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Teaching Vonnegut in the Context of Twentieth Century American War Literature

Many students coming to the work of Kurt Vonnegut for the first time see him as unlike any other writer they have ever read. While they are often entranced by his playful and humorous style, by his short, easily-read chapters, cartoonish characters, drawings of assholes and tombstones, flying saucers and aliens, and the other surface markers of his style, they are often unsure what to make of him as a writer. They may have heard of Vonnegut as a cult favorite; they may dismiss him as a writer who appealed to their parents' generation; or they may view him as someone who is not really very "literary" and who shouldn't be considered alongside "real" writers whose works they believe are more "serious" in nature. I'd like to talk briefly today about an upper division college-level class I developed and taught called "The War Literature of Hemingway, Vonnegut, and O'Brien." In this class we discussed twentieth century American representations of war by examining the literature of Ernest Hemingway in relation to World War I, Vonnegut in conjunction with World War II, and Tim O'Brien's works on the Vietnam War. We read three books from each writer: *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also*

Rises, and *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway; *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Vonnegut; and *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* by O'Brien. Students wrote five 5-page papers in the course: one on each individual writer, one that summarized a critical article, and one as a take-home final exam that synthesized what they'd learned during the semester. I believe that this course offered a valuable way for students to read Vonnegut, because it allowed them to become familiar with a number of his novels while helping them place Vonnegut's work in the wider context of American war literature that comes both before and after him. The course helped show students that Vonnegut, while still a unique American voice, both works out of a tradition and has influenced later writers.

One of the key topics that we tackled in the course had to do with the communicably or incommunicably of war trauma and the search for a literary form that can adequately convey the horrors of war. Vonnegut famously apologizes to his publisher, Seymour Lawrence, for the form of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the opening chapter of the novel, stating, "It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (19). The struggle to say something intelligent about a massacre is something each of the writers we studied in the course deals with quite directly. From Hemingway's suspicion about the emptiness of words like "sacred," "glorious," "sacrifice," and "in vain," and his

fear of “talking [things] up too much” to Vonnegut’s attempts to avoid writing a war novel that could be turned into a movie containing a part for John Wayne or Frank Sinatra, to O’Brien’s claim that “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth,” all three writers are intensely interested in how war is represented and with finding a form that will allow them to write about war honestly and truthfully, without glamorizing it. Each uses an experimental style in order to write about war in a new way. Because of this, the class focused a great deal on form and style, topics that students often find difficult to approach. Students, in my experience, are much more comfortable discussing content and theme than looking carefully at the actual *techniques* writers use to convey meaning. One of the advantages in reading three different books by each writer was that students got a good sense of each writer’s style across a range of content. While Nazi propagandist Howard W. Campbell, Jr. is a very different person than John, the narrator of *Cat’s Cradle*, or than hapless World War II Chaplain’s Assistant Billy Pilgrim, and while each of these characters has very different experiences, the class could still notice commonalities in style across the works.

By the time we got to the third book by an individual writer, we’d often devote an entire class to the students’ brainstorming what they saw as characteristics of a specific author’s style. I’d then fill up the chalkboard with their observations: Hemingway’s short, simple sentences; his poetic repetition of

specific words; his use of extensive dialogue; the way he sets scenes by describing a few concrete images; his descriptions of nature that reflect his characters' emotional experiences and so on. By the time students had read *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, many of them could identify the salient features of Vonnegut's style: his conversational-sounding sentences that use accessible diction and vocabulary; his irreverent humor; an almost child-like use of understatement and lack of moral judgment in the narrative voice, particularly to describe horrifying events or actions; his inclusion of jokes, drawings, songs, limericks, and frequent taglines ("so it goes"); his love of wildly implausible plots, including counter-espionage; doomsday devices; and kidnappings by extra-terrestrials. Similarly, many students identified O'Brien's prose as more realistic than Vonnegut's—more serious-sounding; more explicitly moral. They noted his tendency toward meta-fiction, to comment on stories as he told them, and to even deceive and frustrate readers by telling a story, then undermining it with a contradictory or competing story of events he'd just described.

