Shades of Dresden: Kurt Vonnegut and the Artist's Responsibility in Responding to and Representing War

Marissa S. Brown
Shades of Dresden:

Kurt Vonnegut and the Artist’s Responsibility in Responding to and Representing War.

Warfare has been a widely studied subject, dating as far back as the Greek historian Thucydides recording the events of the Peloponnesian War (Okerstrom 13). For as long as humanity has engaged in warfare, there have also been creative responses as a means of interpreting and evaluating this form of international violence. When confronting war we face not only the disturbing truths about a history of massacres, but also the evil of human nature and our own inherent potential for cruelty. War is noteworthy and disturbing because of the affluence of premeditated, intentional, and brutal deaths. Also, when examining war we see a central component of our own humanity: mortality.

Our identities are tied up in not only anticipating our own demise, but also our relationship to a history of warfare through which many innocent people were intentionally slaughtered for varying, but mostly selfish, purposes. When wrestling with warfare, one also grapples with universal problems about the nature of our selves. But how does one engage the issue of warfare from an outside perspective, when distanced either by time (as a war veteran years following a conflict) or by space (as a citizen whose countrymen are fighting overseas)? Artists can play an influential role in shaping a nation’s own war making or peacemaking personality. Artists from America’s canon of writers that present an evident social consciousness in their works include Transcendentalist writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain. These writers are also famously vocal in their criticisms of war and the issues surrounding warfare. However, while
many artists, like these, have chosen to represent war, and some even to speak out against it, questions for debate still arise. Often people turn to art for entertainment, or for long term escapism from the horrors evident in our world. When so many desire aid in forgetting about life for a while, should an artist still address war in his/her works, and if so, in what manner?

Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States* and *Artists in the Times of War*, in a recent interview discussed the major roles an artist can serve in relation to politics:

There are all sorts of artists. There are artists who don’t really have a social consciousness, who don’t see that there’s a connection between art and life in a way that compels the artist to look around the world and see what is wrong and try to use his or her art to change that. There are artists who just entertain. You can look upon entertainment as something useful. (Burton 4)

Zinn continues by describing the importance of entertainment as a means for boosting morale and serving as a distraction, but he recognizes the deeper wealth found in art serving a more political purpose. While entertainment is valuable in its own right, if one continues to rely on it for comfort and escape,

the entertainment that you seek will become permanent. The misery that people live under and the wars that people have to go through . . . will become permanent . . . In order to change that you need to have artists who will be conscious of that, who will use their art in a such a way that it helps to transform society. It may not be a blunt instrument, but it will have a kind of poetic effect. (Burton 4)

As Zinn argues, artists can play an extremely valuable role in relation to warfare. Through their art they can help accurately capture true war stories and the essence of the lives of people involved in war. They can lead us to truths about humanity and have a powerful effect on our lives. While employing creative and imaginative forces through their works, artists deal most importantly in the truth. For the “truth in the hands of artists, even when they are telling a fiction
... becomes a very powerful thing. Because what artists do is lend passion and emotion—they lend a kind of spiritual element to reality that enhances the truth" (Zinn qtd. in Burton 2).

Kurt Vonnegut is such an artist who addresses and fulfills, in and through his works, all of the issues Zinn brings to the forefront about the relation between art and society. As Jerome Klinkowitz and many others note, “Vonnegut has sustained himself as a great public writer in the tradition of Mark Twain, addressing himself to the major social, political, and philosophical issues” of his time (Reforming 5). Vonnegut has made a life-long effort to conveying anti-war sentiments throughout an impressive writing career that spans 50+ years and includes slews of short stories, commencement speeches, and 14 fiction novels. While the themes relating to war and art reappear in many of his works, I wish to examine three specific novels which display an interesting progression of themes about the relation between the artist and war.

Mother Night, Slaughterhouse-Five, and Bluebeard all address different facets of the issue of an artist’s responsibility in responding to and representing war. In these three novels, Kurt Vonnegut highlights the major fields of responsibility an artist encounters when representing war. In Mother Night, he examines the life and personality of a propagandist, revealing the power and influence, for either good or evil, which an artist possesses in times of war. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut addresses the issue of portrayals of truth in art about war. He specifically combats faulty conceptions of the American soldier contained in popular books and movies directly following WWII. In this critique, he examines the artist’s moral responsibility not only to himself but also his audience to truthfully represent warfare. In Bluebeard Vonnegut revisits the important themes of these earlier novels and then broadens the discussion, highlighting the value of perspective and the importance of the audience to any artwork about war. After embarking on this journey through three novels spanning almost the entire length of his writing career, we are not only enlightened about the role of the artist in responsibly representing war, but we also see how Vonnegut has personally fulfilled this
commission through his own artwork. Finally, we leave challenged to look simultaneously inward and forward and consider our own responsibility as an audience in relation to war.

The Personality of Propaganda: Artistic and Moral Ambiguity in *Mother Night*

"We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be"

(Vonnegut, *Mother v*).

Through this explicit moral, presented in the introduction of his third novel *Mother Night*, Kurt Vonnegut brings to the forefront questions of truth and deception in relation to how war shapes an artist's identity. Stanley Schatt notes that the struggle for identity formation is a particularly poignant issue in *Mother Night*: "As a man of imagination, Campbell is the first of a series of Vonnegut characters who ponder the role of the artist in the modern world" (48). The protagonist, a writer named Howard W. Campbell, exemplifies the effects of war on an artist's personality. In fact, Campbell becomes so subsumed by his country's war art he eventually must answer for crimes committed by the Nazi he "pretends" he is throughout the war. Through Campbell, Vonnegut begins a discussion of war propaganda that he revisits in greater detail in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. By shifting Campbell's role from artist to propagandist, Vonnegut sheds light on an artist's moral responsibility to himself and his audience; both must answer for the consequences of such an influential art form.

As a practicing artist with American citizenship but living in Germany, Campbell's relation to art changes drastically because of WWII. He works as a successful playwright and poet before WWII, but after the war breaks out, Campbell becomes "a writer and broadcaster of Nazi propaganda to the English-speaking world . . . the leading expert on American problems in the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda" (Vonnegut, *Mother 27*). Though during the war he specializes in news broadcasts, he adds a subtle creativity to this medium, using it to maintain and perfect his acting skills. This "acting" eventually gets him arrested and put on trial
because he “committed high treason, crimes against humanity, and crimes against [his] own conscience.” Campbell initially maintains a belief in his own innocence because he serves as “an American agent all through the war,” sending coded messages to the Allies through his broadcasts (Vonnegut, Mother 29). However, Campbell’s intentions blur any black and white moral lines, making ultimately determining his guilt or innocence a gray issue.

Despite his American citizenship, patriotism doesn’t thrill Campbell and he initially refuses the double agent position. He scoffs at the possibility of having any outstanding effect on the war effort and highlights an important misconception about artists: that they have an inconsequential relation to war efforts. After the American recruiter he calls his “Blue Fairy Godmother” offers him the job, Campbell replies, “I’m not a soldier, not a political man. I’m an artist. If war comes, I won’t do anything to help it along. If war comes, it’ll find me still working at my peaceful trade” (Vonnegut, Mother 38, emphasis added). Ironically, in only a matter of time Campbell discovers the intense power art can have on the producer and the audience during war: his art plays a major role in promoting violence among countless Germans; his broadcasts, which John Somer interprets as “clever satires . . . are taken literally by the Nazis. . . [and] he actually strengthens the forces of ‘evil’” (225). Soon Campbell stands trial for “Complicity in the murder of six million Jews” (Vonnegut, Mother 145).

