



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Madness of Sanity

A Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs í ensku

Einar Steinn Valgarðsson

Maí 2009

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Deild erlendra tungumála, bókmennta og málvísinda

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Summary

In this essay I will examine the novel *Mother Night* by Kurt Vonnegut in terms of questions about responsibility, identity and moral schizophrenia, and of awareness and illusion. I will argue that the attempts of the novel's main character, Howard W. Campbell Jr., to keep his sanity, given the situation he had put himself into (as a US spy in the Nazi hierarchy in Germany during World War II), may indeed be a sort of madness. Furthermore, I will explore the fine line in Vonnegut's novel between seeming opposites such as between sanity and madness, and his presentation of the human trait of evasion in the sense of blocking or putting a barrier between two seemingly contradictory stances, between, say, feelings on the one hand and reason or conscience on the other, which, while in some instances are beneficial, also have the potential of having dire consequences, depending on how or if one acts upon them. I will argue that Campbell is a perfect example of this theme and that Vonnegut is pointing out the ambivalence of pushing your awareness or conscience to the corner of the room, not necessarily destroying it, but at least pushing it far enough away to allow yourself to do things that are in violation of it. I will argue that Vonnegut is thus pointing out a very human potential within us all, showcasing the fine line there can be between seeming opposites, reminding us not to take our perception of things for granted. This factor is especially poignant given Vonnegut's own experiences as a US prisoner of war in Dresden experiencing the fire-bombing of this city by his own USAF bombers.

Ultimately it is this trait, and its inner and outer effects, that counts, rather than the question of the trait being bad or good in itself, for I believe that we all have the potential to act as Campbell and other characters in this book do, without that necessarily cleansing him or us of the responsibility for our actions or inactions (for both, ultimately, I feel, effect our world).

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The Madness of Sanity: A Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*.

Kurt Vonnegut and the fire-bombing of Dresden

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. was born in Indianapolis in the United States in 1922 on November 11, Armistice Day, later to become Veteran's Day. He died in 2007, at the age of 84. He was a fourth generation American of German descent and grew up during the Great Depression, an event that would have a significant effect on his life and his writing. His father had been a well-to-do architect who had found himself out of work during the Depression and the family had to live within more moderate means. It is of note that Vonnegut's ancestors were freethinkers, a heritage that was passed down to him and which he admired; they were essentially what today would be called humanists, agnostics who believed in decency and doing good towards your fellow man, regardless of whether they would be rewarded in the possibility of an afterlife. They were also pacifists, a conviction again shared by Vonnegut. Vonnegut's parents were incapable of dealing with the blow to their fortunes that the Depression caused them; his father became more and more isolated and withdrawn from life, lacking motivation, and his mother became increasingly depressed and mentally unstable. On Mother's Day, 1944, she committed suicide.

Vonnegut attended Cornell University and majored in chemistry. During his stay there, his interest and practice in writing increased and he became an assistant manager and associate editor of the student school paper, *The Cornell Daily Sun*. Despite his pacifist beliefs he enlisted in the U.S. army which sent him to study at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and the University of Tennessee to study mechanical engineering. Soon, however, his army unit was shipped over to Germany to participate in the war, since more manpower was needed. He served there as an infantry scout and was captured by German soldiers during the Battle of the Bulge, when, along with five other scouts, he became separated from his battalion. They were sent to Dresden where they were made to work in a

slaughterhouse as prisoners of war.

It was here that Vonnegut experienced the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden, which he later described as the “greatest massacre in European history” (he described “a massacre” as mass killings in a short time, thus not classifying Auschwitz as such).¹ The slaughterhouse was positioned underground, hence Vonnegut and a few other prisoners escaped the bombing. The city lay in utter ruins and Vonnegut and his companions were given the job of burying the bodies. For twenty-four years he would struggle with this experience and how to come to terms with it, before publishing his most famous work, *Slaughterhouse Five*, inspired by these events and by the struggle to articulate his response to it.

After the war Vonnegut attended the University of Chicago and studied anthropology. His essay, about the parallel structures in the work of Cubist painters and in the stories of Native Americans was rejected by the University (however, in 1971, Vonnegut's novel, *Cat's Cradle* was deemed by the same university to have enough anthropological content to earn Vonnegut a master's degree). He then went to work as a PR spokesman for General Electric.

In 1951 he published the first of what were to become many short stories, “Report on the Barnhouse Effect” and in 1959 he published his first novel, *Player Piano*, a dystopian novel heavily influenced by his experience at General Electric. It deals with complete automation and a society that is run by machines and the highest human position is that of engineers. While making things go more smoothly, the machines deprive people of the sense of feeling useful that they had from their work. Vonnegut would go on to write thirteen more novels. He became a prominent man of letters, a public speaker, a novelist and playwright, and his work has been adapted into nine films (the adaptations arguably ranging from great to horrible). It was with his sixth novel *Slaughterhouse Five* that he gained both critical and popular appraisal, the book truly making a breakthrough and himself famous and popular, although he'd already gained some attention within a small circle of devoted fans and academics. Today, among academics, peers, and the general public, Vonnegut is widely

¹ See, for example, Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*, ed. Daniel Simon (2005; New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007), p. 17.

considered to be one of the best American writers of the twentieth century and perhaps beyond.

In 1961, he first published his novel *Mother Night*, in paperback form. In 1966 it was republished in hardcover with an introduction and “editor’s note” by Vonnegut, and it is the later version that is the subject of this essay.²

In the 1966 introduction for *Mother Night*, Vonnegut for the first time described his experience of the Dresden fire-bombing.³ Dresden he described as an “‘open’ city, not to be attacked since there were no troop concentrations or war industries there.” Bombs were dropped and incendiaries “and all the little fires grew, joined one another, became one apocalyptic flame. Hey presto: fire storm. It was the largest massacre in European history, by the way. And so what? [...]. Everything was gone but the cellars where 135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread men” (*MN*, vi-vii).

Here, Vonnegut seems to ironically comment on the reaction of the world, or as Willis McNelly puts it: “an American public that has managed to ignore the moral responsibility of Dresden as well as the ethical implications of such an attack.”⁴ As Vonnegut stated in an interview in 1977, “I didn’t want to argue with people who thought Dresden should have been bombed to hell. All I ever said in my book was that Dresden, willy-nilly, *was* bombed to hell.”⁵ Bo Petterson, in his book *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut*, reflects on the irony that as:

a fourth-generation German-American pacifist, Vonnegut was sent to fight the Germans, and later, as a prisoner of war, he was nearly deprived of his life by his own countrymen in a city that supposedly was “free”. Despite their apparent absurdity, Vonnegut’s experiences of cruelty and suffering during the war seem to have laid the

2 Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (1966; New York: Dial Trade Paperbacks, 2006). All further references in the text are to this edition, abbreviated *MN*.

3 Jerome Klinkowitz, “Vonnegut in America” in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1977), p. 25.

4 Willis McNelly, “Kurt Vonnegut as a Science-Fiction Writer,” in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler (New York: Delcorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1977), pp. 92-93.

5 David Hayman, David Michaelis, George Plimpton, and Richard Rhodes, “Kurt Vonnegut: The Art of Fiction” (1977), in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: U Mississippi Press, 1988), p. 179.

foundations of a solidly humane vision.⁶

Indeed, these war time-experiences might be argued to provide an underlying thread throughout this book, as it considers moral responsibility, justifications and evasions.

The novel *Mother Night*

Apart from the description of the fire-bombing of Dresden, previously mentioned, in the introduction, Vonnegut furthermore describes how there were “some vile and lively native American Fascists in [his] home town of Indianapolis” (*MN*, v) and declares the three morals of the story to be, firstly: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be very careful what we pretend to be” (*MN*, v), secondly: “when you’re dead, you’re dead,” and thirdly: “make love while you can. It’s good for you” (*MN*, viii). He speculates that if he’d been born in Germany he’d probably have *been* a Nazi: “...bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming [him]self with [his] secretly virtuous insides” (*MN*, viii). This, I will argue, is in a way what the main character, of the novel, Howard W. Campbell Jr., does.

Vonnegut then sets himself as a fictional editor, presenting the book as if it were the real confessions of the character. He warns us early on with an ambiguous, if confusing statement, that Campbell was:

a writer as well as a person accused of extremely serious crimes, a one-time playwright of moderate reputation. To say that he was a writer is to say that the demands of art alone were enough to make him lie, and to lie without seeing any harm in it. To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader, for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage (*MN*, ix).

But then, seemingly paradoxically, Vonnegut suggests 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” (*MN*, ix-x). Campbell dedicates the story to

6 Bo Petterson, *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1994), p. 46.

Mata Hari, claiming, in a chapter he later discarded: “She whored in the interest of espionage, and so did I” (*MN*, xii). He then chooses to rededicate the book “to one familiar person, male or female, widely known to have done evil while saying to himself. “A very good me, the real me, a me made in heaven, is hidden deep inside” (*MN*, xiii).

Essentially, it might be argued, this is what Campbell does throughout the book, though his moral ambivalence also suggests his awareness of his crimes. Campbell finishes with the statement: “This book is rededicated to Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times” (*MN*, xiii).

The story itself begins in 1961, as Howard W. Campbell is sitting in an Israeli prison in Jerusalem, accused of war crimes and collaboration with Nazis. He is to write his confessions, and the story itself is indeed built up as it were his real confessions that he’s writing in his cell while awaiting trial.

We learn from Campbell that he was born in Schenectady, New York, on February 16, 1912, the only child of an Engineer in the Service Engineering Department of the General Electric Company. In 1923, when Campbell was eleven, the family moved to Berlin, Germany, taking young Howard with them, as his father had been assigned to General Electric’s Office there. We learn early on that Campbell’s family is what would today be called dysfunctional, as his father is absorbed in his work and has a queer fascination with pictures of carnage from World War One, and his mother, a “beautiful, talented, morbid person” Campbell suspects of having been “drunk all the time” (*MN*, 26). Both parents neglect Campbell, his mother’s morbidness eventually frightening even herself, as well as Campbell, resulting in her ceasing to interact with him.