Because I believe that form is so important to each of these writers, it was one of the topics I required my students to write about. One of their individual author papers had to analyze a writer's specific stylistic choices. In addition, I gave students an option on the final exam to imitate the style and form of all three writers we read. As an alternative to a more traditionally academic question, I

offered students a creative option in which they could invent a brief scene and write it up three different times, using the style and voice of Hemingway the first time, of Vonnegut the second, and of O'Brien the third. What actually *happened* in the scene—the basic plot—was supposed to remain the same, but I told students they should alter the style, structure, theme, characterization, and minor plot details as they saw fit in order to represent each writer's style as fully as possible. Almost every student in the class took this option. While I'm glad I offered the students this choice, it was not, of course, a perfect assignment. Some of the better students had fun with it and did a great job. But, to my surprise, when I read some of the papers of the weaker students, I had difficulty telling which writer they were imitating in which scene. While one might think this was due to problems with writing fluency—difficulties students had incorporating specific stylistic devices into their own work—I finally didn't think this was the case. Their scenes would often be written clearly and effectively and even in engaging ways. I just couldn't tell which author they were imitating. I had to conclude that the problem was not so much incorporating particular stylistic devices, but recognizing these devices in the first place. Several students, despite all our work during the semester, were still unable to distinguish the tone, style, and “feel” of the writers' voices apart from the content of their stories. Of course, this difficulty might be good reason to give such assignments, so students can practice what they have difficulty with.

Despite mixed results, I still think that having students imitate a writer's style can be a good way to draw attention to and teach the more formal choices made by writers that students frequently have trouble distinguishing and articulating.

Another key topic we discussed in the course, and another way that students could consider how Vonnegut fits into a literary tradition—how his work compares to that of writers who came before and after him—was the ways that these narratives cling to or challenge traditional gender expectations. Interestingly, each writer depicts male characters who try to escape the atrocities of war by imagining and sometimes living out a dream of domestic happiness with a woman. They attempt to create what Howard W. Campbell in Vonnegut's *Mother Night* calls a “universe of two”—the insular world that he attempts to forge with German actress Helga Noth. Jake Barnes longs to be with Lady Brett. Frederick Henry runs away with Catherine Barkley, creating his “separate peace” from the war. John in *Cat's Cradle* escapes into an oubliette with his beloved Mona Aamons Monzano. Billy Pilgrim concocts an elaborate fantasy in which he is held prisoner in a Tralfamadorian Zoo with ex-porn star Montana Wildhack. Similarly, Paul Berlin in *Going After Cacciato* invents a story that enables him to leave the Vietnam War and rent an apartment in Paris with refugee Sarkin Aung Wan. And Jimmy Cross in *The Things They Carried* lies in a foxhole and dreams of Martha back home. Each writer can be read as challenging traditional masculine stereotypes associated

with war and warrior culture as well as traditional feminine stereotypes that completely remove women from the world of war and war literature. This particular focus was especially important to me as a feminist scholar who often teaches courses on gender studies and women writers.

Interrogating gender issues and gender stereotypes seemed particularly appropriate as well since two-thirds of the students at the College of Charleston are women, with the ratio of women to men even higher among English majors. Students who conceived of or dismissed Hemingway as a traditionally macho writer were surprised when we discussed issues of androgyny, role-playing, and gender-bending in his work. Students who faulted Vonnegut for some of his seemingly mindless, stereotypical female characters such as Valencia Merble or Montana Wildhack, were persuaded to consider other characters, such as Mary O'Hare or the German obstetrician who appears at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as sharp contrasts. Students who initially saw Vietnam War literature as only about men were interested in talking about ways that characters such as Sarkin Aung Wan in *Cacciato* or Mary Anne Bell in O'Brien's "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" directly addressed issues of gender and war.