Campbell’s anti-Semitic broadcasts feed into the deadly mindset of Aryan superiority, the creed of the Nazi movement. Israeli officials argue that “a propagandist of [his] sort was as much a murderer as Heydrich, Eichmann, Himmler, or any of the gruesome rest” (Vonnegut, Mother 160). Campbell writes for and to a German audience that is trying to make sense of Hitler’s mission. His words give articulation and voice to their sentiments, and aid in distributing and maintaining this world view among the masses. Many find his broadcasts inspirational, and he has numerous devoted followers and admirers. One of his ardent fans is an American named Dr. Jones, editor and publisher of The White Christian Minuteman, who starts an underground anti-
Semitic newspaper to establish a more direct tie between Nazis in America and in Germany. His respect for Campbell highlights his public identity, and Jones describes Campbell as “a beacon ... through all those black years” (Vonnegut, *Mother* 88).

However, others besides his loyal followers openly acknowledge Campbell’s commanding presence. His father-in-law Werner Noth, despite scorning and distrusting Campbell, still compliments Campbell’s broadcasts, saying:

... I don’t care if you were a spy or not ... Because you could never have served the enemy as well as you served us ... I realized that almost all the ideas that I hold now, that make me unashamed of anything I may have felt or done as a Nazi, came not from Hitler, not from Goebbels, not from Himmler—but from you ... You alone kept me from concluding that Germany was insane (Vonnegut, *Mother* 99).

Even his “Blue Fairy Godmother” recognizes that Campbell the Nazi serves as more than just a radio personality. In a conversation with Werdener, the American agent who recruits him, Campbell comments that only three people know the authentic Howard W. Campbell. Werdener refutes this statement, and argues that all of the listeners actually do encounter the real Campbell. Initially, Campbell feels appalled that even Werdener calls him a Nazi, but Werdener replies, “How else could a responsible historian classify you?” (Vonnegut, *Mother* 188). By all visible proof, most easily accessed through citing his words, Campbell is a Nazi. But he soon realizes that when he adopted the title of “Nazi”, he lost his creative role and became merely a political tool.

Along with surrendering his national loyalties to the Nazi party, Campbell also drops his pre-war role of an artist: “One of the first things I discovered when I became an agent was that I couldn’t afford an imagination any more” (Vonnegut, *Mother* 188). Instead of playing the part of creator and supplying the words as an author and playwright, Campbell forfeits personal control and serves as a spokesman and puppet for both Nazi rhetorical manipulation, and Allied secret
intelligence. Campbell moves beyond the act of creation and instead becomes in mind, body, and actions an instrument of propaganda.

Not only his voice, but his entire person serves as a tool for both the Nazi’s and the Allied forces: his “broadcasts carried coded information out of Germany” to the Allies while he also served as a canvas of manipulative Nazi war propaganda (Vonnegut, Mother 29). Though aware of delivering messages through a series of stumbles, coughs, and pauses inserted in his speeches, Campbell never has a clear idea about the content of the coded information he relays over the radio waves. He gets no specific details about this secret good he supposedly transmits through his broadcasts. But, concerning his Nazi persona, he has full awareness of its evil: he knows “full well what ignorant, destructive, obscenely jocular things” he is saying (Vonnegut, Mother 179). Campbell signifies the way in which harmful ideologies “come to life” in the form of propaganda and wreak havoc on an audience.

Campbell becomes a tool, unknowingly relaying information to the Allies about the death of his wife. His recruiting agent informs him that he “had broadcast the coded announcement of . . . Helga’s disappearance . . . without even knowing” or realizing it (Vonnegut, Mother 184). This upsetting news helps solidify his personal realization that no real separation exists between his public and private selves, and it also makes him aware of the potentiality of inadvertently communicating other messages through one’s art:

At that climactic moment in my life, when I had to suppose that my Helga was dead would have liked to mourn as an agonized soul, indivisible. But no. One part of me told the world of the tragedy in code. The rest of me didn’t even know the announcement was being made. (Vonnegut, Mother 184)

While the pain of his “good” side stings authentically, the malice of his “evil” side resonates just as powerfully. Lawrence Broer reads in Mother Night a desire to expose “the capacity for cruelty and moral blindness within the soul of every man and woman” (46).
Campbell originally blindsides morality, remaining motivated by personal glorification and escapism through his art. He seeks gratification through becoming “an authentic hero, about a hundred times braver than any ordinary man” (Vonnegut, *Mother 38*). Campbell describes the appeal of espionage as an opportunity for glory:

> He didn’t mention the best reason for expecting me to go on and be a spy. The best reason was that I was a ham. As a spy . . . I would have an opportunity for some pretty great acting. I would fool everyone with my brilliant interpretation of a Nazi, inside and out . . . And I did fool everybody. I began to strut like Hitler’s right-hand man, and nobody saw the honest me I hid so deep inside. (Vonnegut, *Mother 39*).

Campbell’s basic belief that the good in his heart outweighs any evil in his actions can be seen in his former writing career. Stanley Schatt interprets Campbell’s early artistic career, which consists of writing cheesy romantic plays with the main roles slated specifically for his wife Helga, as an attack on irresponsible artists: “Howard’s plays and childishness are symptomatic of one of the major reasons wars occur. His medieval plays are constructed upon the principle that people are either pure good or pure evil” (45). Campbell uses his simplistic understanding of good and evil as rationale for becoming an anti-Semite. He admits that he is “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.’” He tries to find personal salvation in the intentions inherent in his “secretly virtuous insides” (Vonnegut, *Mother* viii). Eventually, though, he describes himself as “a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times” (Vonnegut, *Mother* xiii). Campbell discovers through the course of the novel, after dropping writing and dabbling with acting, that this shrine of a “good” and “perfect” self hidden deep in his heart is far from enough to absolve him from the sins of his “other” self—from the implications of the art he has become.
The interconnectedness of art and morality is a major question addressed in the novel, and as Richard Giannone notes, is first explicitly stated by Vonnegut in the preface: “The maxim (moral) holds that the imagination is an active moral force. By this light, art — progeny of the imagination — and life are one” (45). Throughout the novel, Campbell operates under a harmful "anthropocentric notion of guilt" and morality perpetuated by his romanticism, a mindset which eventually causes his own fall (Sommer 225). Vonnegut demonstrates through Campbell’s story that the relation between the artist and moral responsibility is actually threefold: the obligation of the artist to himself, of the artist to his audience, and of the audience to itself.

Artists and other public figures find themselves in an immensely influential position because of the increased malleability of popular audiences during the chaotic social and moral environments created by war. Artists can sometimes have more power and control than politicians or officials over the opinions of popular audiences. For, as Percy Shelley argues: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (140). Campbell’s crimes would not be possible without the reactions of his audience. Campbell even says that he “had hoped, as a broadcaster, to be merely ludicrous ... but this is hard work to be ludicrous in, with so many human beings so reluctant to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate. So many people wanted to believe [him]!” (Vonnegut, Mother 160).