Campbell grows up to be a fairly successful playwright in German, writing apolitical escapist romances and marrying the beautiful German actress Helga Noth, daughter of the Chief of Police in Berlin. Campbell’s parents move back home to America but he stays on with his wife, with whom he builds “a nation of two,” shutting themselves off from the outer world, their love or sex being the only thing that matters to them, writing plays for her to act

out, based on this notion, privately documenting their love-life (titled *Memoirs of a Monogamous Casanova*) and never telling her he is a spy.

In 1938 Campbell is recruited as an American agent by “his Blue Fairy Godmother,” Major Frank Wirtanen (calling him that since, at the time of writing, Campbell is the only one who is willing to testify to Wirtanen’s existence (*MN*, 40)). Wirtanen wants Campbell to use the goodwill the Nazis are showing the latter to work himself nearer and higher into their ranks and use this position to secretly provide useful information to the Allies, the U.S. government perceiving that there may soon be a war. At first Campbell refuses vehemently, but Wirtanen appeals to his sense of romance and notion of good and evil, as displayed in Campbell’s plays (and without mentioning it himself, to Campbell’s artistic vanity/narcissism, giving him an opportunity to act out the greatest role of his life) (*MN*, 29).⁷ These, at least, are the main reasons Campbell mentions at this stage.

Campbell’s cover is to be a Nazi radio propagandist; his speeches are anti-Semitic, and demoralizing about the Allies but boosting the German war effort. Secretly, in so doing he is broadcasting vital coded information to the Allies. The code is transmitted through idiosyncrasies in his speech (coughs, deliberate pauses, changes of tone, etc.), Campbell himself never knowing the content of the information he’s sending (except in one instance, to be addressed later).

Campbell proves highly successful in his job but receives a terrible blow when he is informed that his wife is presumed dead after an attack by the Russians on a camp where she had been entertaining German troops. Campbell considers ending his own life then, but changes his mind. On the eve of the Soviet Army’s invasion of Berlin, Campbell visits his in-laws for the last time. There, he learns that his father-in law had never liked him and suspected him of spying for the Allies, but was, ironically enough, inspired in his Nazism by Campbell’s speeches, telling Campbell that, “you could never have served the enemy as well as you served us” (*MN*, 99), and asking him to shoot his daughter’s dog, the daughter being Resi, Helga’s little sister. Resi, who at that point is completely nihilistic, a child broken by

⁷ See also further discussion on narcissism and childhood later in this essay.

war and seeing no point in the world, declares her love for Campbell when alone with him.

Campbell is eventually captured by U.S. forces, by one Lieutenant Bernard B. O' Hare. However, Wirtanen works a deal to have Campbell released and given anonymity in the United States, much to O' Hare's dissatisfaction.

In New York, Campbell lives out a lonely, empty life, what he himself calls his "purgatory" after the war, living, he claims, for the memory of Helga. One day, after having carved out a chess piece, as a way to break out of his loneliness, he visits a neighbor and another lost soul, George Kraft, whom he befriends. Kraft is a painter and secretly also a Russian spy, his real name being Colonel Ilona Potatov.

Campbell is eventually visited by a group of goofy neo-Nazis, consisting of Dr. Lionel Jones, a dentist who sees a connection between the deterioration of teeth and racial degeneration, the elderly August Krapptauer, former *Vice-Bundesfuehrer* of the German American *Bund*, whose greatest achievement was "the arrangement of a joint meeting of the Bund and the Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey in 1940. At that meeting, Krapptauer declared that the Pope was a Jew and that the Jews held a fifteen-million-dollar mortgage on the Vatican. A change of Popes and eleven years of prison laundry had not changed his mind" (*MN*, 73). Then there's the unfrocked priest "Father Keeley," having been defrocked because of his sermon depicting "so vicious and bigoted a God that it attracted the astonished attention of Pope Pius XI" (*MN*, 73-4). Keeley was on skid row when Jones rescued him. Ironically, Campbell claims the sermon had been based on a satirical poem written by Campbell himself, including the claims about the pope.

Lastly there is the Black Fuehrer of Harlem, siding with the colored people, having spied for the Japanese; a perfect example of Vonnegut's irony.

Significantly, the neo-Nazis bring a woman to Campbell whom he recognizes as being Helga, whom he had presumed dead. After they are reunited, testing the extent of Campbell's love for her, the woman confesses to not being Helga at all, but her little sister Resi. While shaken at first, Campbell eventually accepts her as Helga, she herself having

assumed the role during her ten years of working ten hours a day, six days a week, at a cigarette factory in Dresden, coming to see herself as the person she always dreamt of being.

Wirtanen shows up again to warn Campbell that Kraft is plotting to hand Campbell over to the Soviets (which Kraft indeed is) and that Resi is complicit in the plot. Campbell is devastated by this fact and during a conversation with Kraft and Resi alludes to the latter's plan, Resi then claiming that her feelings for him were true, and that Kraft claimed he wasn't going to go along with it either. The FBI then raid the building, arresting Kraft, Campbell and the neo-Nazis.

Just before the raid, while aware of the building being surrounded, Resi expressed her wish for her and Campbell to die together for love. Here, Campbell fails to live up to Resi's idealised and romantic idea of love, not wanting to do so. She urged him then to tell her what to live for, claiming there is nothing else for her. After the FBI storms in, in a demonstration of "a woman who dies for love" (MN, 230), she commits suicide by taking cyanide.

Campbell is released, most likely, he believes, through the workings of Wirtanen, but eventually, walking the streets, he finds, by his own description, "no reason to move in any direction" (MN, 232). He then decides to turn himself in to stand trial in Israel. Thus the book turns again to where it started. During his temporary stay in a prison cell in Tel Aviv Campbell has a significant conversation with Adolf Eichmann, who is in a cell above him, this being before Campbell is transferred to the prison in Jerusalem.

All evidence points to Campbell indeed being guilty of horrendous war crimes, for the United States is not ready to come to his defense, as Campbell had already been warned on the eve of his becoming an agent. The only one left alive that knew of his "inner good self" is Wirtanen, who, almost as *deus ex machina*, sends Campbell a letter, declaring that he is ready to break the silence, to commit treason as it were, to reveal Campbell's identity as one of "the most effective agents of the Second World War" (MN, 262), and his own identity as well, by testifying to all this under oath.

Campbell, in his confessions, claims, upon receiving this information, to find the

prospect of walking free again “nauseating” (*MN*, 267). Near the closing of the book he claims he plans that very night to hang himself for “crimes against himself” (*MN*, 268) (adding that he hopes the gorgeous music, that a hanging man is supposed to hear, isn’t Bing Crosby’s *White Christmas* (of which he has 26 copies, having gained it as war surplus), finishing off with the words *Auf wiedersehen*?⁸

Influences on *Mother Night*

Aside from the Dresden experience, one of the obvious influences on *Mother Night* is “Lord Haw-Haw,” William Joyce, an Irishman who was indeed a broadcaster for the Nazis. He joined the British Union of Fascists in 1932 and became a dedicated activist and orator, as well as being a staunch anti-Semite. He was an ardent and outspoken admirer of Hitler and saw the war as a conspiracy of Jews and International Finance. After fleeing Britain shortly before the outbreak of the war, he became appointed editor and speaker for the German transmitters for Europe and became infamous as “Lord Haw Haw,” a nickname coined for him by the Allies. Lots of people in Britain tuned in to his broadcasts at the time. Joyce was widely resented and ridiculed, but there may furthermore have been a desire with the listeners to hear what the other side was saying, since strong censorship of information in Britain allowed for the possibility that the information being broadcasted by the Germans might fill in some of the gaps.

Joyce was eventually captured by the Allies, sentenced to death and hanged, ironically for “treason,” for he had been born in America, brought up in Ireland, and he took German nationality in 1939.⁹ Vonnegut has stated in an interview that he “began with the idea of an American Lord Haw Haw and there really wasn’t one but the idea interested me so I began pursuing it.”¹⁰

McNelly suggests that much of the character of Howard W. Campbell, Jr. may be

8 Itself an ironic allusion to a previous encounter in the book with his neighbors Dr. Epstein and his mother, both Holocaust survivors, a point to be addressed later in this essay.

9 Alex Softy, “William Joyce, alias Lord Haw-Haw,” <http://www.heretical.com/British/joyce.html>. Accessed 12. april 2009.

10 Laurie Clance, interview with Kurt Vonnegut, “Running Experiments Off: An interview” (1977), in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1977), p. 50.

derived from one John W. Campbell, an editor of a science fiction magazine to whom Vonnegut had submitted some of his early stories and been rejected. His character's name was thus a joke at this other Campbell's expense. McNelly then adds:

At the same time, if one has read John W. Campbell's editorials, one realizes where many of Howard W. Campbell's ideas are derived from. For instance, John Campbell once wrote an editorial in which he argued that slavery was a pretty good idea on occasion – that kind of thing. And yet the ambiguities of John Campbell, which were great, also show up in the character of Howard W. Campbell, and so you can't say that Howard Campbell is this or that or that Vonnegut is this and that. To try to reconcile these opposites is, I think, almost fruitless. We have to say that they exist there, and that he is trying to deal with them in a Taoist way or a Manichean way.¹¹

It should be noted, however, that Vonnegut dismisses this suggestion in a 1987 interview.¹² Furthermore, Vonnegut wrote the novel in 1961 when the trial of Adolf Eichmann was in the news, Eichmann having been a central figure in facilitating the forced deportation of Jews to the death camps, himself having indeed, as Campbell notes in the story “introduced conveyor belts into crematoria”, and been “the greatest customer in the world for the gas called Cyklon-B” (*MN*, 165). The whole trial and questions of guilt, responsibility and the nature of evil that arose around it must have fascinated Vonnegut, considering how these themes fit into his story.¹³

Vonnegut then stated in an interview that an inspiration for the story came from a conversation he had at a cocktail party with someone who had formerly served Naval Intelligence. Vonnegut claims that he had told him: “What you have to realize is that all these

11 Willis McNelly, “Vonnegut in Academe (II),” Part of a panel discussion conducted by Donald L. Lawler, to be found in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler, Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, New York, 1977, p. 208.

