a consciousness of possibility imaginatively. Instead, he imagines Montana, “who supplements the Tralfamadorians’ theories as a defense against Billy’s feelings of impotence and his fear of death” (Edelstein 135). Rather than moving beyond the idea of body and biology and everything set in stones of amber, Billy resorts to an escapist, regressive fantasy that both centers and masks his lack. Unfortunately for him, phallic masculinity is arbitrary, unstable, and illusory. By referring to “anatomical signifiers” (Fernbach 236), such as the size of his penis, Billy attempts to establish a sense of potency, to assuage castration anxiety through his successful relationship with a desirable, docile woman. Though his decision is disappointing, Billy’s performance of masculinity under the dome “resists and destabilizes a dominant patriarchal and heterosexist positioning that would claim masculinity as self-evident and natural” (238). Hence, his “wang,” in contrast with Montana’s “whips,” grant their seemingly traditional dynamic a radical edge. Yet, despite his subversive potential, Billy remains complicit in recovering hegemonic power structures; his erotic fantasies are still an attempt to approximate traditional phallic masculinity.

The first thing Billy is told to do on Tralfamadore is undress. Once naked, he is subject to examination: “The Tralfamadorians were interested in his body—all of it” (Vonnegut 142). Billy’s first encounter with the spacecraft adopts a sexual tone, which recalls the phenomenon of alien abduction and testimonies by abductees about the exploration of their bodies⁸. The aliens “enclose” Billy in a “cylinder of pulsing purple light,” while the

⁸ The end of the 20th century saw an outpouring of narratives “seething with anxieties about the body, reproduction, and even more specifically, miscegenation” (Barbeito 202).

opening of the “airtight hatch at the bottom” offers Billy a “seeming kiss” or welcome (96). The futuristic technologies of Tralfamadore are frightening but distinctly feminine, making Billy’s reactionary fantasy look like an anxious reckoning with “the loss of masculine power and privilege in a postmodern world” (Fernbach 242). Billy does all this to lessen his discomfort amidst rapid historical changes—like the Civil Rights movement and violent wars abroad, such as Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Montana Wildhack is sheltered from the “life of the mind and spirit” (Friedan 23) she once knew. She is first described as a “motion picture star” (Vonnegut 168), though the explicit details of her background are kept secret until late in the novel. It is not essential to think, at first, that her sexuality is configured in a way that would not be accepted within the feminine mystique. As an actress, she represents the “one ‘career woman’ who was always welcome in the pages of the women’s magazines” (Friedan 36). But as Friedan points out, the actress’s image “underwent a remarkable change: from a complex individual of fiery temper, inner depth, and a mysterious blend of spirit and sexuality, to a sexual object, a baby-face bride, or a housewife” (36); from Greta Garbo to Marilyn Monroe. In a similar way, Billy seems to be turning the actress into his domestic goddess or housewife fetish.

Though Montana challenges Billy in some ways, especially when she screams upon arrival, her horror is ignored until she conforms and submits to her cage. Providing a shocking parallel to Americans at the time, the pair’s ambivalence makes them an unsuitable team for liberation. The differences between men and women had been blurred significantly by the end of the Second World War. Still, because this created such intense feelings of anxiety for those resistant to change, the masses were deluded into believing that the intimacy they sought could be found in the home. Thus, Billy and Montana stay trapped on Tralfamadore, reenacting the illusion of intimacy:

“Tell me a story,” Montana Wildhack said to Billy Pilgrim in the Tralfamadorian zoo one time. They were in bed side by side. They had privacy. The canopy covered the dome. Montana was six months pregnant now, big and rosy, lazily demanding small favors from Billy occasionally. She couldn’t send Billy out for ice cream or strawberries, since the atmosphere outside the dome was cyanide, and the nearest strawberries and ice cream were millions of light years away (...) She could send him to the refrigerator, which was decorated with the blank couple on the bicycle built for two—or, as now, she could wheedle, “Tell me a story, Billy boy.” (Vonnegut 228)

Through his relationship with Montana, Billy seeks to end the isolation he suffers in the real world with his real family (Brown 106). Unlike Billy and Valencia’s stressful honeymoon scene, when she demands a story, Billy and Montana lay side by side, conversing openly and comfortably. Montana’s personality is sedated rather than agitated, and her requests require little effort. She is delightfully “big” and “rosy”—blossoming like a flower and glowing in her late stage of pregnancy. The mood between them is peaceful and private. Montana asks for a story by simply suggesting, with the casual implication that he will oblige because he has shared stories before. Billy springs into a retelling of his memories of Dresden—the locus of his trauma—without traveling through time. Notably, Montana does not manipulate this vulnerability from him or ask for a war story specifically; instead, she offers Billy an opportunity to speak for himself, a practice he chooses willingly. The nickname “Billy boy” shows a level of endearment that dissolves their age difference, making Montana seem more mature which reflects Billy’s longing to be loved by a nurturing motherly figure.

The image of the “blank couple on the bicycle built for two” (Vonnegut 228) displayed on the refrigerator door is a nostalgic nod to the Gay Nineties era, that of the 1890s. This period marked the emergence of the iconic New Woman and Gibson Girl, emblems of intelligent and beautiful American and European women at the turn of the 20th century. However, contrary to the traditional view of the bicycle as a catalyst for women’s rights, a study of Victorian literature from that time reveals that the bicycle was an elitist tool for

promoting norms rather than breaking barriers (Rush 9). As Rush highlights, the shift in clothing styles during the 1890s toward simpler silhouettes and reduced ornamentation links to women's increased engagement outside the home, participation in clubs and associations, and the emergence of the "servantless housewife" (3). In other words, despite popular belief, the bicycle did not liberate women from their confining dresses. Instead, women's entry into the public sphere facilitated their progress and eventual adoption of pants.