The public will often rely on artists or other leaders to write their stories for them. Rudolf Hoess, the Commandant of Auschwitz, describes the admiration and envy he has for artists: “How I envy you creative people . . . Creativity is a gift from the gods” (Vonnegut, Mother 17). Non-artists envy not only creativity, but also articulation. Hoess, like so many others, “had some marvelous stories to tell . . . they were all true, but . . . people wouldn’t be able to believe them” and he had not the talent to write them compellingly (Vonnegut, Mother 17). However, even from the position of writer, Campbell is still greatly influenced and manipulated by outside
forces. Though he literally writes the stories, they are still generated from the German society within which he finds himself situated.

Campbell and his wife Helga’s naïve and oblivious lives before the war provide perfect examples of people allowing the state to create their story for them. Because the Campbell’s live such sheltered and unassuming lives, the harmful ideologies thrown their way by political and artistic mediums easily manipulate and control the couple. Campbell and his wife live so caught up in their marriage and theatrical careers that they unthinkingly accept their country’s propaganda without fully absorbing the true implications of these media messages. The form of the speech seduces and deceives them. Campbell describes this in retrospect:

We didn’t even listen to each other’s words. We heard only the melodies in our voices... If we had listened for more, had thought about what we heard, what a nauseated couple we would have been!... we talked like the patriotic lunatics all around us (Vonnegut, Mother 43).

Campbell’s disgust with himself and his wife reflects the novel’s larger question about the responsibility of the audience’s response to propaganda. Vonnegut criticizes, through an unlikely speaker, the complacency of masses of people to manipulative rulers. One of Campbell’s guards while he is being held prisoner in Israel, Arpad Kovacs, assumes that Campbell’s broadcasts were only effective because they targeted “complacent bastards... smug briquets... By briquets he meant people who did nothing to save their own lives or anybody else’s life when the Nazi’s took over, who were willing to go meekly all the way to the gas chambers, if that was where the Nazis wanted them to go” (Vonnegut, Mother 11). However, even while condemning others for passively accepting the messages of Nazi propaganda, Kovacs himself demonstrates the manipulative power of this artistic medium.

Kovacs, after only hearing about Campbell’s former career as a writer, “walked up and down the corridor, waving and praising [Campbell’s] pages extravagantly. He didn’t read them.
He praised them for what he imagined to be in them” (Vonnegut, *Mother 11*). Kovacs demonstrates the seductive power of the mood generated by war propaganda. The mere potential of experiencing an inspiring broadcast excites him so greatly that he becomes emotionally moved without even reading any of the literature. However, when Kovacs finally does read one of Campbell’s radio broadcasts, he feels disappointed because, ironically, he thinks it does not compare with the propaganda he encountered when he, like Campbell, had posed as a harsh Jew-hating Nazi.

Kovacs, though truly a Jew, “got himself false papers and joined the Hungarian S.S.” in order to save his life during the war (Vonnegut, *Mother 12*). He finds pride in how well he plays the part of an Aryan, and even though he serves as the mole that everyone in his S.S. platoon searches for, “He looked bitter and affronted, remembering it, even though he had been that leak” (Vonnegut, *Mother 13*). Kovacs did so much more than just play flawlessly the part of a Nazi; he became a hateful S.S. officer. His statement, “I’m happy to say . . . that fourteen S.S. men were shot on our recommendation,” carries much weight because it rings ultimately true for both sides of his personality (Vonnegut, *Mother 13*). However, while both these men served as double agents, the popular nature of Campbell’s Nazi personality places him in the spotlight and leaves him open for brutal personal attacks.

Public personas can easily serve as scapegoats, taking responsibility for the harm inflicted by their art. Following the war, Campbell “was high on the list of war criminals, largely because [his] offences were so obscenely public” (Vonnegut, *Mother 28*). For each Nazi that worshipped him as a brilliant spokesperson of their movement, countless Americans bore him enmity, cursed his existence, and wished punishment upon him for the atrocities that occurred in the death camps. When the Americans liberated Ohrdruf, Campbell “was taken there . . . forced to look at it all—the lime pits, the gallows, the whipping posts— at the gutted and scabby, bug-eyed, spavined dead in heaps. The idea was to show [him] the consequences of what [he] had
done” (Vonnegut, Mother 28). As an identifiable voice of a group of people and a movement, and a living, breathing medium of propaganda reinforcing their mindset, Campbell bears the weight of the blame for these horrors, especially in the eyes of survivors and critics from the opposing forces.

Though Campbell at first tries to convince himself of his innocence, he is subconsciously aware of his responsibility. Campbell’s first admission of guilt comes out in his dreams. One of the night shift guards in the Israeli jail informs Campbell that he sleeps restlessly and talks all through the night. “You are the only man I ever heard of... who has a bad conscience about what he did in the war. Everybody else, no matter what side he was on, no matter what he did, is sure a good man could not have acted in any other way,” his guard informs him in the morning (Vonnegut, Mother 15). Following the war Campbell cannot rationalize his way out of guilt like his other war criminal counter parts, such as Adolf Eichmann.

Campbell happens to meet Eichman when Israel holds both men prisoner in the same jail. Eichman was “the architect of Aushwitz, the introducer of conveyor belts into crematoria, the greatest customer in the world for the gas called Cyklon-B” (Vonnegut, Mother 165). In this ironic meeting, Eichmann confides in Campbell that he feels no guilt for the murders of six million people. Campbell jokingly comments: “You were simply a soldier... taking orders from higher-ups, like soldiers around the world?” Eichmann reacts angrily, not because Campbell made a joke in poor taste or a ridiculous suggestion, but because he believes that his main line of defense has been leaked. “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” (Vonnegut, Mother 165).

In reflecting on the difference between himself and others like Eichmann, Campbell locates the heart of his crime, and a major problem the artist faces when creating a socially conscious work. While Vonnegut does not exonerate Eichmann, and he should answer for his
crimes, there is a major difference between this man and Campbell. Eichmann was a blind, sick man and “should be sent to the hospital,” and Campbell falls into the category of people “for whom punishments by fair, just men were devised” (Vonnegut, Mother 166). In Campbell’s case, and also in other similarly propaganda-based art, morality is tied up in intentions. Do you still create art even if you know that it will have a potentially harmful result, or that your intentions are not completely honorable? Campbell argues for a basic grasp of right and wrong as foundational for taking responsibility for actions:

... Eichmann cannot distinguish between right and wrong ... not only right and wrong, but truth and falsehood, hope and despair, beauty and ugliness, kindness and cruelty, comedy and tragedy, are all processed by [his] mind indiscriminately ... 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. (Vonnegut, Mother 166)

This inherent understanding and contemplation of morality directly affects Campbell’s final act; he “assumes that he is morally superior to the world and therefore the only one who can be held accountable for his crimes” (Somer 226).

While awaiting trial, a letter that proves Campbell actually served as an American agent arrives. Campbell does not risk being found innocent and set free because of this new evidence and takes justice into his own hands. Acting out of his own knowledge of right and wrong, and after reaching the realization through the process of writing his autobiography that he is responsible for the harmful propaganda perpetuated in and through his Nazi alter ego, he hangs “Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself” (Vonnegut, Mother 268). However, Campbell does not totally redeem his “evilness”; even in his demise, he remains completely wrapped up in himself. He never considers the punishment he deserves in light of the crimes he
committed against the Jews, so his suicide “remains simply an affirmation of an ego obsessed with its own cosmic importance” (Somer 226).