12 Hank Nuwer, “A Skull Session with Kurt Vonnegut” (1987), in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson U Mississippi Press, 1988), pp. 257-58.

13 See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem – A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963; London: Penguin, 2006) Arendt herself attended the trial.

people are schizophrenics. They have to be insane, he said, because otherwise they would either blow their covers or simply die of fright. He went on to say that someone ought to make a spy movie about what spies are really like. So I wrote a book about it.”¹⁴ Vonnegut also noted that “very few spy novels have ever acknowledged this, as the man has maintained his political purity actually because the enemy is so easily deceived. Well, the enemy isn’t easily deceived at all. The enemy very promptly kills anybody who is acting the least bit strange.”¹⁵

Key scenes in *Mother Night*

Campbell tells of his encounters with four Israeli guards during his stay in prison in the first four chapters of the novel. The first is a teenager named Arnold Marx. The war happened before he was born and he knows nothing about it and has no interest in it. His mind is all in the ancient history and archeology of Israel, Arnold feeling that anyone should know Tiglath-pileser the Third, king of the Assyrians, while he himself has no idea who Paul Joseph Goebbels was. “And I felt the dust of the Holy Land creeping in to bury me, sensed how thick a dust-and-rubble blanket I would one day wear. I felt thirty or forty feet of ruined cities above me; beneath me some primitive kitchen middens, a temple or two – and -then - Tiglath-pileser the third” (MN, 5). Thomas F. Marvin claims that “Marx helps Campbell put his own story in the context of world history, laying to rest the dangerous delusion that Nazism was an essentially German phenomenon that arose from some fundamental flaw in the German people.”¹⁶

Yet it could be argued that while Marvin’s claims may be true to a point, in that evil is not black and white and everybody has a capacity for it, the Holocaust is still a unique manifestation of it, both in scale and certainly in its horrible system of utterly complex bureaucracy. Furthermore, even if Campbell’s crimes are “another brick in the wall” as far as

14 Charles Reilly, “Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut,” in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: U Mississippi Press, 1988), p. 204.

15 Clance, p. 51.

16 Thomas Marvin, “Who Am I This Time?: Kurt Vonnegut and the film *Mother Night*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 31:3 (2003), 231. Accessed 10 May 2009 at: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=420667511&Fmt=7&clientId=58117&RQT=309>

history goes (in the long run, that is to say), that doesn't actually absolve him of them, however he himself might feel.

Andor Gutman is the next guard. He himself is a Holocaust survivor, plagued by guilt. Gutman was in the Sonderkommando, a group of Jewish prisoners that were set to "shepherd condemned persons into gas chambers, and then to lug their bodies out. When the job was done, the members of the Sonderkommando were themselves killed. The first duty of their successors was to dispose of their remains" (*MN*, 7-8). Gutman himself escaped that gruesome fate since he got the job late on, and soon after, in the final throes of the war, Himmler decided to have the gas chambers destroyed, fearful of the Allies' reaction, seeing as Germany was losing the war.

Gutman doesn't know why he actually volunteered for the job, but is ashamed nevertheless. As Marvin, to his credit observes, "[h]is story suggests that it is possible to be a victim and a villain at the same time, and this is how Campbell chooses to portray himself in his confessions. Like Malachi Constant, the protagonist of Vonnegut's first novel *The Sirens of Titan* [sic], Campbell is 'not only a victim of outrageous fortune, but one of outrageous fortune's cruelest agents as well' (*Sirens* 13).¹⁷ Being a victim as well as an agent does not excuse either Campbell or Gutman, but it does suggest that "conventional notions of guilt and innocence are inadequate to deal with the complexities of human behavior."¹⁸

The third guard, Arpad Kovacs, escaped the camps by joining the Hungarian SS, secretly working as a spy to give information to the Jews concerning the SS's next strike. There is an obvious parallel to Campbell here, and, from Campbell's description, Kovacs seems proud of how convincing an Aryan he made and feels that Campbell's propaganda was far too weak, Kovacs claiming he'd have been far more vicious himself. Kovacs boasts of 14 SS men being killed upon his detachment's recommendation, and that "Adolf Eichmann himself congratulated [them]," (*MN*, 13) later adding that if he (Kovacs) had known at the

17 Marvin, "'Who am I this time?'" It can also be argued that this alleged trait of Campbell's is shared by Winston Niles Rumfoord, another major character from *The Sirens of Titan*, a point I will attempt to argue later in this essay.

18 Marvin, *ibid*.

time how important Eichmann was, he (Kovacs) would have killed him.

The greatest difference between Kovacs and Campbell is that there is no suggestion of Kovacs being aware of this contradiction, this paradox, as it were. Marvin argues that “in a sense Kovacs’ guilt is greater than Campbell’s and yet Kovacs is the guard and Campbell is the prisoner, Why? Simply because Campbell’s crimes were committed in public and because the US Government refused to acknowledge that he was an American agent. Comparing Campbell to Kovacs shows how arbitrary society’s decisions about guilt and innocence often are.”¹⁹ Furthermore, one could actually argue that this creates, if not sympathy, then at least empathy with Campbell, who, according to the next guard, Bernard Mengel, gives signs in his sleep suggesting that he has a guilty conscience about his actions, Mengel claiming Campbell is the only war criminal he’s seen exhibiting such behavior. Mengel claims everybody else was convinced there had been nothing else they could have done. For the normal reader, it’s easier to empathize with even a monster if he at least feels guilty, for guilt is in itself a common feeling the reader would presumably be able to identify with, irrespective of the nature of the crime itself. Nonetheless, this does not change anything about Campbell’s guilt or responsibility for his crimes.

Thomas R. Holland has pointed out how each and every one of the guards has adapted to his image of the world to accommodate the absurdity of his own life, and their descriptions stand at the beginning of the book as a foreshadowing of Campbell’s adaptations to his own absurdities.²⁰ Throughout the novel there are examples of the numbing or accommodation of the mind in the face of otherwise uncomfortable situations. This may indeed be seen as a sort of schizophrenia, a theme running through the book. A scene that could be considered crucial in reflecting this and, furthermore, reflecting the brutality of war, regardless of the victim and perpetrator, is the scene where Campbell learns of his father-in-law’s death by hanging. The description is graphic and horrible and Campbell is here clearly affected as he describes that he “began, tentatively and queasily, to recognize the shattered building in the background.

¹⁹ Marvin, ““Who am I this time?””

²⁰ Thomas R. Holland, *Vonnegut's Major Works* (1973; New York: Cliff's Notes, 1994), p. 25.

Behind the hangman, looking like a mouthful of broken teeth, was all that was left of the home of Werner Noth, of the home where my Helga had been raised as a good German citizen, of the home where I had said farewell to a ten-year-old nihilist named Resi” (*MN*, 108). Of course, even if Noth was a Nazi and Campbell in one way was undermining his cause (as an Allied spy), Noth was still Campbell’s father-in-law. It might furthermore be argued, again reflecting Campbell’s moral ambiguity (in the sense of the question where his allegiance lies, remembering, as has been mentioned before) that Campbell simultaneously undermined and strengthened the Nazi cause, just as he did the Allied one. We learn that Noth was “revived eight times and hanged nine. Only after the eighth hanging were his last bits of courage and dignity gone. Only after the eighth hanging did he act like a child being tortured” (*MN*, 110).

The ultimate irony then comes in the fact that the article, in which Campbell learns of these circumstances surrounding Werner Noth’s death, is printed in a pornographic magazine. This would seem to imply a disturbing relationship between pornography and carnage, both belonging to a sexual fetish, both indeed appealing to the most primitive instincts of man. This may be seen to be echoed by Robert Weide, the screenwriter of the film *Mother Night*, in his perception of the young Campbell’s discovery of his father’s book of carnage as equaling any other kid’s discovery of his father’s *Playboy* magazine.²¹

Campbell’s conversation with Eichmann is another crucial scene, since it allows the reader to wonder about Campbell’s responsibility for the Holocaust. Campbell asks Eichmann if he feels guilty of murdering six million Jews. Eichmann does not perceive himself as guilty of this crime and affirms Campbell’s suspicion that Eichmann saw himself as “only following orders.” The scene is furthermore important because of the contrast Campbell seeks to set up between himself and Eichmann (to be addressed later).

Finally, I would like to look at the scene where the neo-Nazi’s bunker is raided. In this

21 Robert Weide, “Audio Commentary” by director Keith Gordon and screenwriter Robert Weide on *Mother Night*. 1996. Dir. Keith Gordon. Perf. Nick Nolte, Sheryl Lee, Alan Arkin, John Goodman and Kirsten Dunst. DVD. New Line Home Video, 2000. The film was based on Vonnegut’s novel of the same name.

scene Jones laments about the state of the country, putting blame on Catholics and colored people, despite the fact that two of his close allies are a black man and a Catholic. When one of the G-Men who have arrived to arrest Kraft and the neo-Nazis calls Jones “Crazy”, Campbell, as the narrator responds:

Jones wasn’t completely crazy. The dismaying thing about the classic totalitarian mind is that any given gear, though mutilated will have at its circumference unbroken sequences of teeth that are immaculately maintained [...] The missing teeth, of course, are simple, obvious truths, truths available and comprehensible even to ten-year olds, in most cases.