Considering the historical context, it is ironic that an image of a couple on a tandem bike is present in the Tralfamadorian zoo. While the couple on the bike collaborates to propel it forward, they are confined to a kitchen, symbolizing a relationship constrained by domestic boundaries. This contrast hints at historical regression from the active and optimistic changes in gender relations spurred by First Wave Feminism to the passivity that couples succumbed to post-Second World War. Billy's inability to think critically about this image reflects his empty imagination. It is not the couple who are blank, but Billy.

In a heart-shaped locket between her breasts, Montana carries a sooty image of her "alcoholic mother" with an engraving of these words: "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" (Vonnegut 267). The Serenity Prayer made famous through the Alcoholics Anonymous movement—"circulated by the United States armed forces during World War II" (Berlina 29)—is a powerful message of surrender to God's guidance. It first appears on the wall of Billy's office in the shape of a skull. As Berlina suggests, the prayer is made strange by the narrator's comment that, "Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (Vonnegut 77). In other words, the prayer presents "a strange breed of fatalism and optimism" (Berlina 29), calling Billy to accept all things, even human cruelty and suffering. Both skull and heart, the prayer points out that serenity

can be found both in love and death; “Eros and Thanatos” (29). Given that free will does not exist in this universe, Montana and Billy surrender to the idea that they are powerless to influence any injustices they have or will experience.

2.2. Regressive Fantasies and Prelapsarian Escape

Gender relations in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are tumultuous and tinged by tragedy. Women and men struggle to reconcile their inner worlds with post-war America’s gender order. One major response continues to be escapism through erotic fantasy and deflection through misogyny, a reflection of the sexism that brought about Second Wave Feminism. Vonnegut leans on innuendos and erotic encounters to satirize the association between sex and war.

In this subsection, I discuss the representation of war as a sexual hangup, misogyny as a site for male bonding (especially through pornography), and the issue with self-absorption or blissful ignorance in regard to male liberation. I also explore the idea of the Tralfamadorian spaceship as a fantasy of fusion with the *matrix* (or mother) and Billy’s regressive prelapsarian fascination with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Finally, I consider what Billy’s admiration of the “heavenly androgyne” (Vonnegut 68) can mean in terms of an unconscious interest in re-gendering strategies.

There is a scene toward the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which Montana is breastfeeding her and Billy’s baby. When Billy mentions casually “that he had seen part of a blue movie she had made” (265), Montana simply retorts: “Yes— (...) and I’ve heard about you in the war, about what a clown you were. And I’ve heard about the high-school teacher who was shot. He made a blue movie with a firing squad” (265). In this way, she equates her uncomfortable past with Billy’s, acknowledging the violence in sex and the sex in violence.

The fact that she reminds Billy that he was a clown counteracts his attempt to use her as a mask for his sense of inferiority. Most importantly, she implies that Edgar Derby⁹ was dominated by the firing squad and that his execution parallels her sexually scarred past.

This idea calls back the explicit connection drawn between sex and war in chapter three, when the narrator critiques “combat’s fans” who feel a “sort of post-coital satisfaction” from the term “mopping up” (Vonnegut 66). This military operation describes the “listless loveplay that follows the orgasm of victory” (66). The colloquialism exposes the perverted mind of the “war enthusiasts” who render “success in battle in terms of sexual intercourse” (Kunze 49). By relating the two activities in this way Vonnegut manages to “uncover the gendered understanding of war that aligns military and sexual conquests” (49). This “understanding” is that hypermasculinity is about domination in every sense; that military prowess is a symbol of a nation’s manliness. Thus, the jingoist male prefers to describe the terrible and tragic act of taking prisoners, recovering dead bodies, and accounting for bloodshed as the after-sex act of “mopping up.”

Ironically, what is engendered through the “orgasm of victory” is not life or freedom but destruction and death. As scholars have found, Vonnegut expresses at various points throughout his works a strong sentiment of “American involvement in recent wars as a form of sexual hangup” (Hume 182). Historically, the military has been used to defend national virility on a global scale; it is the most prominent mechanism for the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, and its deployment of violence and development of technologically

⁹ Edgar Derby is the eldest of the American prisoners of war. A high school teacher who had “pulled political wires to get into the army at his age” (Vonnegut 106), Derby had expected to become a company commander due to his wisdom and physical strength (117). In Dresden, he is executed for petty theft, dying not as a hero but at the cruel periphery of an arena he had righteously romanticized. By calling him “poor, doomed old Edgar Derby” (117) Vonnegut mocks the naïve ideal of war as a theatre for masculine nobility and strength.

advanced weaponry makes it particularly effective. Thus, domination is translated directly as an exchange between superior and inferior, masculine and effeminate.

Sexual prowess is something that even the soldiers on the battlefield seem obsessed with. The most bizarre example is the recurring “dirty picture of a woman attempting sexual intercourse with a Shetland pony” (Vonnegut 51). It appears for the first time when the ridiculous, overcompensating Ronald Weary shares his prized image and makes Billy “admire that picture several times” (51). Weary’s obsession with torture devices and the dirty photograph is meant to bolster his masculine identity before Billy’s eyes. Weary is determined to impress or intimidate Billy, who is indifferent even to the threat of violence.