In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut forces us to ponder the villainous role an artist can serve: “If the artist can be a criminal, we have to consider the possibility that a criminal can be a creative artist” (Giannone 48). The “artist” otherwise known as Nazi ideology exercises manipulative control through Campbell, its propagandistic work of art. Campbell’s story raises questions about the responsibility of the artist not only to himself, but also to his audience during the chaotic times created by war. Campbell’s story offers a word of warning for irresponsible artists that assume art and morality exist mutually exclusive of one another. Through *Mother Night*, Vonnegut demonstrates the intimate connections between creation and creator, and artist and audience, and sheds light on the potentially dangerous manipulation and control of war propaganda in many people’s lives.

Campbell’s disregard for others and the moral blindness caused by his own self-centeredness is not a far throw from sentiments characteristic of Americans in the era during and following WWII. Vonnegut reveals critical views of these tendencies in many of his later works. After returning from WWII, Vonnegut came in contact with many people blinded by the false notions of grandeur constantly reinforced within the framework of American society. A sprinkling of this criticism surfaced briefly in *Mother Night*. We can see this as Vonnegut paints a very powerful picture of American glorification of war through a spectacle that Resi and Campbell witness in NYC:

We saw a Veterans’ Day parade down Fifth Avenue, and I heard Resi’s laugh for the first time . . . What struck her so funny was the drum majorettes, kicking at the moon, twitching their behinds, and twirling chromium dildos . . . she said to me . . . “War must be a very sexy thing to Americans” (Vonnegut, *Mother* 139).
*Mother Night*, with these subtle criticisms of America and Americans, paves the way for a more direct attack on our country’s love affair with war following WWII. War criminals like Campbell are far from the only guilty party in war. As the years following the conflict increased, and America became more and more distanced from the events of the time, art became an important source for the truth about the character of war and the personality of the American soldier. In America following WWII, a glorified image of the American soldier was reinforced through the popular books and movies of the time. However, as Vonnegut began to match the popular representations of war up with his own personal experience as an American soldier, it became strikingly evident that his “truth” varied from public presentations of the truth.

Vonnegut’s most famous novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* examines the moral questions artists face and presents the noble duty to truth that an artist should serve when representing war.

**Slaughtering American Propaganda**

Now, and always, an artistic response is an important and powerful reaction to war. Vonnegut, viewing his own experiences as a soldier through an artistic lens helped Americans see more clearly not only the devastation of Dresden, but also the harmful characteristics of ‘Americanism’ that led to this horrific attack. Stanley Schatt described the entrance of this monumental novel onto the American literary scene as both a “lightening rod [and] . . . a seismograph” because of its direct and widespread effect on its audience. It was “published at the nadir of America’s self-confidence during the Vietnam War years; . . . it discarded the easy assumptions of national innocence and intrinsic American worth” (20).

During WWII Americans wished to portray themselves as the world’s official enforcers of morality. After valiantly defeating Hitler and the evil Nazi’s, they deemed it so fit and right that a message of power, intimidation, and warning should be sent to other dictators of powerful nations, such as Russia and Japan. The medium of this message, though following a long and
violent war, became manifest in the form of more destruction. Initially, the American attack that comes to mind is the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima which killed 71,379 people. Because of the employment of the then new technology of mass destruction, the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are propelled to the forefront, into the limelight of horrific WWII bombings. However Dresden, which Vonnegut personally witnessed, was “a unique event in the history of warfare: the largest massacre in military history, outstripping even the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to come later that summer” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 3). Dresden was destroyed using conventional weapons by an American ordered and issued firebombing attack. The entire city was obliterated, wiping out 135,000 people, including many civilians and POW.

Kurt Vonnegut, having survived this horrific massacre, “felt obliged to fulfill his survivor’s duty and bear witness to the event he had experienced” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 3). However, as he began researching the details of the attack, it became evident that Dresden was neither very well known nor often talked about: “It wasn’t a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima . . . There hadn’t been much publicity” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 10). He even “wrote the Air Force . . . asking for details about the raid on Dresden, who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 11). But the public relations man could only inform him that the information was top secret. If the government, the media, and history books weren’t commissioned to communicate the truths about this portion of American history to the country, then who was? Vonnegut, because he witnessed the bombing and its effects first hand and possessed the artistic talent to articulate both the story and truth he personally experienced, undertook the immense task of representing the event through writing his “Dresden book”. However, articulation of a massacre is no simple task.
How should art represent war? This difficult issue haunts, and could potentially hinder, an artist as he attempts to create a piece on war. But the artist’s role in relation to war is immeasurably valuable. Historians are commissioned with the preservation of the facts. They present the observable course of events, and though they may perform some interpretive work, their job remains determining what actually happened, what is true. Artists, however, bear the burden of truth and through their work help us understand and respond to war with the addition of the emotive power of art. Though this is their responsibility, not all artists embrace or succeed at meeting this challenge.

Kurt Vonnegut not only identifies with the enormous task placed on those with a similar calling, he also amply fulfills this commission through his work as a writer. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut dispels familiar yet dangerous myths about the personality and character of the American soldier that had been engrained in the hearts and minds of post WWII America by such influential art forms as television and books. Upon returning from the war and starting a master’s degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago, Vonnegut encountered this all too familiar problem when he “found his professors unwilling to discuss any negative aspects of the war beyond Hitler’s infamy and the Holocaust that had exterminated up to six million Jews and other presumed political enemies” (Klinkowitz, *Reforming 3*).

Unlike his professors, Vonnegut knew that he must directly address the horrors he witnessed in Dresden, but present them from a renewed perspective. For, “to write a truly startling and effective anti-war book, Vonnegut knows he needs to arts of defamiliarization” (Klinkowitz, *Kurt Vonnegut 65*). Vonnegut deconstructs the conventional versions of the American soldier during WWII, and with the benefit of over 20 years distance from these events, he presents his view to a different context: America during the Vietnam War. Through his fiction, Vonnegut reveals the role of the artist as a presenter of the truth about the brutality of
war, and the skewed state of many Americans’ perspectives on war in the decades immediately following WWII.

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969, appeared during a period in American history that is eerily similar to our contemporary military involvement in Iraq. A counter-culture of mostly college-age readers resonated with the text and its applicability to the national unrest caused by the Vietnam War. Vietnam was the first highly televised war, one that brought the pictures of wounded soldiers and civilians right into the country’s living rooms for the first time. Many place blame on the American media for the outcome of the war because the coverage supposedly undermined public support, without which victory could not be possible (Okerstrom 281). Today, the media coverage of warfare that we finally view has gone through a sieve of government censorship and manipulation. The “truth” is carefully prepared, the jarring blow of high numbers of lost lives softened, before public exposure. However, we can turn to other sources for less tainted and more accurate portrayals of war and death. Vonnegut presents raw and striking images of the truth of his own experience in war that remains enduring and applicable. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a perfect example of the power of literary art to capture the horrific reality of war, and subsequently of death as well. Richard Giannone argues that “Art must confront death frankly,” and *Slaughterhouse-five* does precisely this (83).