The willful filing off of gear teeth, the willful doing without certain obvious pieces of information – That was how a household as contradictory as one composed of Jones, Father Keeley, Vice-Bundesfuehrer Krapptauer, and the Black Fuehrer could exist in a relative harmony.

That was how my father-in law could contain in one mind an indifference toward slave women and love for a blue vase -

That was how Rudolph Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz, could alternate over the loudspeakers of Auschwitz great music and calls for corpse-carriers – That was how Nazi Germany could sense no important differences between civilization and hydrophobia. (MN, 224-5)

William Veeder perceives the “dehumanization involved in such stereotyping” ultimately to be “more offensive than Jones or the G-man,”²² who had classified Jones as “crazy” in response to Jones’ contradictory stand, on the one hand condemning colored people and Catholics, and on the other hand two of his close allies being a Catholic and a black man, without noticing the paradox. Veeder finds particular crudeness in Campbell’s “representing the human consciousness by the image of a machine,”²³ finally pointing out

22 William Veeder, “Technique as Recovery: *Lolita* and *Mother Night*,” in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1977), p. 115.

23 Veeder, p. 116.

Campbell's alleged self-congratulation at the end of the chapter (the chapter in *Mother Night*, that is), where Campbell claims that he has "never [...] willfully destroyed a tooth on a gear of [his] thinking machine. Never have I said to myself, 'This fact I can do without'" (*MN*, 225).

In response to this, it might be useful to bear in mind that Vonnegut himself has used a similar analogy elsewhere, in the sense that he has compared humans to machines or "rubbery test tubes [...] with chemical reactions seething inside," notably in the introduction for *Breakfast of Champions*.²⁴ Veeder furthermore acknowledges that Campbell apologizes for this image, Campbell alluding to the effect of his upbringing as the son of an engineer.²⁵ Veeder's argument about Campbell's self-congratulation²⁶ would seem a stronger argument, and seems a way for Campbell to try distance himself from the full-blown Nazis, in a similar way that he did with Eichmann, yet there is a contradiction here as well, to be addressed later in this essay.

As for the case of the Black Fuehrer of Harlem, a bold move it might be argued in 1961, if we look beyond the obvious ridiculousness of it, we might see it as resembling how war and politics can make strange bedfellows. Racist Germany teamed up with Japan, for example. I suppose many were as flabbergasted by Hitler and Stalin's treaty, especially the ones fighting on the Republic's side in Spain, though it may make sense in retrospect. Keith Gordon, director of *Mother Night*, claims that this portrayal of the character wasn't being racist at all, that it wasn't about color, on the contrary, this was pointing out how "it doesn't matter who you hate or why, if you hate people enough, you all end up sort of back in the same spot."²⁷

Gordon furthermore perceives Vonnegut as going after the concept of nationalism, any nationalism. That whatever the cause or country one identifies oneself with, the second that a flag becomes more important than humanity, one is in deep trouble. Also, considering

²⁴ Kurt Vonnegut. Preface to his *Breakfast of Champions* (1973; New York: Dial Press Paperback, 2006), pp. 3-4.

²⁵ Veeder, p. 116

²⁶ Veeder, *ibid.*

²⁷ Gordon, "Audio Commentary."

how the neo-Nazis come across as gentle and polite in some instances, as vicious and spiteful in others, Gordon notes that this shows they share a common human contradiction, however clownish one might perceive them. Gordon points out that everybody is capable of great cruelty, amorality and kindness. He sees this as part of Vonnegut's genius to be able to make the neo-Nazis simultaneously horrifying and at the same time "kind of sad and funny and human." He claims that while that may seem disturbing, he himself finds it more disturbing when Nazis are portrayed as pure evil and not human beings, for that way people will not recognize their own capacity for evil.²⁸

Bernard B. O'Hare, Campbell's captor after the war is described by Tom Marvin, as a "flag-waving American patriot,"²⁹ Campbell himself describing O'Hare being "lean as a young wolf" (*MN*, 28) at the time O'Hare captures Campbell, later comparing him, at the time of their reunion, both of them having aged, to a coyote. O'Hare is self-righteous and bristling with hate towards Campbell, whom he considers the embodiment of evil. As Marvin notes, this is rather a narrow and short-sighted view of the nature of evil, ignoring the potential for evil within every man. Marvin claims that O'Hare is indeed "every bit as fanatical, narrow-minded and violent as the worst Nazi."³⁰ Yet it could be argued that at the same time O'Hare, in spite of everything, comes across as a rather a sad, if pathetic figure, tragicomic, if you will (although initially he also seems dangerous, showing us that however noble the cause, a simplified worldview can lead to hate and is a gateway to worse things). Marvin certainly seems to make a good point of noting that by this "O'Hare reminds readers that American patriotism and German fascism are cousins, if not brothers", a notion that seems to gain force by Himmler's and Hitler's fascination with Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as a "powerful piece of propaganda" (*MN*, 19), at the very least reminding us of how hazy the boundaries can be, and reinforcing the idea of how uncritical thinking can lead to dangerous extremes.

Marvin sees Campbell's confrontation with O'Hare's as his finest hour, when after a

²⁸ Gordon, "Audio commentary."

²⁹ Marvin, "Who Am I this Time?"

³⁰ Marvin, *ibid*.

being subjected to a series of insults from a drunk O' Hare, Campbell performs "the only violent act [he] ever committed in what has now been a long, long life" (*MN*, 250), by breaking O'Hare's good arm with fire tongs, furthermore shoving him to the edge of his stairway and declaring:

"You poor miserable drunk, one-armed sonofabitch" [...] I'm not your destiny or the Devil either! Look at you! Came to kill evil with your bare hands, and now away you go with no more glory than a man sideswiped by a Greyhound bus! And that's all the glory you deserve! That's all that any man at war with pure evil deserves.

"There are plenty of good reasons for fighting, but no good reason ever to hate without reservation, to imagine that God Almighty Himself hates with you too. Where's evil? It's that large part of every man that wants to hate without limit, that wants to hate with God on his side. It's that part of every man that finds all kinds of ugliness so attractive." (*MN*, 251)

The whole scene is, as Keith Gordon puts it, "hysterical and funny and tragic."³¹ Marvin makes a strong case of declaring this to be Campbell's finest hour,³² and one seemingly reflecting Vonnegut's own views, yet it still seems to me to simplify the notion of evil, for Campbell's evil is mostly brought on by vanity, deluding himself by establishing a persona through whom he can transform all of the evil acts that he is required to do onto, while being aware of or at least suspecting the negative implications of those actions. While "the voice of conscience" is still somewhere in there, and he can somewhat hear it, he chooses to ignore it by telling himself that all the bad acts were performed by "that other person."

Weide points out the different perspectives we get in Campbell's meeting with the Epsteins, mother and son. Campbell himself, however indirectly, has been immersed in the Holocaust and the mother remembers the Holocaust and feels it should be remembered whereas her son, the doctor, feels that this "period of insanity" should be forgotten. As Weide

³¹ Gordon, "Audio Commentary."

³² Marvin, "'Who Am I This Time?'"

notes, they are all right in their own way, depending on one's perspective.³³ The implied underlying question seems to be what view would the reader take, further implying that things are not always cut and dry and there may be no one answer. This scene can therefore be said to be important because of the implication that the mother would reveal Campbell's identity, since she recognizes him, and most obviously she may be seen as a living testament to Campbell's crimes, looking him in the eye, so to speak. Holland makes the assertion that when Campbell finally decides to turn himself in, and appeals to the Epsteins, claiming he wants to "surrender to an Auschwitzer" (*MN*, 254), Mrs. Epstein's decision to go along with it arises out of pity. He seems to draw this conclusion from Campbell's quotation of Mrs. Epstein: "This is not the first man you've seen who could not move unless somebody told him where to move, who longed for someone to tell him what to do next, who would do anything anyone told him to do next. You saw thousands of them at Auschwitz" (*MN*, 257). Yet it could be argued that this is reflecting Campbell's own narcissism, identifying himself with the victim (throughout the novel, Campbell laments his own fate, even as he at other times paradoxically acknowledges his own active role in shaping it), indeed Campbell claims: "she understood my illness immediately, that it was my world, rather than myself, that was diseased" (*MN*, 256-7).

Furthermore, Mrs. Epstein herself answers affirmatively when her son asks her if she still wants revenge. Again the question is put to the reader; what way would justice best be deserved?

Analysis of main characters and themes

A question for the reader that surely must arise soon enough is this: Why would Howard W. Campbell Jr. succumb to being a spy and a Nazi at the same time, in the end turning out to be at once the best Allied spy and the most effective Nazi propagandist, which Jerome Klinkowitz describes as having "The irrational truth of a joke," Campbell being thus

³³ Weide, "Audio Commentary".

“responsible for both the war’s end and it’s stubborn prolongation”?³⁴ This question lingers with the reader, and he is given various clues and explanations, and yet one still wonders. The job itself consists of doing bad things and good things at the same time, certifying Kurt Vonnegut’s notion of an effective spy, in order to be able to do this, having to be schizophrenic.³⁵ Campbell himself claims that the catch was quite clear: “To do your job right [...] you’ll have to commit high treason, have to serve the enemy well. You won’t ever be forgiven. The most that will be done for you is that your neck will be saved. But there will be no magic time where you will be cleared, when America will call you out of hiding with a cheerful: Olly-olly-ox-in-free” (*MN*, 44).