One more key topic we considered in the course was the way that the writers conceive the relationship between history and fiction, particularly how each addresses questions of truth, honesty, and authenticity vs. inventing, pretending, or

even lying in relation to war stories and trauma. In “Soldier’s Home” from the Hemingway collection *In Our Time*, Harold Krebs feels he must tell lies about his wartime experiences, since he returned late from the war and people in his small Oklahoma hometown have already heard stories of German women chained to machine guns in the Argonne forest. Hemingway writes about Krebs’s lies, “In this way he lost everything.” The famous ending to *The Sun Also Rises* emphasizes as well the lies told by members of the Lost Generation, when Jake Barnes, in response to Brett Ashley’s lament that they “could have had such a damned good time together” replies, “Yes . . . Isn’t it pretty to think so?” For Hemingway, unflinching honesty with one’s self and others, a refusal to be lied to or tell lies, no matter how painful such a position might be, may be the only way to retain dignity in the face of war trauma.

Vonnegut and O’Brien, as postmodernists, tend to assert an even more complicated relationship between truth and lies. Both are metafictionists who comment on the role and nature of narrative within the stories they tell. Vonnegut, for instance, as the supposed editor and compiler of Nazi propagandist Howard W. Campbell’s confessions in the novel *Mother Night*, ventures the opinion that “lies told for the sake of artistic effect—in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell’s confessions, perhaps—can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth” (ix-x). So, for Vonnegut, truth and fiction are not so easy to separate as they may

be for Hemingway. While telling lies destroys Harold Krebs, lies and pretense often help Vonnegut's characters survive: Bokononism, the invented religion in *Cat's Cradle*, brings comfort to the downtrodden residents of San Lorenzo and Billy Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian fantasies allow him to cope with wartime trauma in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Similarly, Paul Berlin in O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* is able to control his "fear bites" by exercising his imagination and inventing a long, highly detailed story about a trek after an AWOL soldier that leads his platoon all the way from the jungles of Vietnam to Paris.

Even more, Hemingway, Vonnegut and O'Brien are suspicious about the human ability to get at "truth" in the first place. As postmodernists, especially, both Vonnegut and O'Brien believe that the stories we tell about ourselves are not separate from reality; they *constitute* our reality. Vonnegut, writing a preface to *Mother Night* several years after its original publication, claims that he knows the moral of his novel, which is: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (v). The Books of Bokonon in *Cat's Cradle* begin with the caveat that "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (5). Lies and truth are not only inextricable from one another in this novel, but as in *Mother Night*, pretense—the stories we tell about the world—actually shape and create that world. Both Lionel Boyd Johnson (Bokonon) and Earl McCabe grow so fully into the roles of martyr and tyrant that they actually

become the characters they invent. *Slaughterhouse-Five* similarly suggests the power of narrative to shape reality. In his novel *The Gospel from Outer Space*, debauched science fiction writer Kilgore Trout describes an extraterrestrial visitor who comes to Earth to study Christianity and to learn why Christians can be so cruel. Trout writes, “He concluded . . . that at least part of the trouble was slipshod storytelling in the New Testament.” One of the reasons that Vonnegut focuses so intently on form in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is because of the dangers of slipshod storytelling; a story poorly told could lead to exactly what Mary O’Hare warns against: making war look wonderful so that we’d have more of them.

All three of O’Brien’s works also examine the malleability of truth, the difficulty of getting at what he calls the “happening truth” of an event. As he writes in “How to Tell a True War Story,” from *The Things They Carried*, “absolute occurrence is irrelevant” (83). One might have to “make up a few things” (77) to get at truth. Or, as the narrator/historian of O’Brien’s mystery novel-without-a-solution, *In the Lake of the Woods*, writes, “Even much of what might appear to be fact in this narrative—action, word, thought—must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events. I have tried, of course, to be faithful to the evidence. Yet evidence is not truth” (30). Students who read Vonnegut alongside Hemingway and O’Brien can see how Hemingway’s interest in wartime lies leads to Vonnegut’s views of the inextricably intertwined

nature of lies and truth, which leads in turn to O'Brien's refusal to tell a straightforward story—his constant claims that “this is true,” followed by equally insistent claims that he invented everything he just told readers.

Because Vonnegut's playful, humorous, and deceptively simple style of storytelling makes his work accessible to a large audience, it is easy to overlook how fully his fiction illustrates the pressing literary, philosophical, and social concerns of the 20th century. This course, I hoped, worked to show students how Vonnegut learned from and built on the work of his predecessors at the same time that his anti-realistic fiction helped usher in the postmodern period in American literature.