However, not everyone was ready or willing to accept even the potential writing of a book dealing with such a controversial massacre as Dresden. In the opening chapter, Vonnegut describes a conversation about protest art with a film-maker, presenting a mini and comical stand-off between “the writer” and “the movie-maker” about the enormity of Vonnegut’s task in writing a book on Dresden. He explains to “Harrison Starr, the movie-maker” that he is working on a book about Dresden, and Harrison “raised his eyebrows and inquired, ‘Is it an anti-war book?’” Vonnegut answers yes, and Harrison replies, “Why don’t you write an anti-glacier book instead?” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 3*). Vonnegut agrees that wars are indeed difficult to stop,
that “even if wars didn’t stop coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 4*). However, Vonnegut will not buckle under the weight and difficulty of his subject. He witnessed intentional and premeditated death first hand; it fuels his creative process and propels the effectiveness of his work. Right from the onset, Vonnegut makes the subject of his book very clear.

Before even encountering the text of the novel, his themes become evident in the novel’s two part title. *Slaughterhouse-Five* has a second title: *The Children’s Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death*. The inspirations for the two parts of this alternate title are detailed in the first chapter of the novel, an autobiographical exploration of his struggles with creatively and artistically representing his experiences at Dresden. These phrases serve as the initial presentation of two major issues that the novel addresses: “the subtitle . . . clearly represents Vonnegut’s most serious statements about both war and death” (Schatt 81). Vonnegut’s reference to death as a dance is a powerful metaphor for the artist’s task in creating a work about war. Here he refers to the French writer and subject of the book *Celine and His Vision* by Erika Ostrovsky. During WWI, a French soldier named Celine received a serious head injury. He lost sleep and heard voices in his head. Later, he was a doctor for the poor by day and an author of grotesque novels at night. Through his work he sought to describe the intimate connection between art, death, and truth: “No art is possible without a dance with death, he wrote . . . *The truth is death*, he wrote. *I’ve fought nicely against it as long as I could . . . danced with it, festooned it, waltzed it around*” (qtd. in Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 21*).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the artist’s creative process actually mirrors, generally, the conflict he attempts to capture in his art. The “duty dance” he speaks of references not only the inevitable flirting with death that anyone in battle participates in, but also the artist’s necessary interaction with death in order to enable a closer grasp of the truth through art. As a soldier, Vonnegut witnessed much death and destruction, and now as a writer he submits himself to a
creative waltz with the memories of his experiences, a dance necessary for him and his readers to gain greater insight about not only death, but life. For while death “is at the center of the Dresden experience . . . so too is there life after witnessing all that organized, orchestrated killing” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 5).

One of the seemingly random anecdotes that Vonnegut relates in the first chapter of Slaughterhouse-Five actually provides a nice preface for his continuing discussion about death and the artist. He describes his personal experience as a police reporter, and how death often makes the most interesting news story. For his first assignment Vonnegut has to cover the unfortunate, accidental death of a veteran who is crushed by an elevator. After giving a report of the reactions and comments of the victim’s wife to another reporter, Vonnegut is asked, just out of curiosity, what the deceased man looked like. Despite the gruesome state of the body, it did not bother him because he had “seen lots worse than that in the war” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 10). Vonnegut’s own experience of “dancing” with death as a soldier in WWII made the random and accidental deaths often covered in the newspapers seem less shocking to him. It was his duty to report on, through his fiction, the more shocking, premeditated and intentional deaths of innocent people that he witnessed first hand in the war. Fittingly, the second half of the alternate title, A Duty Dance with Death refers directly to dancing. During the majority of the story, however, the focus shifts to the adventures of another soldier who flirts and dances with death.

This dancing metaphor continues throughout the novel in relation to the main character Billy Pilgrim. Just before he is captured as a POW, Billy is “a dazed wanderer . . . bleakly ready for death” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 32). His pathetic appearance reflects the empty worthlessness the war creates in his heart. Poorly dressed for the weather and terrain, Billy wears “cheap, low cut civilian shoes . . . [and] had lost a heel, which made him bob up-and-down, up-and-down”. Vonnegut describes this awkward and disturbing gait as “involuntary dancing” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 33). Rather than a super-tough, invincible soldier valiantly fighting
the forces of evil in the name of freedom and democracy, we have a deflated man, helpless in his situation to do anything other than go along with the reality that the war presents him with: a dance with death. Even though Billy travels with two experienced scouts, they still cannot gain an upper hand in avoiding capture or death. As the narrator describes: “The Americans had no choice but to leave trails in the snow as unambiguous as diagrams in a book on ballroom dancing—step, slide, rest—step, slide, rest” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 39). This image of pre-planned, mapped out steps implies that the steps of every soldier, no matter where or when, follow basically the same motions. All war is essentially the same; history keeps repeating itself.

This allusion to problems in past conflicts initially appears in the first half of his alternate title, which highlights a group of youngsters who voluntarily dance with death by serving in a fictitious religious army. The Children’s Crusade goes hand in hand with the novel’s dedication to Mary O’Hare because this woman inspired the title. Mary, the wife of Vonnegut’s war comrade Bernard O’Hare, first vocalizes a major problem with a popular American misconception about wars: that they are fought by upstanding American soldiers, by attractive, movie-star-like, middle-aged men.

Mary becomes noticeably irritated while Vonnegut and O’Hare begin scanning their memories and war stories for good material for his book. While they fail miserably in their attempts at reminiscing, Mary criticizes the poetic license, manipulation, and subsequent glorification that often occurs in books and movies about war: she thinks “wars were partly encouraged by books and movies,” and says of Vonnegut’s intentions: “You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 14). Mary and Vonnegut acknowledge the problem with the way contemporary books and movies portray war heroes, and throughout the
rest of the novel, Vonnegut presents truthful images of the weakness, vulnerability, and naivety of the “babies” that actually fought in WWII.

Vonnegut and Bernard looked up the real Children’s Crusade in a book by Charles Mackay entitled *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. In 1213 “two monks got the idea of raising armies of children in Germany and France, and selling them in North Africa as slaves. Thirty thousand children volunteered . . . most . . . were shipped out of Marseilles, and about half drowned in shipwrecks. The other half got to North Africa where they were sold” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 16). Not only does this allusion highlight how young and inexperienced the Americans fighting during WWII really were, but it also implies that good art about war needs to dispel, rather than create or reinforce, popular delusions.

Popular misconceptions of the “American soldier” were also held by the other nations during WWII. The Germans who capture Billy and Roland first discover the two just as Roland starts beating Billy senseless. The hatred and cruelty one soldier is capable of harboring and unleashing upon another from his own army surprises the Germans, and they “were filled with bleary civilian curiosity as to why one American would try to murder another one so far from home” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 51). Also, the Germans are so pleased with the poor condition of Billy and Roland’s feet that they take a picture of their bloody and inadequate footwear “as heartening evidence of how miserably equipped the American Army often was, despite its reputation for being rich” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 58).

The Germans hoped to dispel a potentially intimidating myth: that they were fighting a bunch of rich Americans with all the best equipment and weapons that money could buy. Once Billy arrives at the POW camp, a German officer measures “Billy’s upper right arm with his thumb and forefinger” and asks “a companion what sort of an army would send such a weakling like that to the front . . . [and then] looked at the other American bodies [and] pointed out a lot more that were nearly as bad as Billy’s” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 83). Though this view of the
American soldier obviously falls on the severe and extreme end of the spectrum, it is still important to acknowledge just how bad the conditions did and could get. Few people actually had a comfortable and glamorous Hollywood experience as an American soldier in WWII.