Campbell’s plays already consisted of light escapism,³⁶ romances constructed as an escape route from the harsher world that doesn’t appeal to him, an idealistic world for him and his wife alone, reflected on stage and vice versa. Indeed, Keith Gordon claims that “Howard is a man of theater and he sees the world that way and he’s turned his whole life into a theatrical performance, yet again it takes us back to that weird theme [...] of romance and heartfeltness meeting falsity.”³⁷ Wirtanen seems to take advantage of this, claiming that Campbell loves good and hates evil,” implying a naive worldview that Campbell displays in his art, however he himself may feel, or at the very least an ideal world he prefers over the real one. Furthermore, this appeals directly to Campbell’s vanity, or narcissism, allowing him to play the greatest role of his life.³⁸ Indeed, Wirtanen claims that “espionage offers each spy an opportunity to go crazy in a way he finds irresistible” (*MN*, 191), strengthening both this view and the aforementioned view expressed by Vonnegut. Campbell has already shut himself off from the outer world, and continues to do so in his Nazi role. Klinkowitz thus claims Campbell “accepts only because the role appeals to him as a romantic, letting his outside life be sacrificed to an inner truth only he knows.”³⁹ Campbell himself declares

34 Jerome Klinkowitz: *Kurt Vonnegut*. Contemporary Writers. General eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Christopher Bigsby (New York/London: Methuen, 1982), p. 49.

35 Interview with Vonnegut and Nick Nolte on the *Mother Night* DVD (New Line Home Video, 2002).

36 Jerome Klinkowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), p. 53.

37 Gordon, “Audio Commentary.”

38 Interview with Nick Nolte on *Mother Night* DVD

39 Klinkowitz, *ibid*.

himself in the novel to be “a nationless person by inclination” (*MN*, 1). The question of identity comes into play here, Bo Petterson arguing that much of Campbell’s character may be explained by his childhood: taking a sort of Freudian view, Campbell is trying to substitute his lack of communication as a child with double communication as a double agent.⁴⁰ While strong hints are certainly given, it is still done in a subtle way, making it harder to establish this one explanation as superior to the other.⁴¹ Campbell’s identity is multiple, there is the allied spy versus the Nazi guise, the playwright, and the lover. Holland describes Campbell as seeing his foremost identity as being “a poet and playwright, a romantic dreamer whose inner self is never touched by the plots and schemes which his external personalities are involved in,” or so Campbell would like to believe, for “his memoirs are, above all, a search for his true identity, an attempt to reconcile and come to terms with the three parts of his life.”⁴²

Gordon notes that “it’s weird that [Campbell’s] moral emptiness sort of here shows up, I mean, his willingness to not take a stand on the war, and the fact that, ultimately, everything including the world events going on is about himself, and even his choice to spy has much more to do with his own ego than any real connection with what’s going on with the Nazis or Jews or anything in the bigger world.”⁴³

As for Campbell’s love life with Helga, Weide points out indications of something theatrical going on in Helga and Campbell’s sexuality and argues that Helga doesn’t really know who Campbell is, since he never reveals his identity as an agent to her; even if there is a strong passion and intensity, there is “this implication that there may be something else.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, Gordon asks the rhetorical question, after Helga’s death, that despite great passion, how real is such a love? This indicates both how romantic and false at once such love can be, strengthening the theme of duality (or sometimes tripleness) running through the novel.⁴⁵ Indeed, it would be hard to say that one sees Helga much as a real person

⁴⁰ Petterson, p. 84.

⁴¹ Gordon, “Audio Commentary.”

⁴² Holland, p.22.

⁴³ Gordon, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Weide, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Gordon, *ibid.*

in the novel. What the reader gets is more of an idealized romantic picture of her. In a way, it might be argued, she doesn't even feel very real, thus in line with the notion of Campbell fantasizing his life, turning his life into play and vice versa, so the whole thing in itself starts to feel artificial. It could be argued that Campbell is a changed man after the war, broken and disillusioned, a shell of his former self, and that is certainly how he chooses to present himself ("people should be changed by world wars, else, what would world wars be for?") (MN, 133) and yet, as Nick Nolte points out in the interview with him and Vonnegut, Campbell loses his romantic sense of drama by not committing suicide after getting news of the supposed death of Helga, something both feel would have been a logical thing for him to do, as an escape from a crazy role.

Nolte: See, even purgatory is acceptable because he still has the role to play, now he's the ... the victim of this ... and he still gets to play out, even though the world doesn't care, he's play ... I find he's... even though it's a horrible time he's comfortable with it. It's only when he's ... really gets confronted with the past that ...

Vonnegut: Oh, one thing he isn't and which most people are, is a nobody. To himself, he has really been something, whatever the hell it was, and, you know, all the people on the sidewalk there are gonna be nothing, they might as well not have lived at all.⁴⁶

Mainly out of loneliness Campbell encounters Kraft, and loneliness is indeed a strong theme throughout Vonnegut's writings, fiction and non-fiction. As Weide has it: "Just one of these great little pieces of Vonnegut irony that a man that was completely isolated, alone, would decide to, of all things, create a chess set for himself that you can't use without anyone

46 "A Conversation with Kurt Vonnegut and Nick Nolte", on *Mother Night* DVD (1996; Dir. Keith Gordon. New Line Home Video, 2000). It is also interesting to note that in Campbell's description of himself as a "death-worshipper" after Helga's presumed death, he resembles Scotty, the main character of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (Paramount, 1958). Both worship the memory of a woman they believe dead (Madeleine in *Vertigo*, Helga in *Mother Night*) and try to make the new lover resemble the old one (in *Vertigo* it actually turns out to be the same person), make her *become* the previous lover and the woman plays along, but gradually starts to assert her own identity (*Vertigo*'s Madeleine being a false character). In short, there may be said to be a common theme of a sort of necrophilia in both works, as Hitchcock is reported to have said about his film.

else,” this being “... the beginning of trying to reach out to other people”. He also refers to the house where Campbell, Kraft and the Epsteins live as a “weird little concentrated place of lost and doomed souls who’ve been damaged in one way or another by the world of politics and nationalities.”⁴⁷

Kraft, like Campbell, sees himself primarily as an artist, and may even in his way (partially) be a true friend to Campbell, but if so, he seems to share a similar sort of schizophrenia as Campbell describes it (although it might be argued that here Campbell would choose to diminish that of himself, and even the evil deeds he performed himself in his double role, not pointing out the similarities): “It was typical of his schizophrenia as a spy that he should also be a true friend of mine, and that he could eventually think of a way to use me cruelly in advancing the Russian cause” (*MN*, 53).

At the time, there would have been further cause for Campbell feeling empathy with Kraft, due to Kraft’s story of his dead wife, and Kraft claiming he’d considered suicide after his wife’s alleged death. Yet it is hard to say how honest Kraft is, just as Campbell himself is complex. We never know whether Kraft was sincere in deciding not to go through with turning Campbell over to the Russians, we only have Resi’s word for it. It may be that Campbell, *wishes* it were so, and it may further be that Campbell wishes in his mind to make Kraft more like himself than perhaps he really is, that in his double identity Kraft was a real friend. We have to remember Campbell’s loneliness, he’d certainly feel better with the notion that some part of Kraft was sincere, for Campbell trusted him, opened up to him, and at that time, Kraft was his only friend.

As for Resi, Gordon sees her as Campbell’s doppelganger in many respects, being a numb and lost soul, though Gordon reminds the viewer that she was already like that as a child (as mentioned earlier), that she had no soul left, had nothing and just felt the world had no point, but that she shares with Campbell the sense of choosing to live within a fairy tale (Campbell’s fairy tale, of course, being the nation of two). Gordon sees this scene as both touching and cynical, in the sense that while professing her love for and need of Campbell,

⁴⁷ Weide, “Audio Commentary.”

Resi doesn't really know Campbell at all, that she knows him even less than Helga did, but has created him in her preferred image. That she is, in effect, in love with her own fiction of Campbell. Gordon sees this as the really sad thing of the novel/film, that everybody in either book or film that cares for anybody is caring for their fictional view of that person, not who that person actually is. While perceiving this as true, Gordon asks whether this is not indeed what we do in real life, that we see what we want to see in our friends and loved ones, and ignore what we don't want to see, and make them much worse in our minds if the relationship breaks up? He sees Vonnegut as "really tapp[ing] into something very real about the way human beings relate and just exaggerat[ing] it in a much more theatrical way."⁴⁸

Lastly, there's Frank Wirtanen, whose role has already been mentioned. Gordon describes Wirtanen, at the time of his first meeting with Campbell, as simultaneously a funny guy that one kind of likes and a creepy and scary authoritative figure that one should look out for. Wirtanen certainly is, along with Kraft, the greatest direct shaper of events in Campbell's life, apart, of course, from Campbell himself. Gordon then later describes him as a sort of Old Testament God; that while being scary in a sense, he's also a figure of truth, inviting Campbell to look at his life and ultimately tries to be a figure of salvation. Gordon argues that while the effect may not be good, his intent may well be purer than that of almost anybody else in the story.⁴⁹ Whether Wirtanen has any moral qualms about his role is debatable. While seducing Campbell to take on the task of espionage, he's always honest to Campbell as far as natural security allows him to be. He gives him a fair warning and the decision is up to Campbell himself. He tries to help Campbell as far as he can when Campbell gets into trouble and, as mentioned before, eventually offers to break the secrecy of his and Campbell's identity in order to save Campbell's neck, saying that "if there must be a trial of Howard W. Campbell by the forces of self-righteous nationalism, let it be one hell of a contest" (*MN*, 267). This seems to rhyme with Marvin's view of blind patriotism and Gordon's view of nationalism as displayed in the novel. Wirtanen claims in his letter to

⁴⁸ Gordon, "Audio Commentary."

⁴⁹ Gordon, commentary

Campbell to have done Campbell no wrong, thus not feeling any remorse, but the truth of this statement is left to the imagination of the reader.