Could it be that men express lust as a way to relate to other men? Maybe Billy is immune to these appeals because he is so alienated from others already. Even so, these sorts of pictures make teamwork of the objectification of women, as though sex were another masculine sport, another arena in which to prove one’s manhood. This is often intellectualized, as we see in the case of the pony’s photographer, André Le Fèvre, who, in 1841, posed and captured “the first dirty photograph in history” (Vonnegut 51). After he was arrested for attempting to sell the image, Le Fèvre testified in court that “the picture was fine art,” intended to “make Greek mythology come alive (...) with the woman a mortal and the pony a god” (52). This rationalization is indicative of the hilarious hoops that a misogynist may jump through to justify their cruelty. The image highlights the degradation done to both models and the desire to equate women with animals. Vonnegut does not let Le Fèvre get away with this, though, for the artist dies of pneumonia in prison. On one level, this provides a critique of male artists who justify their sexism despite having exploitative intentions. On another, it ridicules the men who wish to identify with the miniature pony simply because it is in a position to have sex with a woman.

When the German corporal leading the mop-up finds Ronald Weary's dirty picture, he feels instant intrigue: "What a lucky pony, eh? (...) Don't you wish you were that pony?" (69). He hands the picture to another old man and says, "Spoils of war! It's yours, all yours, you lucky lad" (70). This bestial image is treated as a trophy by "droolers as toothless as carp (...) clothed fragmentarily with junk taken from real soldiers who were newly dead" (67). Moreover, it is as though the "ramshackle" (67) old men are hoping to claim themselves as authentic soldiers through props. In a later scene, a woman laments, "All the real soldiers are dead" (203), as if losing one's life in combat were the faithful soldier's requirement, the only way to memorialize oneself as a righteous military member; to kill or be killed, not to live and let live. It is crucial to recognize that these emaciated men gather "spoils" to flaunt them, attempting to create some semblance of armor, endeavoring to make the dire situation momentarily amusing. In reality, they are playacting.

The image appears again and for the last time when a clerk directs Billy to the back of an erotic bookshop. At this point in the novel, Billy is on a mission to discuss Tralfamadore on the radio, to share his gospel with the world. The clerk is eager to show Billy the photograph of a woman with a Shetland pony, but Billy could not care less. He is completely self-absorbed, but this ambivalence translates to complicity in the cruelty that surrounds him. Like the jaded people paying for peep shows, Billy remains seduced by science fiction, admiring four Kilgore Trout paperbacks that sat "speckled with soot and fly shit" (256) by the window. He ignores the "hundreds of books about fucking and buggery and murder," as well as the news bulletin "about power and sports and anger and death" (256), figures of hegemonic masculinity in action, reflected in the glass. Billy turns his back on the facts and refuses to read them even though the signs surround him.

To understand why Billy reacts neither to pornography nor atrocity, we should consider that the popularity of the former was a direct result of the latter. When the Second World War ended, men began averting the cultural pressures to be indestructible, breadwinning, family providers. The rise in the 1950s of *Playboy* magazine, launched by Hugh Hefner in 1953, offered a remedy: a refreshing example of the bachelor that soothed men's desires to escape traditional masculinity. As "Hugh Hefner announced in the magazine's inaugural issue (...) *Playboy* offered men 'a little diversion from the anxieties of the Atomic Age'" (Kimmel 167). In Connell's words: "The readership of this magazine was positioned as a corporate sexual hero, consuming an endless supply of desirable 'girls'" (Connell 215).

Considering that the rise of *Playboy* and the pornography industry was happening in the background of Vonnegut writing his anti-war book, it does not seem coincidental that he alludes to it in this blatantly bleak way. While Billy imagines Montana to be "taking care of the baby" on Tralfamadore, a magazine called *Midnight Pussycats* promises that she is "wearing a cement overcoat under thirty fathoms of saltwater in San Pedro Bay" (Vonnegut 262). It goes to show that if Montana is not selling sex, then their culture says she might as well be dead, and, for added entertainment, that her death should be sensational. In this way, the author presents the dichotomy between a "thin, contemptuous misogyny, in which women are treated basically as disposable receptacles for semen" and "a much more respectful, even admiring view of women's strength" (Connell 108). Admittedly, preferring to picture Montana as a mother trapped on Tralfamadore is neither "respectful" nor "admiring," though it tries to be. Billy's refusal to "look closely" at films of Montana as a teen reflects the same avoidance of exploitation of the female fetish that he benefits from on Tralfamadore. Hence, even in his imagination, she is unclothed and sexually submissive. Her purpose on that planet

is to be his mate; her function as an emotional companion is secondary. The irony remains: Billy uses Montana to bolster his masculinity in one way or another.

The exploitative representation of women in men's media partly explains why Women's Liberation raised issues about masculinity and the male role at the end of the 1960s. As Second Wave Feminism began to take off in the 1970s, men's movements reinterpreted men's issues as resolvable through counseling and workshops concerned with "masculinity therapy" (Connell 206). This deflection led to self-absorption and the "translation of social issues about men into questions of pure psychology" (Connell 211). Consequently, the Men's Liberation movement and the politics around masculinity sidestepped responsibility for the subjugation of women. They exhibited reactionary and resentful attitudes rooted in a desire to restrict the revolutionary changes in gender relations that were imminent in the early 1970s. Vonnegut foreshadows this form of apprehensive evasion through Billy's imaginative leaps. As Brown points out, Billy cannot picture himself as happy within a human community (Brown 105). Before Billy imagines being abducted by aliens, for example, he dreams of a life where he feels accepted in the wild:

Under morphine, Billy had a dream of giraffes in a garden. The giraffes were following gravel paths, were pausing to munch sugar pears from tree-tops. Billy was a giraffe, too (...) The giraffes accepted Billy as one of their own, as a harmless creature as preposterously specialized as themselves. Two approached him from opposite sides, leaned against him. They had long, muscular upper lips which they could shape like the bells of bugles. They kissed him with these. They were female giraffes—cream and lemon yellow (...) Why? (Vonnegut 126)

This dream is the first sign of Billy's desire to be soothed within an idyllic garden space. He seeks to be a "harmless creature" so "preposterously specialized" that life is made simple, driven purely by primal instinct. Billy's fantasy also includes a steamy romance with two female giraffes, clarifying that he would like to feel admired simply for existing as a merely male mammal, as he will be on Tralfamadore. These creatures' kisses serve to alleviate

Billy's broken sense of manhood like Montana's affection for him does. No matter what he imagines, though, he craves the attention of somebody feminine. Billy's storied example of the ideal husband and wife is Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which is profoundly problematic for various reasons.

Adam and Eve first appear after Billy and Weary are captured. The primordial couple are a golden reflection in the "patina of the corporal's boots" (67). The narrator notes: "They were naked. They were so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently. Billy Pilgrim loved them" (Vonnegut 68). Their connection to Billy and Montana on Tralfamadore is evident, as both couples are naked, innocent, vulnerable, and eager to behave; after all, they do not protest against their captors or refuse to mate. Set against the backdrop of war, Adam and Eve remind Billy of the paradise that could have been possible. This is significant when we consider that the symbolic reason for humanity's fall from grace was triggered by a legendary battle in which God's angels led by Lucifer attempt to usurp his power.

After inventing rebellion, Lucifer transformed into Satan tempts Eve, who tempts Adam, and thus peace on Earth is overcome by sin. Somehow, this origin story can be used to rationalize why it is futile to be upset about atrocities because, according to the Bible, original sin is our inheritance; humanity is cursed with hell on Earth. Adam and Eve were the first human beings to accept this false reality. Unfortunately, they are also Billy's relationship goals. As Edelstein states in his analysis of this prelapsarian dynamic, Eden myths "frequently mask and attempt to dignify escapist, regressive fantasies" (Edelstein 135). A set belief in the rigid nature of binary genders limits Billy's imagination.

Adam and Eve appear for the second time right before Billy's abduction when, presumably drunk on the night of his daughter's wedding, he watches a war movie backward. This scene may be Vonnegut's most touching critique of the evils of war and the American

delusion of righteous participation in World War Two. He deconstructs the war by describing it in reverse (Vonnegut 94). Bombs are returned to factories where American women separate their “dangerous contents (...) into minerals” (94). These minerals are cleverly hidden and returned to “the ground (...) so they would never hurt anybody ever again” (94). But the action does not end there, not for Billy. He extrapolates, supposing that the American flyers shed their uniforms and return to the youth that was robbed from them. Hitler becomes “a baby, and all of humanity, without exception,” conspires “to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve” (95).

Edelstein notes that the return of bullets and bombs “into the bellies of planes (...) indicates the function of the Eden imagery and its relation to the womb imagery” (136). Essentially, Eden and womb resemble identical “places of retreat beyond which Billy cannot regress” (Edelstein 136). Billy’s abduction by the technologically advanced spaceship is a fitting metaphor for his wish to return to the *matrix*, a word which originates from *mater*, the Latin word for “mother” and “womb” (Fernbach 244). Similar to what Fernbach observes in their analysis of the fetishization of masculinity in science fiction, Billy’s integration or “fusion” with the Tralfamadorian way of seeing the universe “tends toward an obliteration of subjectivity” (Fernbach 248).

On one level, it seems Billy relinquishes independent thought, accepting the Tralfamadorians’ assertion that his abduction was arbitrary: “this moment simply is” (Vonnegut 97). In a different way, this space simultaneously acknowledges and dismisses anxieties typical of contemporary masculinity as it envisions the future (Fernbach 248). It does this by emphasizing Billy’s powerlessness while positioning him as a time-traveling messiah, able to “comfort so many people with the truth about time” (Vonnegut 35).

Like Fernbach's so-called cyberpunk Console Cowboy, Billy's "white male heterosexual body, surrounded by imploding differences and full of self-loathing, is nevertheless still privileged and still very much at the center of the action." (Fernbach 248). By dreaming of both Eden and *matrix*, Billy obscures a reluctance to relinquish a masculinity striving for universality amid fragmentation and the emergence of new identities (251). This reluctance might not only belong to Billy but also to Vonnegut, showcasing the writer's tentative explorations of new identity types. Tralfamadore critiques established narratives that no longer serve as viable means of liberation. Though Billy represents one response to the rapid cultural change, this is not a response that Vonnegut would endorse.

Contrarily, Edelstein perceives Vonnegut's resolution as resigned and pessimistic, suggesting an escape into a pre-sexual, pre-fall past as a means to "deny the responsibilities of adulthood" (Edelstein 139). This misses the point. As Trout does in his science fiction novels, Vonnegut places Billy and Montana on Tralfamadore as an experiment, not a solution. He recreates the same "togetherness trap" that most American middle-class couples were stuck trying to make work, failing to find fulfillment in this philosophy of the family. By the time Vonnegut published *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the nation had been observing this flop for decades, lacking the imagination to break out of the cycle. As Friedan states, "Togetherness was a poor substitute for equality; the glorification of women's role was a poor substitute for free participation in the world as an individual" (Friedan 202). But how to make men question this?