When Billy and the other Americans arrive at the holding camp, before they are moved to their assignment in Dresden, they spend time with some English POW who have been in the camp for several years. These Englishmen are “adored by the Germans [because] . . . they made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 94). As can be expected, it is much easier to stomach a more pleasant illusion of war than the actual awful reality, so the Germans tried to convince themselves that war could be less horrible and more inviting, like the English made it seem. The Englishmen can hardly believe that the pathetic and humiliated specimens of soldiers they encounter are Americans, and one even asks Billy, “Are you really an American?” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 97). The English blame Billy’s sorry state on the Germans, but the real source of his degradation is actually his home country, one where many people, his future wife Valencia included, “associate sex and glamour with war” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 121). This theme, which was touched on in Mother Night, spills over and can be seen throughout Slaughterhouse-Five.

The harsh reality is that Billy and the other Americans do not fulfill their country’s romantic ideal. They are not super-human, moral avengers, heroically overthrowing the forces of evil. Rather than conquering giants or fighting for “good”, the Americans in the novel had been deflated and dissolved beyond individual recognition: through “the valley flowed a Mississippi of humiliated Americans” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 64). However, hope can be found in the midst of Vonnegut’s depressing images of degradation in Slaughterhouse-Five. As John Somber observes, “the affirmation of life, vibrating in this climactic novel is based not on self-deception but upon the greatness of the human spirit confronted by great adversity” (252).
Vonnegut emphasizes in the midst of the hardships and dehumanization of the war the common bond of humanity that all of the soldiers share. In his descriptions of the train that transported the soldiers to the POW camps Vonnegut repeatedly calls them “human beings”:

Human beings in there were excreting into steel helmets . . . The human beings also passed canteens . . . When food came in, the human beings were quiet and trusting and beautiful . . . Human beings took turns standing or lying down. (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 70)

This weakness and vulnerability characterizes many American soldiers’ war experience. The stark humanity that Vonnegut presents, evident despite the brutal conditions of war, creates a balance of truthful imagery that counters the illusions of invincibility found elsewhere, and that Vonnegut combats through his art.

The power of illusion does not solely plague those separated from the major fighting by distance, or those captured early in the conflict. Even people directly involved in battle are continually jarred back into the reality of the true characteristics of soldiers. Vonnegut presents the opposition of illusion and reality in an episode where Billy and his comrade Derby spend several days in the infirmary, until a visiting colonel informs them that all the other Americans had recently shaved their beards. Ironically, though Billy and Derby look older and reminiscent of movie war heroes because of their long facial hair, this serves as a thin screen of their real condition, one reflected more obviously in their fellow soldiers:

Billy and Derby were the only two still with beards. And [the colonel] said, “You know—we’ve had to imagine the war here, and we have imagined it was being fought by aging men like ourselves. We had forgotten that wars were fought by babies. When I saw those freshly shaved faces, it was a shock. “‘My God, my God—’ I said to myself, ‘It’s the Children’s Crusade’” (Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse 106, emphasis added).
Here we see the fusion of Vonnegut’s actual postwar experiences with the action of his fiction. He literally has Mary O’Hare’s words flow from the mouth of one of his fictitious characters. Apart from emphasizing and reiterating this powerful theme, Vonnegut also shows how the imagination can take a real experience, elaborate on it, and offer an audience even more insight on the original event. Having these words initially introduced in the first chapter, and then return in their new and imaginary context, gives them a renewed poignancy and relevance. Paradoxically, the imagination aids in making these words and their implications in their fictional setting even more real for the audience.

War inevitably initiates imaginative responses from its participants, but not all of them become therapeutic, profound, or life-altering for the subject, as is the case with Vonnegut himself. Roland Weary, a young American soldier introduced at the beginning of the novel actually loses complete touch with the reality of the war he is fighting because of his own imagination. Weary, a young, fat, and immature boy “plays” war in a fantasy world while his “vision of the outside world [is] limited to what he could see through a narrow slit between the rim of his helmet and his scarf from home” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 41).

Often, even those who directly experience warfare have difficulty establishing and maintaining their conception of the reality. Weary parades around enemy grounds wrapped up in every conceivable item of clothing, “so hot and bundled up . . . that he has no sense of danger” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 41). Too many Americans block out the horrors of war and their true connection with them. Weary displays the negative effects of misleading and romanticized stories about war. He remains wrapped up in the security blanket of his own misconceptions of power and invincibility. In the midst of battle, his imagination makes it possible “to pretend that he was safe at home, having survived the war, and that he was telling his parents and his sister a true war story —whereas the true war story was still going on” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 42). The “true war story” of Weary’s imagination, one that looks a lot like a Hollywood film, does
not line up with his actual experiences. The reality of Weary’s story is that he doesn’t survive the war; but Vonnegut did, and so has his war story.

But what is the true war story? And how can one adequately portray it? Through *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut not only protests participating in war but also the temptation to rely on conventional mediums as a basis for understanding war experiences. While accomplishing this task he also fulfills his moral obligation to himself and his audience to present the truth in his art. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut’s truthful representation of soldiers literally challenges his audience to evaluate their perspectives on traditional presentations of war events. Through his unconventional, nonlinear narrative structure, Vonnegut fulfills his “promise to write a war novel that does not glorify or glamorize killing” (Schatt 94).

While “his moral confrontation with Dresden was steady and persistent throughout his career”, Vonnegut’s exploration of the role of the artist in responding to war expands and takes on a different face in his later works (Somer 252). Vonnegut’s questioning and reinvention of the artistic form, subsequently altering the audience’s experience, continues throughout the novels following *Slaughterhouse-Five* and returns full force about 20 years later in his novel *Bluebeard*. Here, he returns to the story of another traumatized war veteran. Written in a mock-autobiography format like *Mother Night*, this time the narrator is a practicing artist, and through this artist’s story Vonnegut challenges readers to reevaluate war from yet another perspective.
Bluebeard: Feminist Artistic Responsibility; or
Peacefully Deconstructing a War-Mongering HuMANity.

One of Kurt Vonnegut's main motivations for solidifying his WWII experiences into a literary work was a desire to put out a book with accurate portrayals of soldiers and warfare. He wanted to counter the faulty, romanticized renderings of war presented in popular movies and books. In Slaughterhouse-Five he tried to show that it was really "babies" and children who fought and died in wars, not men. In Bluebeard these complaints resurface almost verbatim: "Because of the movies nobody will believe that it was babies who fought the war...the young people will think our war was...old men and blanks and catsup" (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 245). Though Vonnegut revisits his anti-war themes in this novel, this time he targets another problematic trend in understandings of, and portrayals of war: the disregard for, or omission of, the female experience.

In Bluebeard he makes the most obvious and extended feminist statement of any of his fiction novels. Conveniently, as Loree Rackstraw notes, "Vonnegut centers on a nonliterary art, the 1950s school of abstract expressionism whose artists sought new ways of responding to the insanity of war" (137). Vonnegut and his artist protagonist seek achievement of precisely this. Through Rabo Karabekian's journey of self discovery, Vonnegut deconstructs the historical illusion of male superiority and invincibility, gives a microphone to the female voice in warfare, and empowers the "fairer" sex as the model for real change in such a violent humanity.