Jerome Klinkowitz has noted how the whole book is constructed from two- or three-part jokes, ironies and absurdities.⁵⁰ You may get a premise, counter-premise and a solution in the form of a punchline. The same thing goes with the characters: “Nazis being shown from a different angle, Werner von Braun is met at a dance, Reichsleiter Goebbels and Oberdienstleiter Hederich are encountered during an intramural ping-pong tournament⁵¹ [...] shock value surprises made from combining radically unlike associations.”⁵² Holland and Klinkowitz share a similar notion, that each character and nearly every event is constructed as a three-part joke, and that “indeed all three main characters of the novel – Campbell, Kraft and Resi – seem to share this sort of schizophrenia, an ability to dissociate the motives and actions of one part of the self from the other.”⁵³ The schizophrenia is further defined by Petterson: “I would argue that Campbell behaves according to the popular notion of schizophrenia: as a divided personality rather than as a schizophrenic in a strictly psychiatric sense. When Schatt mentions Campbell’s shifts between the roles of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, he is much closer to defining the core of Campbell’s character.”⁵⁴ Holland further claims that Kraft, Resi and Campbell are aware of their contradictions whereas Jones and Eichmann are not, furthermore adding that “it is even implied in the novel that this ‘schizophrenic’ ability to overlook contradictions is a necessary factor for mental health.”⁵⁵

I would thus argue that each character blocks certain things from his mind, and however he or she does it, that this is a common denominator. Campbell tries to distance himself from Jones and yet he seems similarly to have built a wall between his two imagined selves, turning away from the ugly truths of his actions as a Nazi propagandist and applying them to his “alter ego”, which he struggles to convince himself and the reader wasn’t really him. It would thus seem that Campbell’s and Jones’s versions of this schizophrenia are really

⁵⁰ Klinkowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect*, pp. 55-56.

⁵¹ Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut*, pp. 47-48.

⁵² Klinkowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect*, p. 55.

⁵³ Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 49; Holland, p. 24.

⁵⁴ Petterson, p. 112.

⁵⁵ Holland, p. 25.

two sides of the same coin. And yet, this distinction does not work fully for Campbell, for there are many instances in the book where he seems to grasp, at least to an extent, the nature of his doings, whether he may himself feel actual guilt for this or not. His only distinction is that he is aware of his doings, even when he tries to delude himself. And that's where the real contradiction sets in, on a larger scale, arguably, than for Jones and Eichmann. For Campbell is aware of his own schizophrenia, his own fantasies, much like Resi, who is aware as well of her playing a part, and acts it out anyway, just like his role is partly determined by the situation he puts himself in even though he acts it out consciously. All this is part of a larger theme for Vonnegut, Petterson argues, and which he claims runs through all of Vonnegut's works; that of "a complex vision that attempts to combine two utterly contradictory stances, determinism and responsibility,"⁵⁶ describing it such that, in Vonnegut's vision "man is *not entirely* determined and should try to do good *in so far as it is humanly possible*."⁵⁷

As for Campbell's contradictory view regarding his guilt and responsibility, consider these assertions made by him: first, he admits to having "committed high treason, crimes against humanity and crimes against my own conscience" (*MN*, p. 29). In his statement about how hard he worked for the applause of the Germans, seemingly alluding to the theater, it might be argued that this also refers to his role as a propagandist, hence him saying "Too hard. Amen. Too hard" (*MN* 37). He admits, as aforementioned, that he knew what he was stepping into (*MN* 43). In his comparing himself with Eichmann, it might be argued that he seems to admit that he may in fact be guiltier than Eichmann: "The more I think about Eichmann and me, the more I think that he should be sent to a hospital, and that I am the sort of person for whom punishments by fair, just men were devised" (*MN* 165-6), although, ironically, this might point to his narcissism, seeing himself as more important, however negatively (see Vonnegut's statement about Campbell not perceiving himself as a nobody). "My case is different. I always know when I tell a lie, am capable of imagining the cruel consequences of anybody's believing my lies, know cruelty is wrong. I could no more lie

⁵⁶ Petterson, p. 12

⁵⁷ Petterson, p. 49.

without noticing it than I could unknowingly pass a kidney stone” (*MN 166*). “Those whose orders I carried out in Germany were as ignorant and insane as Dr. Jones. I knew it. God help me, I carried out their instructions anyway” (*MN 69*). Campbell also says about Eichmann and himself: “This man actually believed that he had invented his own trite defense, though a whole nation of ninety some odd- million had made the same defense before him. Such was his paltry understanding of the God-like human act of intervention.” He says that he’d like someone to be able to say about him “Forgive him – he knows what he does”, adding “This cannot be said of me now” (*MN, 165*). Furthermore, when hearing an old recording of his own voice spewing Nazi propaganda he claims: “I can hardly deny that I said them. All I can say is that I didn’t believe them, that I knew full well what ignorant, destructive, obscenely jocular things I was saying” (*MN 169*). In other words, he is fully aware of his actions and suspects the consequences they may have. Campbell describes his alter ego, the Nazi propagandist thus: “that was the undiluted evil in me, the evil that had its effect on millions, the disgusting creature good people wanted dead and underground” (*MN 154*). Contrast this then with his assertion that this “wasn’t him,” whereas Wirtanen, towards whom the assertion was directed, responds that “[w]hoever it was, he was one of the most vicious sons of bitches who ever lived.” Campbell then asks: “You give me hell for that, - knowing what you do? How else would I have survived?” with Wirtanen responding: “That was your problem ...” (*MN 187-88*). This may seem unfair, and Klinkowitz indeed classifies Campbell’s story as being: “a classic story of someone being used.”⁵⁸ That is true to a point, yet it is hard to see Campbell being forced to take on the job. As referred to earlier in the interview with Vonnegut, and in Wirtanen’s explanation of Campbell’s task, one understands from the beginning that he can survive only if he serves the enemy very well. Once Campbell has taken on the job, he is doubly controlled to a degree, yet he lays out the finer details himself (writes his own speeches, composes his own propaganda), even to the point of making a cardboard shooting mark of a Jew, he claims, to establish himself further as a Nazi in the eyes of those he had to convince, something that indeed proved very successful with Nazis

⁵⁸ Klinkowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect*, p. 52.

(*MN* 154-5). Campbell claims that he had hoped to be merely ludicrous in his propaganda, so that it would be impossible to take him seriously, but unfortunately “so many people *wanted* to believe [him]” (Vonnegut’s italics) (*MN*, 160). It seems logical that he may have told himself that as a way to justify his actions. Yet, as has been mentioned, he’d be in danger of being killed if he wasn’t convincing enough. The fact that he was effective and survived seems to suggest otherwise. He couldn’t have been an effective agent without being in turn an effective Nazi propagandist. If he had not wanted this, it would have been easy for him to blow either his cover or his brains out, both acts would ultimately have freed him of his task and resulted in his death. He chose neither.

Campbell’s playing with fantasy has already been mentioned and thus we have a man that simultaneously deludes himself and is aware of himself doing so. He is simultaneously “determined”, to use Petterson’s phrase, and free up to a point, within that box, so to speak. This position seems to be reflected in Italian writer and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi’s description of the paradox of the German people during the war, and that of a capacity of people in general. Levi asks how it was possible that the extermination of millions of human beings could have been carried out in the heart of Europe without anyone’s knowledge, although explaining this to a degree by pointing out the nature of an authoritarian state being able to cover things up.

“However, it was not possible to hide the existence of the enormous concentration camp apparatus from the German people.”⁵⁹ He himself then quotes Eugene Kogon, a former Buchenwald prisoner, later professor of Political Science at the University of Munich:

What did the Germans know about the concentration camps? Outside the concrete fact of their existence, almost nothing. Even today they know little [...] How could the German people have known? Anyone who entered the camps found himself confronted by an unfathomable universe, totally new

⁵⁹ Primo Levi, “Afterword: The Author's Answers to His Reader's Questions”, in *If This is a Man/The Truce* (1958; London: Everyman's Library, 2000), pp. 458-60.

to him [...] and yet, and yet, there wasn't even one German who did not know of the camp's existence or who believed that they were sanitariums. [...] All the Germans had been witnesses to the multiform anti-Semitic barbarity. Millions of them had been present – with indifference or with curiosity [...] Not a single German could have been unaware of the fact that the prisons were full to overflowing, and that executions were taking place continually all over the country.⁶⁰

Levi himself furthermore and significantly adds that, “in spite of the varied possibilities of information, most Germans didn't know because they didn't want to know. Because they wanted not to know [...] In this way the typical German citizen [...] shutting his mouth, his eyes and his ears, [...] *built the illusion of not knowing*”⁶¹ (my italics). I believe that this description seems apt for Campbell and for a human trait that is all too common, a capacity that lurks in every man.