The riddle resides in Vonnegut's wish to destabilize the myth of heroic masculinity and point out the evil of massacre machinery manned by hegemonic masculinity. He unfortunately fails to decenter the lonely, traumatized, middle-class white man or to present a world where hope is practiced and widespread. Nonetheless, Vonnegut admits this failure;

and in that sense, his cards are on the table. The author, like his protagonist, was affected by the pre-, mid-, and post-war periods. His position as a postmodern artist obligates him to confront “the abyss concealed by traditional masculinity” (Fernbach 252)—an abyss exposed by the unbound coherence of the male ego. R.W. Connell calls this *gender vertigo*.

Therefore, Billy’s fantasy of returning to the innocent nakedness of a prelapsarian couple allows him to evade the responsibility of envisioning radically new possibilities. This is frustrating, especially considering Billy’s unconscious proximity to radical redefinitions. For instance, he momentarily challenges gender norms when encountering “the face of a blond angel, of a fifteen-year-old boy. The boy was as beautiful as Eve. Billy was helped to his feet by the lovely boy, by the heavenly androgyne” (Vonnegut 68). Some may interpret this moment as Billy appreciating a kind gesture during a time of distress since it deviates drastically from the aggression he is otherwise accustomed to. On another level, it suggests how male writers of the 1970s anticipated a world where conventional masculinity would be replaced by some form of androgyny (Connell 228).

In many communities, especially “younger professional and intellectual networks in Western cities, domestic equality and shared household labor is now common sense” (Connell 227), signaling a shift in cultural consciousness. As people feel increasingly liberated to choose their lifestyles without adhering strictly to gender conventions, boundaries continue to blur. Hence, the “heavenly androgyne” in Billy’s encounter might symbolize his latent hope for the gradual erosion of patriarchal legitimacy. This depiction of the young boy extending a helping hand to the battered soldier represents a future where demands for equality challenge the celebration of hegemonic practices such as exclusion and exploitation. It is no longer a matter of keeping the peace but creating it colorfully.

2.3. The Seventh Sex and Dresden's Dispute

By this point, it is apparent that Billy is obsessed with speculative fiction that makes highly critical observations about humanity. Even so, he is unable to grasp these critiques and translate his readings into action; instead, he falls into the trap of passivity, centering his life in a self-absorbed delusion about his highest calling: “prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (Vonnegut 26). This vision, of course, does not offer anyone the chance to improve their situation, but encourages them to submit to it because the moment is determinably structured and can never be changed. Billy cannot move beyond what he perceives politically, emotionally, or otherwise—generally, he is not moved by anything—remaining dislodged from time and space altogether. Without firm footing in reality, without the motivation to live or the ability to love, Billy cannot liberate his family from the pressures of gender that alienate them from themselves and each other. What is the solution to this separateness, then? How can listless playthings take back their autonomy? Before considering these questions and how the novel grapples with them, I want to propose some final points about Vonnegut's anti-war argument and its opposition to hegemonic masculinity.

As the author notes:

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. (Vonnegut 208)

These sentences capture the essence of Vonnegut's critique of conformity. Authentic “characters,” in this case, are those intelligent and resilient people who resist the pressure to fall in line. Billy cannot be called a character, even if he is the central figure, because he dismisses injustice, learning nothing and improving nothing. The novel demonstrates how Billy was discouraged from being a character throughout his life. He preferred to sink than

to swim, preferred to stand in the line of fire than to run or shoot back, and preferred to regress into a prelapsarian cage than to engage in any meaningful protest. But it is not enough to say that war emasculated Billy. Rather, the entire project of becoming an exemplary man was impossible from the get-go. The pressures that pushed him to seek this identity—to match the march of the military system—ultimately deprived him of any fundamental dignity, freedom, fulfillment, or personality.

Who could Billy have become if his parents and his culture had not been so obsessed with succumbing to the gendered mystique and projecting that need onto everyone else, policing the way women and men behave? Indeed, he could have had the energy to persevere and heal from the horrors he witnessed, to put effort into being a positive change within his community, to enjoy a happy marriage with real intimacy, to attend to his family's emotional needs. There could have been no need for Tralfamadore. His daughter's wedding could have been a night of joyous celebration instead of a cause for escape. He could have been proud of Barbara becoming her own woman, confident that her marriage was a happy choice and not just a convenient continuation of the same cycle of business arranged by wealthy patriarchs. Her wedding night might not have been the tipping point for Billy's disillusionment because he could have broken that cycle and set himself and his family free.

Where would Vonnegut start if he could guarantee an end to this type of tragedy? In the final chapter, he recalls his father as “a sweet man” but a “gun nut” (268). Vonnegut mourns the “count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam” (268) with a statement that symbolizes the importance of closing generation cycles of hypermasculinity in whatever ways they manifest: “He left me his guns. They rust” (268). Firearms are the symbolic crux of masculinity and violence: a nation uses an army to protect its populace just as a father uses guns to defend his property; both hold power over those they control, and both suspect their

enemy's death to be proof of superiority. As Connell points out, "It is a cliché that the gun is a penis-symbol as well as a weapon (...) At both symbolic and practical levels, the defense of gun ownership is a defense of hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 212). Though Billy had not been armed since basic training, his companions "insisted that he arm himself, since God only knew what sorts of killers might be in burrows (...) escaped maniacs and murders, soldiers who would never quit killing until they themselves were killed" (Vonnegut 249-250).