Offering an alternative perspective on war is an important task an artist representing war can serve. Vonnegut uses the main character, Rabo Karabekian, as an example of the enormous task an artist undertakes when creating a multi-purpose piece of work that functions on several discursive levels. As a writer and a visual artist, the protagonist displays an artist's responsibility not only to himself and his art, but also to the past, and to contemporary and future audiences. Art not only retains the truth and memories of war, it also leads the audience in a reexamination
of events long past. However, with the help of additional perspectives, as is the case when Rabo interacts with several influential women throughout his life, the work and event are effectively undomesticated or de-familiarized for the reader/viewer, thus generating a dynamic relationship between artist, work, and audiences (Rackstraw 141).

Warfare colors Rabo’s family timeline; it is a major factor in his ancestral history and eventually dominates his artwork thematically. His parents, before fleeing Armenia for the United States, survived a brutal massacre when the Turkish Empire slaughtered one million of their fellow countrymen. His father hid in a school house toilet and “never saw or heard the actual killing. For him, the stillness of the village . . . was his most terrible memory of the massacre” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 4). Rabo’s “mother’s memories . . . were more gruesome . . . since she was right there in the killing fields” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 4). After they flee the country and settle as a married couple in America, his mother “somehow managed to put the massacre behind her and find much to like in the United States . . . to daydream about a family future” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 4). His father, however, never gets over the trauma of the experience.

Right at the onset of the work, Vonnegut presents a major problem with the “male,” or traditional, war experience: a static connection with the past. Rabo’s mother, who experiences war’s raw worst, staring for hours into the face of a dead woman, moves on, trying to grow and learn from her experiences. Rabo’s father, however, never really separates himself from his past; he lets it taint the rest of his life and hinder any personal growth. Neither of their experiences with the massacre is more or less traumatic than the other’s; their own reactions, their personal choice of either surrendering to the pain or externalizing their experiences as fuel for positive change, ultimately determine how it affects their lives.

Rabo, a WWII veteran, suffers from the same predicament as his father: he cannot let go of his past war experiences. He operates under a faulty conception of male dominance and self-
sufficiency, which leads directly to his struggles with producing soulless art work. Only through the intercession of strong female characters can this broken old man escape his selfish misunderstandings of war and become a truly soulful artist. The widow Circe Berman greatly influenced Rabo’s process of transformation. This dominant “energetic and opinionated and voluptuous and relatively young woman” moved in and “inspired [his] amazing career change” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 12). Circe jump starts the writing of his autobiography because “she couldn’t bear seeing and hearing [him] do absolutely nothing all day long” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 11).

She forces him into action, into movement out of his mindless, empty habits so he can begin reflecting on his life and experiences. Though Rabo is first a visual artist, his growth and transformation is directly influenced by exercising verbal creativity through writing his autobiography. Rabo becomes a success story of a visual artist reborn through literary art: Circe’s “insistence that Rabo write his life story is the vehicle for Vonnegut’s ongoing effort to deconstruct the barriers to wholeness in artistic expression” (Rackstraw 139). Incidentally, Rabo could not display his final and most important painting until after he composed his life story. Artistic representation becomes the final element in the process of preserving war experiences and presenting them in a manner that can eventually motivate social change. However, several steps must be completed before reaching this culminating epiphany of social motion, one that art ultimately points the artist and audience towards. Rabo spends the entire novel moving towards this place as an artist and as a human being.

From Circe, Rabo discovers one of the essential elements of a truly powerful and effective piece of art work: vision. She criticizes his huge, famous, and valuable collection of Abstract paintings, even though “she has seen immensely respectable people from as far away as Switzerland and Japan worship some of them as though the pictures were gods almost” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 35). Circe remains unimpressed by these pieces that “are about absolutely
nothing but themselves” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 8). When Rabo sells a Rothko for over a million dollars she expresses elation: “Good riddance of bad rubbish. It was rotting your brain because it was about absolutely nothing” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 35).

Circe finds no pleasure in pictures that are simply pretty either, exclaiming that “she wasn’t on Earth to be pleased but to be instructed” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 23). There is more to life and art than beauty or entertainment. All art provides some form of stimulation; some pieces challenge viewers, others confuse or cause stagnation in personal growth. Though Rabo claims that his abstract paintings, even down to their titles, are “meant to be uncommunicative,” Circe counters nicely by asking him: “What’s the point of being alive if you’re not going to communicate?” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 35). Slowly, she begins transforming his aesthetic view, eventually “convinc[ing] him that in any sort of art communicating a vision to a viewer is everything” (Rampton 21).

Circe introduces the importance of context for communicating themes through artwork when Rabo is “pleasantly” surprised by a redecorated foyer upon his return from a weekend in New York City. He and his second wife Edna made a project of “redecorating a Victorian house to accommodate modern art” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 112). The foyer originally had stark white walls with simplistic Abstract paintings decorating them. When Rabo returned from NYC, he found his foyer covered instead by flowered wall paper and chromo paintings of little girls on swings from the Victorian era. Outraged, he offers his, and a common, criticism of such paintings: “They are the negation of art! They aren’t just neutral. They are black holes from which no intelligence or skill can ever escape. Worse than that, they suck up the dignity, the self-respect, of anybody unfortunate enough to have to look at them” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 122).

However, when Circe explains these pieces in their cultural context, she gleans deeper truths from the art that transcend the canvases and penetrate people’s hearts. Circe asks for time to explain, and identifies the importance of patience and humility on the part of the audience:
“These pictures are twice as serious as yours,” she challenges Rabo, “if you give them half a chance” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 123).

By explaining her chromos in the context of Victorianism, Circe shows that a network of connections exists between past, present, and future audiences, and between the work and artist. They join together and propel the work’s message through later generations. She explains why “these pictures of little girls on swings” are actually very “serious art”:

Try thinking about what the Victorians thought when they looked at them, which was how sick or unhappy so many of these happy, innocent little girls would be in just a little while—diphtheria, pneumonia, smallpox, miscarriages, violent husbands, poverty, widowhood, prostitution. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 124)

Though Rabo initially feels skeptical about this explanation of the importance of these paintings, he uses it later when some visitors ask him why he includes the chromos in his Abstract collection. To Rabo’s surprise, after hearing about the Victorians and the dismal futures of these young girls, the visitors are “unanimous in agreeing that these were the most important pictures in the house” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 149). For the first time, viewers of Rabo’s art collection actually have something to say following the tour of the mansion. As the guests departed, they say to Rabo, “... grinning and shaking their heads... ‘No more war, no more war.’” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 149).