These two paradoxes, that of knowledge versus illusion and that of free will versus determinism, the former arguably a subdivision of the later, can be seen throughout Vonnegut's work. It is interesting to draw parallels with Vonnegut's Winston Niles Rumfoord, from *The Sirens of Titan* and Campbell, on the one hand, and the illusion/knowledge in *Cat's Cradle* and *Mother Night* on the other. Winston Niles Rumfoord travels through chrono-synclatic infundibulum and comes to be able to see the past and the future simultaneously. He has a grand plan of achieving world peace, but at the expense of lots of people whom he kidnaps and brainwashes to become an army that is to become martyrs in the cause of a war to literally end all wars, for from it Rumfoord forms a universal religion to unite mankind, the “Church of God the Utterly Indifferent”. Rumfoord teaches that luck is not in the hand of God and devises a mechanism to be put on people that ensures that no one can advance further than the other, enforced socialism at its most absurd (and simultaneously frightening and funny). Later in the book the reader learns that Rumfoord's

⁶⁰ Levi, pp. 461-62

⁶¹ Levi, pp. 458-63.

endeavors have served the cause of aliens from Tralfamodore in order to supply old Salo, a Tralfamadorian robot, who has been assisting Rumfoord in his plans, with a replacement for his spaceship, so that Salo can return to his home planet. When Rumfoord expresses his dissatisfaction with having been used, and Salo asks why Rumfoord didn't mention this before, Rumfoord responds: "Nobody likes to think he's being used [...] He'll put off admitting it to himself until the last possible instant [...] It may surprise you to learn that I take a certain pride, no matter how foolishly mistaken that pride may be, in making my own decisions for my own reasons."⁶² Rumfoord can hence, like Campbell, simultaneously be both a tool and a perpetrator, simultaneously build himself an illusion and be aware of it. Illusion of awareness/awareness of illusion. Responsibility/determinism. He can perhaps even be seen as doing good and bad at the same time, achieving world peace and equality, but at the price already mentioned. Similarly, in *Cat's Cradle*, there is the religion of Bokononism, *The Books of Bokonon* already establishing on the first page that the book is nothing but lies.⁶³ This doesn't change the fact that practically all the inhabitants of the small poor island of San Lorenzo are devoted followers. And yet the lies don't turn out all that well, for the religion is ultimately (like that of Rumfoord's, or Campbell's actions as a Nazi propagandist) also destructive, Bokonon "hastening the apocalypse" (caused by the spilling, and then spreading of Ice-nine, a chemical making water freeze at room temperature) "... into water rather than warding it off."⁶⁴

Just as truth was uncomfortable for Rumfoord and Campbell, so it was for the people of San Lorenzo, the reality of their situation too harsh to deal with, as was the case of Rumfoord's and Campbell's. Like Campbell and Rumfoord, the people of San Lorenzo dealt with it by deluding themselves, their lies being provided for them by Bokonon, and, like Rumfoord and Campbell, they were simultaneously aware of the lies being, in fact, lies, and yet persisted in living in accordance with those lies. Bokonon and his friend Corporal McCabe were originally young adventurers, each of them "half pirate/half saint". However,

⁶² Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959; New York: Dial Press), p. 290.

⁶³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (1963; New York: Dial Press, 2006), p. 265.

⁶⁴ Petterson, p. 50.

in order for the religion that was to relieve the people of San Lorenzo from dwelling on their misery to work, Bokonon felt that it had to be outlawed. Bokonon took on the role of the religious saint and McCabe the role of the villainous tyrant, each having to give up one part of themselves for the other part, each working as the other's deterrent in order to give the religion more zest. McCabe and Bokonon, like Campbell (and perhaps even Rumfoord), got trapped in their roles, becoming, to all practical purposes insane⁶⁵ (the sanity of Campbell having already been questioned earlier in this essay). In that sense we get the same theme as in *Mother Night*, that we "are what we pretend to be."

Mother Night has widely been seen to be in many ways different from other books by Vonnegut. Robert Scholes describes it as "darker than the others, a little less comic but by no means a satire,"⁶⁶ Vonnegut then being asked a similar question in another interview, if he agreed that the novel was different or darker than his others, as the interviewer claimed many people felt.⁶⁷ It is interesting, however, that the novel includes all the major themes which Holland claims run through Vonnegut's works.⁶⁸ There is the free will versus determinism, already touched upon by Petterson, and the duality of love. As Holland describes it: "Campbell's love for Helga is good, in itself, yet it insulates him from the world to the extent that he becomes a contributing factor in the slaughter of Jews by the Nazis."⁶⁹ It could in fact be argued that the uncritical love that Campbell praises and the unquestioned faith he finds vile are in fact not all that different. Since it seems Helga doesn't know Campbell, due to him not revealing his identity as a spy, one might furthermore wonder whether she loves him in spite of being the Nazi she believes he is, or even because of it. Either way, this is ignoring the darker side and ultimately alienating. Finally, there is natural depravity versus natural goodness, and, as the Holland points out, "Vonnegut is proud of the fact that none of his books have villains, but it should be noted that none of them really have heroes. Even the

⁶⁵ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, pp. 172-76.

⁶⁶ Robert Scholes, "A Talk With Kurt Vonnegut" (1973), in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: U Mississippi Press, 1988), p. 129.

⁶⁷ Nolte in Vonnegut and Nolte interview (*Mother Night* DVD)

⁶⁸ Holland, pp. 53-56.

⁶⁹ Holland, p. 55

Nazis in *Mother Night* are not purely evil...”⁷⁰

Campbell’s position may in part be seen as that of a man struggling with his sanity. Two of his last poems indeed reflect on his wish to distance himself from the world and on his wish that his inner self be preserved and valued, regardless of the actions of the outer self (*MN*, 121-24). The fight to keep his sanity becomes a delusion, isolating him from the very events that he continues to pursue actively. He is aware of the illusion while he still acts according to it. He claims to have taught himself to rid himself of various emotions (guilt, loss, loathing of death, rage, need for love, expectations from God), and if that is true, one may indeed wonder if such a man can be called wholly sane.

An obvious question at this point would be: Why does Campbell hang himself at the end of the novel (if indeed he does, for actually, he only announces that he thinks he will do so that very night, without the reader ever being fully aware of whether he does so or not). Veeder asks whether this is supposed to be a sad fact, not experiencing it that way himself, but acknowledging that he's not all that sure that Vonnegut intends the end of the book to be as flat as he perceives it.⁷¹ Klinkowitz sees Campbell’s possible suicide as being “the first time in his life in the entire novel (in which) he takes matters into his own hands: instead of submitting to execution by the Israeli government for crimes against humanity,” electing to “hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself,” perceiving the loss of self, when the romantic self has been made the center of the universe, as lost, literally, when that self collapses, and seeing Campbell as a man who realizes this.⁷² A similar view is displayed by Holland: “his decision is not so much a moral judgment as it is an admission of this infidelity to himself. In his role-playing, he lost sight of his real self and lost his free will [...]. Ironically, Campbell’s suicide is the first really free act in the whole novel.”⁷³ Yet, as Petterson points out, Campbell repeatedly renounces his free will (his numbness as a member of “the Nation of Two” towards the real world contributing to his decision to become an

⁷⁰ Holland, p. 56

⁷¹ Veeder claims this in “Vonnegut in Academe (III)”, in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler (New York: Delacorte Press/ Seymour Lawrence: 1977), p. 199.

⁷² Klinkowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect*, p. 60.

⁷³ Holland, p. 27.

agent, his decision to turn himself in to the Israeli authorities, and finally the alleged intention to commit suicide). Petterson furthermore asks: “do not the repudiations actually assert free will in the act of abandoning it – does he not choose to yield his free will?”⁷⁴

I think this is really touching upon the core of Campbell’s moral schizophrenia, the awareness of the illusion and vice versa, the conscious choice of deluding yourself while being aware of that very act, and acting in accordance with it. Petterson indeed sees Campbell as “paradoxically assert[ing] his own narcissism; he – and only he – holds the right to punish his evil deeds.”⁷⁵

Perhaps the question should be reversed, though: What has Campbell to live for? His legacy is that his most fervent admirers are neo-Nazis, directly inspired by his Nazi persona, and ironically, in the end, Jones is the only one he can trust, save for, perhaps, Wirtanen. Campbell's parents may have died of broken hearts (*MN*, p. 45), his best friend betrays him, Campbell has been used by practically everyone while having at the same time been active in his role and knowing how it went against his better judgment and conscience, never knowing, save for one instance, the content of the broadcasts, being unable to know whether he has done more harm than good, but suspecting it to be so, his love-life perverted, having by his own view betrayed Helga’s memory: “She made me faithless to those memories, and they can never be the same again” (*MN*, 206) (never knowing, in fact whether she survived or not). Furthermore, he learns that his love/sex diary has been published in Russia as pornography complete with graphic illustrations (not his own, and these illustrations are indeed his chief objection). The man who found the trunk with Campbell’s plays, translating many of them, and widely believed to be the author of *Confessions of a Monogamous Casanova*, ended up being shot ironically enough, not for plagiarism, when he started to claim Campbell’s work as his own, but for originality, when he started writing his own stuff, and a 2000 word long satire on the Soviet Army was found in his home. Campbell himself claims: “the part of me that wanted to tell the truth got turned into an expert liar! The lover in

⁷⁴ Petterson, p. 87

⁷⁵ Petterson, p. 48

me got turned into a pornographer! The artist in me got turned into ugliness such as the world has never seen! Even my most cherished memories have now been converted into catfood, glue and liverwurst!” (MN, 206). Klinkowitz notes that “art and love should be inviolate, but in the world of *Mother Night* they are violated at every turn, calling Campbell’s refuge of the self into profound question.”⁷⁶ Indeed, Campbell’s art, love and politics, could all be said to have been perverted, by himself and others, e.g the fact that Campbell broadcasted coded information about the possible death of Helga, before even learning of her possible death himself, and only learning of having done so through Wirtanen informing him about this at the end of the war. This is indeed the only broadcast of Campbell’s whose content Campbell ever learns. Campbell was particularly upset about learning this, perceiving it as a wider separation of his several selves, and indeed it seems to perfectly reflect his moral schizophrenia.

Finally there is Resi’s suicide, killing herself out of disappointment with Campbell, seeing nothing else to live for.

Concluding remarks

Whether we conclude Campbell’s death ultimately to be a good or a bad thing, or whether he himself is good or bad, depends on how we ourselves would address such fundamental philosophical questions as to whether one man should be sacrificed to save a hundred.

Vonnegut reminds us of the grey areas we humans inhabit, what a fine line there can exist between seeming opposites, particularly in human nature, of the capacities for the extremes in the human soul. He furthermore reminds us of the effects that all our actions and inactions have directly, or indirectly, on our environment. The effect that our behavior has on ourselves and others, in the end, is what counts. The duality is already expressed in the book’s title and in the lines from Faust, quoted in the editor’s note: “I am part of the dark that gave birth to the light ...” (MN, xii). It’s rather like the Japanese ying/yang and I don’t think that it is a coincidence that the white side has a little of the dark and vice versa.