Billy had survived everything so far without a gun; almost everyone he encountered was too weak or weary or friendly to fight. The logic of owning weapons because the enemy has them, too, only allows the cycle of violence to continue. Ironically, men's claim to gun ownership highlights their sense of helplessness in a system that threatens their freedom and keeps them on edge. The point Vonnegut makes here is that the perceived need to stay armed is based on a paranoid faith that enemies are lurking nearby at all times. Furthermore, studies suggest that the soldier who would never quit killing was a myth. Soldiers were more likely to be shot by artillery than by a bullet (Connell 214). What good is a rifle against a tank?:

A remarkable piece of research by Tony Ashworth has shown that for much of the war, on many parts of the Western Front, the troops operated a 'live and let live' system, limiting the actual violence. Tacit agreements with enemy troops, and grass-roots social controls, resulted in truces or ritualized aggression that was easily avoided—to the fury of the high command. Paul Fussell's research on American frontline soldiers confirms the gap between media imagery and the daily reality of boredom and petty tyranny (nicely called 'chickenshit' by the troops). For the minority in actual combat the daily reality was extreme fear, chancy outcomes and disgusting deaths—being dismembered by artillery was the commonest way to die. The techniques of industrialized war have almost nothing to do with the conventions of individual heroism. (Connell 214)

Fear is a powerful feeling, helpful in manipulating people into believing they should remain on the defensive and not trust anything foreign or strange. As Connell explains, "No arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity" in Western culture than the military (Connell 213). Violence and the production of exemplary masculinities are integral to the maintenance of dominance in the gendered order. As long as the military can

continue to set standards within our culture, defining what's correct and disciplining those who don't fit the mold, people will continue buying into popular beliefs about the positive impact of war; led to believe that the military benefits them, even though its entire purpose is violence "on the largest possible scale" (213). Many people question their ideologies very little, and the least critical of custom are the most resistant to change.

Nevertheless, this fear is natural since to "undo masculinity is to court a loss of personality structure that may be quite terrifying: a kind of gender vertigo" (137). The masculine/feminine opposition defines one place for female bodies and another place for males, naturalizing injustice in gender relations through constant appeals to difference as unavoidably hierarchical, marking not only separation but supremacy (231). To critique dominance is to attack difference, which leads to resistance, "emotional turmoil and guilt feelings" (232). In least favorable circumstances, the project of critique will be rejected outright "as an attempt to turn men into women" (232) and result in violence.

During Vonnegut's era of writing, a more robust alternative to pushback lingered on the horizon. However, it has consistently remained feasible for heterosexual men to resist patriarchal norms and distance themselves from the realms of dominant and compliant masculinity by advocating for social justice, rebuffing racism and imperialism. Heterosexual men have consistently possessed the capacity to acknowledge how their dominance over women distorts their own lives. Regrettably, not all of them embrace this realization. Billy, for instance, fails to collaborate with other men to amend his circumstances. His stunted growth impedes him from forging new connections with children or from rectifying the equilibrium between his professional and personal life, despite the pivotal nature of these choices in cultivating an anti-sexist environment.

According to Connell, by striving for what philosopher Michael Walter terms “complex equality,” we can reach a contemporary understanding of justice founded on diversity as an active practice, engaging in ongoing explorations of human potential (230). Billy, who, as I mention above, is not a character, can at least provide the imaginative source of a radical invention—one that poses the greatest threat to hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic science in the entire novel. Limited in that it still restricts possibilities to a specific number, this “moral bombshell,” which contradicts all of Billy’s preconceived notions of sex and gender, is revealed by the Tralfamadorians: “They said their flying-saucer crews had identified no fewer than *seven* sexes on Earth, each essential to reproduction” (Vonnegut 145). This disruptive proposition denies the presumably fundamental notion of binary sexes. Though the Tralfamadorians are Billy’s invention, he cannot imagine what the other five sexes could be or how they might be involved in the conception of a baby. The Tralfamadorians explain that “they were sexually active only in the fourth dimension (...) It was gibberish to Billy” (146).

Conflicting discourses about biological sex roles and human sexuality were increasingly widespread in the post-war period, mainly thanks to Women’s Liberation, making it a probable theme in Billy’s unconscious and certainly in Vonnegut’s. Many of these discourses may have sounded like gibberish to most people who took them for granted, brushing them off as nonsense because they had never encountered or studied anything like them. Here, the author offers readers the opportunity to expand the limits of their imaginations to consider other possibilities, not only in terms of time and space but of war, sex, and relationships as well.

Just because the Tralfamadorians sum up all meaning in the universe with a single curt statement, “So it goes,” does not mean that the reader is encouraged to bow and accept.

The statement's intention is provocative: frustration is a sign that something is amiss, and outrage is a tool that awakens our consciousness of oppression, calling us to take action against the systems that take advantage of us. We learn this best from a German couple, a middle-aged man and woman from Dresden, who were “lyrically (...) crooning to the horses” (Vonnegut 250) that had led Billy and his fellow American prisoners through the ruins. The “two horse pitiers” (251) had noticed “what the Americans had not (...) that the horses’ mouths were bleeding, gashed by the bits, that the horses’ hooves were broken, so that every step meant agony” (251).

Before their arrival, Billy’s “sundrenched snooze” (249) in the back of a wagon might have been the happiest moment of his life. Mere moments later, two obstetricians are gazing at Billy “in patronizing reproach” (Vonnegut 251). Billy, with his fellow Americans, “had treated their form of transportation as though it were no more sensitive than a six-cylinder Chevrolet” (251). The Dresdeners scold Billy, make him get out of his wagon to see the condition of the horses for himself. What Billy sees makes him “burst into tears. He hadn’t cried about anything else in the war” (252)—not the quiet weeping he would sometimes do in middle age, but “loud boohooing noises” (252), a catharsis of emotional pain:

They weren’t afraid of [Billy]. They weren’t afraid of anything. They were doctors, both obstetricians. They had been delivering babies until the hospitals were all burned down. Now they were picnicking near where their apartment used to be (...) This couple, so involved with babies, had never reproduced themselves, though they could have. This was an interesting comment on the whole idea of reproduction. (Vonnegut 251)

When Vonnegut claims that there are *almost* no characters in this story, he implies that there are *some* characters, after all. This woman and man provide the most progressive example of a couple unified in a project of active resistance, where gender differences are pronounced only in their clothing. Otherwise, they are a pair of equals. Both work the same, highly demanding job. While the woman defies feminine convention by being a doctor, the man

defies masculine convention by delivering babies and working closely with women. They reflect Wendy Chapki's idea of a "colorful revolution," as Connell explains: "The idea is to recompose, rather than delete, the cultural elements of gender" (Connell 234). The balance between these partners strengthens each of them so they can remain sympathetic and even optimistic, sharing a meal near the rubble where their home once stood. Similar to Mary O'Hare's role in holding Vonnegut accountable in the novel's initial chapter, these two individuals, unlike the passive characters found elsewhere, embody Friedan's observation: "Professor Maslow found that the higher the dominance, or strength of self in a woman, the less she was self-centered and the more her concern was directed outward to other people and to problems of the world" (Friedan 258). Their outspoken nature draws attention to injustices that might otherwise escape notice from those who are fatigued, traumatized, or too trusting, compelling them to care.

The hand they play in reproduction, as obstetricians, is invaluable. Though they have no children of their own—another example of their non-conformity to traditional gender roles—they help to deliver countless babies, creating families for others. They are "involved with babies" (Vonnegut 251) in a way that fulfills them without obligating them to model their lives according to a hegemonic standard. With nine languages between them, this couple has enough intelligence and culture to enrich them both for a lifetime; thus, they serve as "an interesting comment on the whole idea of reproduction" (251). Not surprisingly, Vonnegut refrains from deciphering the comment himself; he merely assumes the presence of something compelling to unravel. As Connell claims, "the best prospects for masculinity politics may be found outside pure gender politics, at the intersections of gender with other structures (...) especially where there is explicit solidarity with women in the same situation"

(Connell 237). In the Dresdeners' case, solidarity arises at the intersection of healthcare, animal rights, and social justice.

Vonnegut demonstrates how despair in the face of hegemonic masculinity is not a viable response. Unable to imagine a straightforward solution to the unfathomable terrors of buried trauma and gender vertigo, Vonnegut offers *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a messy meditation instead—a confused but critical look at recent history and a strong example of what not to do. As feminists, we are inspired to revise our culture's taken-for-granted truths about gender relations and the sociocultural aftermath of the Second World War. Billy's emotional collapse can, therefore, be traced back to repeated abuse under a ruthless gender order that coerces men to assemble aggressively masculine identities, and convinces women to reenact submissively feminine fantasies, to the mutual detriment of their mental health.

Conclusion: 'So it Goes' But Why?

History and literature combine in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to offer readers a critical look at the consequences of the gendered mystique after the Second World War. Women's active involvement in the formerly male-dominated public sphere posed a substantial challenge to hegemonic masculinity. This challenge disrupted the social reintegration of men, many of them grappling with mental instability from wartime and other traumas. The debate and mission to define American manhood and womanhood, which had already undergone centuries of contradiction and confusion, received a renewed sense of insecurity and urgency. With many men unable to adapt to these changes, the patriarchy influenced a cultural regression. In this era, a cultural ideal of female fulfillment became a treasured essence within American society (Friedan 8). Though the narrator of this anti-war novel satirically repeats the phrase, "So it goes," the reality remains that this deadening ideal was not spontaneous. As Betty Friedan so bitinglly observed, the feminine mystique was meticulously crafted by media figures, advertisement researchers, and those interpreting Freudian principles within academia (98). This phenomenon mirrored a broader, bleaker aspect of humanity—our inclination to perceive change as a threat and to perpetuate past ideologies, traditions, and societal norms instead of fostering curiosity for the unknown. Furthermore, a peculiar stagnation arose in the American ethos—a collective slumber that brushed aside critical issues, leaving progress at a standstill:

Women went home again just as men shrugged off the bomb, forgot the concentration camps, condoned corruption, and fell into helpless conformity (...) It was easier, safer to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy, and the uncontrolled bomb. It was easier to look for Freudian sexual roots in man's behavior, his ideas, and his wars than to look critically at his society and act constructively to right his wrongs. (Friedan 150)

This conjecture is the unfortunate example that Billy Pilgrim sets throughout the novel. His empty marriage and family relationships, as well as his bizarre erotic fantasies and escapist delusions, are proof of the dead-end results of what afflicted most middle-class Americans after the Second World War. Normalizing a society segregated into distinct spheres heightened feelings of loneliness and emptiness. The irretrievable longing to revert to an idyllic state (Eden) or a primal space (the womb) caused intensified inter-generational trauma.

It has become increasingly apparent that rigid gender stereotypes are socially constructed patterns rooted in the justification of dominance through sex-based differences. Friedan's articulation of the "problem that has no name" (Friedan 5) in 1963 shed light on the inner turmoil experienced by women directed solely toward the roles of wives and mothers, sparking a burgeoning yearning among women for pursuits beyond domestic confines. A pivotal shift in societal paradigms following World War II ignited a rebellion among marginalized groups, instigating a cascade of transformations that challenged established norms regarding their suppression as a prerequisite for white men's secure identity formation (Kimmel 174). Simultaneously, the once revered image of the soldier, emblematic of traditional manhood, underwent a perceptual shift, gradually becoming associated with failure (174). Confronted with these upheavals, numerous American men struggled, resorting to well-worn tactics of exclusion or evasion.