⁷⁶ Klinkowitz, *The Vonnegut Effect*, p. 59.

In the end, as for this human capability that can permit people to commit acts with horrible consequences, even knowingly, this act of distancing oneself, which may not necessarily be bad but has every chance of becoming so, is well described by Primo Levi, as regards Nazi hatred. Levi furthermore theorizes about this common human potential in general: “We cannot understand it, but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we must be on our guard. If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened can happen again. Conscience can be seduced and obscured again – even our consciences.” Levi reminds us how the ideas of Hitler and Mussolini, “charismatic leaders”, with a strong seductive power in the way they proclaimed them, and which “were, in general, aberrant, silly or cruel” were yet “acclaimed with hosannas and followed to death by millions of the faithful”, reminding us further that the followers were not born torturers, nor (with a few exceptions) were they monsters; “More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions, like Eichmann; like Hoss, the commandant of Auschwitz; Stangl, commandant of Treblinka; like the French military of twenty years later, slaughterers in Algeria; like the Khmer Rouge of the late seventies, slaughterers in Cambodia”.⁷⁷ Nolte describes Campbell as “a monster of a different kind, he’s a monster of the lack of awareness, the monster of ignorance, the monster of, you know, romanticism.”⁷⁸

Now, it can hardly be said that Campbell is a true believer. He was always, by his own claims, aware of what he did, and even of it being wrong. Yet he did it anyway. That, it seems to me, is the real threat.

If Campbell has been a hero he has ultimately also been a villain. Nothing he does can give back any of the lives that he may be responsible for. If he has done something good he is at the same time guilty of something evil that has furthermore gone against his own beliefs, having indeed, by his own account, committed “crimes against [his] conscience” (*MN*, 29). Ultimately, not knowing the content of the messages he broadcasted (save for the one

⁷⁷ Levi, 476-77.

⁷⁸ Interview with Nolte, *Mother Night* DVD.

previously mentioned), he'll never know if he has caused more damage than good.

Although several critics have noted that the story is ambiguous, and some have found this a fault in the book, to the point of being downright confusing,⁷⁹ I actually find this to be the book's strength. By raising these fundamental topics for speculation Vonnegut asks big questions about life, the universe and everything.⁸⁰

In Vonnegut's collection of articles and speeches, *Palm Sunday*, he describes the thesis he developed in anthropology at the University of Chicago, wherein he studied the shapes he felt that stories had and could be drawn as a graph on paper. He was interested in the similarities in the structure of simple stories in various cultures. On one horizontal side of an axis would be "B" for beginning and on the other "E" for end. The vertical axis would consist of "G" for good fortune and "I" for ill fortune. From using this the graph, for example, Vonnegut found that the creation myth from the Old Testament and the story of Cinderella were identical.⁸¹ Vonnegut would revisit the thesis later on at various stages, for example in another collection, *A Man Without a Country*: "But anyway, I read these stories one after the other, collected from primitive people all over the world, and they were dead level, like the B-E axis here. So all right. Primitive people deserve to lose with their lousy stories. They really are backward. Look at the wonderful rise and fall of our stories."⁸² But later in the chapter, Vonnegut shows how Hamlet has the same structure in terms of good fortune/bad fortune:

So he goes along, and finally he gets in a duel and gets killed. Well, did he go to heaven or hell? Quite a difference. Cinderella or Kafka's cockroach? I don't think Shakespeare believed in heaven or hell any more than I do. And so we don't know whether it's good news or bad news.

I have just demonstrated to you that Shakespeare was as poor a

79 Particularly Veeder, who feels the author's voice to be all too vague and his technique to be ineffective. See *Vonnegut in America* (pp. 197-200).

80 The answer to which, as every reader of Douglass Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* knows, is "42". (1979; New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), pp. 180-81. One might add that Douglas Adams was a huge fan of Vonnegut's and acknowledged how his own book was inspired by *The Sirens of Titan*.

81 Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday* (1981; New York: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 2006), pp. 285-88.

82 Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*, pp. 27-28.

storyteller as any Arapaho.

But there's a reason we recognize Hamlet as a masterpiece: it's that Shakespeare told us the truth, and people so rarely tell us the truth in this rise and fall here (indicates blackboard). The truth is, we know so little about life, we don't really know what the good news is and what the bad news is. And if I die – God forbid – I would like to go up to heaven and ask somebody in charge up there: “Hey, what was the bad news and what was the good news?”⁸³

As mentioned earlier, the university turned his thesis down, though Vonnegut would eventually obtain his master's degree through *Cat's Cradle*. About his discovery and the University's initial dismissal of his thesis, Vonnegut had this to say:

“I was thrilled to discover that years ago, and I am just as thrilled today. The apathy of the University of Chicago is repulsive to me.

They can take a flying fuck at the mooooooooooooooooooon.”⁸⁴

Vonnegut adds, a few lines below, in this chapter with the stated subject of the sexual revolution, that there is “little that is genuinely sexual about telling a great university to take a flying fuck at the mooooooooooooooooooon”.⁸⁵

Campbell's actions were neither wholly determined nor wholly free. Yet everything he did affected his world in some way, as with all our actions in life, but in his case, what he did was on a major scale and ultimately he was, amongst other things he did, responsible for much harm. Even if he was not wholly bad or wholly good, Vonnegut himself saw him as a monster, because of the harm that he caused, and furthermore Campbell was always on some level aware of the wrongness, even if there was not much else he could do after putting himself in that position. Weide said that when asked, Vonnegut had told him his position explaining:

⁸³ Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*, pp. 35-36.

⁸⁴ Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday*, p. 288.

⁸⁵ Vonnegut, *ibid*.

“The example he gave to me was that if Campbell were confronted with Holocaust victims or Holocaust survivors, people who were in the camps during the war or who lost relatives, if he were confronted with them 15 years after the war, and you know, while the relatives are being put into the gas chambers there was Howard’s voice metaphorically over the loudspeakers egging them on, if they met up with Howard years later, say, in New York and said ‘how could you do this?’ and if Howard said ‘Oh, well, you don’t understand, my speeches actually had code in them that were helping the Allies’, that wouldn’t matter a wit to those people, I mean Howard, he still did what he did and the speeches had the effect that they did, so in Howard’s mind, or rather I should say in Vonnegut’s mind, I guess Howard’s, you know, the means, the ends didn’t justify the means. I just thought that it was interesting that Vonnegut came down so specifically on one side of that issue.”⁸⁶

By raising complex questions of morality and identity, the novel compels the reader to ask himself, in effect, “What would I have done?” That is certainly the effect Weide hoped the film adaptation would bring out: “I wanted them to think of it in terms of how it applies to their own lives and moral decisions and ethical decisions that we all make and the way we justify terrible things that we do.”⁸⁷ And this seems to be what Vonnegut is fishing for as well. Gordon asks what we would have done if we’d grown up in Germany, knowing of the atrocities. That might have meant death for yourself or your family. Would there have been an opportunity to speak out? Would we have gone along with the program or risked our lives? He reminds us of Vonnegut’s own words (“If I’d been born in Germany...” (*MN*, vii-viii). As he points out, there is no right or wrong answer. Gordon compares the situation further with the McCarthy hearings, claiming he thinks it *was* wrong to give in to the committee, and yet reminds the viewer to consider what he might have done himself under

⁸⁶ Weide, “Audio Commentary.”

⁸⁷ Weide, *ibid.*

that pressure.⁸⁸ In other words, we might have become as guilty, and that's the point. Even if everybody has a capacity for doing something that has dire consequences, even if there was nothing else one could do, the action, with its consequences would still remain. This is not to imply that everybody *would* behave in such a way, it's just saying that he'd have the capacity to *do* so. I believe this is an important distinction.

Arguably, against all the odds (particularly in Campbell's case due to his status having accepted the agent/propagandist role), Vonnegut upholds the notion of common decency, a thread running through all his work, summarized by one fan as "Love may fail but courtesy will prevail."⁸⁹ This larger paradox of Vonnegut's, between determinism and responsibility, Petterson finds to be "one of the most fascinating – and fundamental aspects of his career,"⁹⁰ claiming that "the larger type of irony in the theme and form of his novels may be Vonnegut's most lasting contribution to American literature, not least because it expresses his abiding interest in the forces determining human behavior and in the responsibility man nonetheless must accept."⁹¹

My personal view on Vonnegut's work is pretty much the same as expressed by a drunk Elliot Rosewater in Vonnegut's novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* towards a group of Science Fiction-Writers, whose conference he has just crashed:

"I love you sons of bitches [...]. You're all I read anymore. You're the only ones who'll talk about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. You're the only ones with guts enough to really care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents, and catastrophes do to us. You're the only ones zany enough to agonize over time and distances without limit,

⁸⁸ Gordon, "Audio Commentary."

⁸⁹ Kurt Vonnegut. Preface. *Jailbird* by Kurt Vonnegut (1979; New York: Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2006), p. 2.

⁹⁰ Petterson, p. 39.

⁹¹ Petterson, p. 148.

over mysteries that will never die, over the fact that we are right now determining whether the space voyage for the next billion years or so is going to be heaven or hell.”⁹²

I find it fitting to end this essay with a quotation from one of Graham Greene’s books, Greene himself having claimed Vonnegut to be “one of the best living American authors.” The quote, I feel, rings very true with Campbell, Vonnegut’s vision and the complexity and ambiguity of mankind, the fine lines between the opposites that we sort of walk a tight rope on: “The greatest saints have been men with more than a normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious men have sometimes narrowly escaped sanctity.”⁹³

⁹² Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965; New York: Dial, 2006), p. 18.

⁹³ Quoted in John Tolland, “Foreword,” in his *Adolf Hitler* (1976; London: Book Club Associates, 1977), p. xiv.

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