By the mid-1970s, calls for "men's liberation" surfaced, aiming to emancipate men from rigid societal roles; evidently, men, too, needed liberation from the constraints imposed upon them. The relentless pursuit of success in a competitive milieu left men feeling isolated and hollow, fostering a cultural narrative that characterized masculinity through lenses of vacuity and an overarching sense of absurdity. This landscape of isolation finds a parallel in the experiences of Billy as his anomie-induced detachment from others leads him into an

egoistic retreat, prioritizing his needs in a self-centered fantasy world. When placed in conversation with contemporary gender theory, Vonnegut illustrates the disorienting nature of gender vertigo and the limited strategies available to endure shocking cultural shifts.

Through examining contemporary masculinity, Connell highlights the necessity of alliance politics over a singular men's movement. They elucidate that dismantling patriarchy, viewed as a historical structure rather than an unchanging division between genders, necessitates a cumulative effort toward transforming the entire system (Connell 238). Connell asserts that men's investment in patriarchy, embodied in hegemonic masculinity, is institutionalized in the state and fortified by cultural mechanisms glorifying it, perpetuating violence against women and gay men. Moreover, Connell notes how globalization propagates this pattern worldwide (241). Connell envisions a fresh politics of masculinity centered on alliance work, advocating an internationalist approach emphasizing a politics beyond interests, rooted in pure possibility and the pursuit of social justice and balance with nature (243). Additionally, Connell underscores the influence of the global feminist movement in intensifying the cultural push for change (261). Finally, Connell recognizes the challenges posed by neo-conservative politics to widespread gender equality efforts, emphasizing that the politics of masculinity will remain continually contested pivotal questions for the future of human society (266).

Even as oppressive forces continue to rationalize statements such as "So it goes," writers like Vonnegut and feminist thinkers will continue to respond by asking, "Why?" After the Second World War, books and magazines were highly effective tools for influencing the minds of American men and women. In a meta-literary moment toward the novel's end, while hoping to spread his Tralfamadorian message, Billy listens to a conversation among three literary critics about "the function of the novel (...) in modern society" (Vonnegut 264). The

answers these critics give are generally pessimistic. Fortunately, in his interview with *Playboy*, Vonnegut imparts a more hopeful interpretation of the function of the writer in modern society: not as a perpetrator of patriarchy, but as an agent of change:

Writers are specialized cells in the social organism. They are evolutionary cells. Mankind is trying to become something else; it's experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into the society, and also a means of responding symbolically to life. (Vonnegut, "*Playboy* Interview")

Hence, the artist responds to "mankind's wish to improve itself" through symbolic warning. Even if the differences they make appear to be minor, writers like Vonnegut "continue to think that artists (...) should be treasured as alarm systems" (Vonnegut, "*Playboy* Interview"). Importantly, he emphasizes *mankind's* need for improvement. Men pay the price for their participation in patriarchy by becoming its puppets, especially in the interest of war. They are the ones who overlook how unquestioningly adhering to the model of hegemonic masculinity impedes their overall welfare. Most women and people of color do not need an alarm to remind us of patriarchy's perils.

In the case of *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969), a novel full of foul masculine fantasies and problematic depictions of gender relations, the alarm is quietly feminist. Gender relations in this story are tumultuous and tinged by tragedy. Women and men struggle to reconcile their inner worlds with post-war America's gender order. One primary response is escapism through erotic fantasy and deflection through misogyny, a reflection of the sexism that brought about Second Wave Feminism. Vonnegut, therefore, relies heavily on sexual innuendos and erotic encounters to satirize the association between sex and war. Whether Vonnegut sensed the arrival of Second Wave Feminism or not, the movement was around the corner, ready to call all "listless playthings" (Vonnegut 208) into creative action.

I want to continue writing about gendered relations and Vonnegut's characters in further research. I was especially intrigued by the contrast between the American and English prisoners when they meet at the concentration camp and what they reveal about Vonnegut's conception of military masculinity. Likewise, I think there is much to critique about the misogyny displayed in the interactions between Kilgore Trout and Maggie White (217-219) and Professor Rumfoord and Lily (235-240). It would be interesting to trace how Vonnegut's representation of sex and gender shifts throughout his career.

Initially, I hypothesized that if *Slaughterhouse-Five* subverts heroic ideals to denounce war, its satirical aspects must also convey an anti-sexist message due to the link between hegemonic masculinity, war, and violence. In other words, there can be no critique of the military without a critique of patriarchy. Despite a bleak conclusion, Vonnegut's narrative hints at radical potentialities within deterministic constraints, challenging regressive gender norms via the tragic Tralfamadorian dream. *Slaughterhouse-Five* evokes a strong sense of danger, redirecting readers like the Dresden obstetricians led Billy toward the horses to recognize that something is wrong with the post-war paradigm.

The pressures to conform to rigid social codes break Billy, the rest of his family, and most people around him. He cannot attach himself emotionally to the world long enough to engage with or take action according to any moral core. The responsibility to combat patriarchy and its consequences, including war, rests on all people with the will to foster inner peace while addressing broader global issues through alliance politics. Vonnegut's use of Billy as a passive, unsatisfactory model prompts reflection on our autonomy and role in shaping humanity's future, demonstrating that complicity is an inhumane response to atrocity.

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