But Rabo has not always been on the viewing end of artwork; he has not always spent most of his time “daydreaming what little remains of his life as a museum guard” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 8). As a young adult he studies under Dan Gregory, a renowned American illustrator who teaches him, among many things, that the artist must lose himself in his art, must hide from the vision of his audience. Gregory worked in a huge studio made up of the upper rooms of three townhouses. The walls had been torn down and countless mirrors of varying shapes and sizes decorated the huge attic space: “many of them hung in unexpected places at crazy angles, to
multiply even the bewildered observer to infinity” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 96). The studio itself was a work of art and a symbol for Gregory’s artistic philosophy of a hidden and elusive creator. Eerily, as Rabo stood “There at the top of the stairs . . . Dan Gregory was invisible to” him, and Rabo himself “was everywhere!” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 96). This fanatical and frightening den of creation becomes a perverse example of John Keats’ term “negative capability,” which Stanley Schatt defines as “the ability of the artist . . . to free himself from the confines of his own personality and ego and to adopt the identity of the person or persons his is writing about” (84). In Gregory’s studio the master remains unseen and the audience is reflected everywhere through the variously shaped and shaded mirrors.

However, the presence of the artist, especially one who has his/her own war stories to tell, is extremely important in influential anti-war art. “Negative capability” is actually harmful for the artists in *Bluebeard* because they take it much too far. By describing several empty and soulless artists throughout the novel, and then presenting Rabo’s transformation into a higher level of artistic enlightenment that culminates in the revelation of his secret potato barn masterpiece, Vonnegut shows us the important role the addition and inclusion of the artist’s history and personality serves in his work. But submitting and becoming vulnerable in the way that this type of personal art requires comes with great difficulty; as Glenn Meeter suggests: “It is less dangerous to create than to reveal” (219).

Not surprisingly, Rabo operates under this ethic of the absent artist for many years, even after Gregory kicks him out. When WWII breaks out he becomes part of a platoon made up of artists specializing in camouflage. They are skilled in the art of disguise and hiding, becoming famous for their “astonishing illusions” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 2). As Rabo recollects, “What hallucinations we gave the Germans as to what was dangerous to them behind our lines” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 2)! Often the artists find themselves doing more than just masquerading behind their own handiwork. Throughout *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut presents many men who
completely lose themselves in their art. For some of the artists, creation becomes merely a physical and technical act.

Rabo’s father begins mindlessly creating decorative cowboy boots, and after many years as a cobbler, he “began to blossom as an artist” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 62). However, though he creates beautiful designs, the creation process frightens Rabo. He “would look into his [father’s] eyes, and there wasn’t anybody home anymore” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 63). Rabo witnesses a similar scenario with his close friend Terry Kitchen, an Abstract Expressionist painter who creates huge canvases of solid colors and totally loses himself in his work: he paints “as though he were in a trance” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 62). This creative characteristic also touches Gregory, despite his position on the opposing side of Abstract Expressionism. When he too creates “art, the whole rest of the world dropped away” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 138).

While these comatose moments are addictive in their own right, they ultimately become detrimental for the subject when returning to the “real” world. Complete separation from the world, total escape through art, is impossible. Rabo also reached this warped state of artist’s nirvana during a later period of his painting career. Rabo, who “had a very hard time getting the hang of civilian life after the war . . . discovered something as powerful and irresponsible as shooting up with heroin: . . . laying on just one color of paint to a huge canvas . . . could make the whole world drop away” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 138). However, it wasn’t until he saturates himself and finally almost drowns in realism that he finds such solace in abstraction.

Dan Gregory teaches Rabo about the world of realist illustration. Before his apprentice Rabo escapes into the realm of Abstract Impressionism, Gregory influences Rabo not only technically, but also philosophically as an artist. In retrospect, Rabo claims that most of Gregory’s ranting is merely “delusions of moral grandeur” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 134). However, some tokens of truth emerge from Gregory’s claims about the power and influence of artists: “Painters and storytellers, including poets and playwrights and historians . . .
justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 134). Rabo, though, embraces a movement less than concerned with becoming potentially oppressive deities through their artwork.

As Rabo notes, “maybe the most admirable thing about the Abstract Expressionist painters, since so much senseless bloodshed had been caused by cockeyed history lessons, was their refusals to serve on such a court” of Good and Evil (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 135). Gregory did not think highly of Modern Art at all and forbid his apprentice from ever entering the Museum of Modern Art. When he discovers Rabo and his mistress Marilee happily exiting the museum he exclaims, “What could that happiness be but a mockery of me and of every person who ever tried to keep control of a paintbrush?” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 159). Though technically the paintings in this museum are much less sophisticated than any of Gregory’s detailed illustrations, isn’t it possible that they have more value to an audience? Arguably, could this type of more “open-ended” art possibly bring a viewer closer to the truth than paintings that “think” for them?

Presenting the truth becomes tricky business, as Rabo later discovers. Even Gregory, the master illustrator lacks something as he renders famous fairy tale scenes or historical moments. He can freeze an instant, like a snapshot, but his paintings become more static than any abstract pieces. Gregory’s commercial pleasers and book cover pictures were truthful about material things, but they lied about time . . . he lacked the guts or the wisdom, or maybe just the talent, to indicate somehow that time was liquid . . . that all moments quickly run away . . . Dan Gregory was a taxidermist. He stuffed and mounted and varnished . . . supposedly great moments, all of which turn out to be depressing dust-catchers. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 82)

Gregory’s paintings and Rabo’s camouflage, though looking technically perfect as copies of their true subjects, actually serve as powerful deceptive tools. As Rackshaw notes, “Both cover
everything with a false familiarity and thus trick human perception about reality. Both can cause horrendous pain for those who are fooled by their illusion” (138). Gregory’s paintings are merely pictures, frozen objects that add to the décor of a room. They are not living, breathing pieces that continue to interact with audiences for years to come.

Eventually, Rabo abandons realism, disillusioned and bored with his gift because “cameras could do what he . . . could do” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 44). He decides instead to become a banker:

I concluded that my mind was so ordinary, which is to say empty, that I could never be anything but a reasonably good camera. So I would content myself with a more common and general sort of achievement than serious art, which was money. I was not saddened about this. I was in fact much relieved! (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 44).

He reaches this point after he is repeatedly chided by his master, and then rejected from advance art classes at a university because his work has “no soul.” He can do nothing more than counterfeiting; nothing exists behind his work, nothing really gives it substance. However, he cannot find soul in abstraction either. After several years surrounded by blooming Abstract Expressionists to whom he loans money and is repaid in paintings, Rabo himself gives abstract painting a whirl.

The works Rabo contributes to Abstract Expressionism do reasonably well initially. He sells a huge painting to a major corporation, and another is bought by the Guggenheim museum. However, his paintings, “thanks to unforeseen chemical reactions . . . all destroyed themselves” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 18). Rabo’s stripped paintings serve as a metaphor for his life before the addition and application of the female experience to his perspectives of the past, present, and future. In the same way that his paintings strip away their own color, revealing nothing more than a blank canvas, Rabo, and many other men like him, present a bright façade of male dominance, self-sufficiency, and autonomy, only to self-destruct as well, and reveal after a
matter of time the emptiness of their own souls. Rabo even describes himself upon returning from the war as "simply blank" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 200). Before the war his realistic paintings lack soul; after the war his abstract paintings literally became the nothing and emptiness that are also behind them.

Ironically, the women in the novel create more soulful and relevant art than Rabo. Circe writes young adult novels that are "about life right now," while Rabo and his writer friend Slazinger grow stagnant because they are stuck in the past and "never got past the Great Depression and World War Two" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 121). Marilee, Rabo's former lover, produces superior art as well. Her letters to Rabo contain "more wonderful things about life than every picture in [his] house. They're the story of a scorned and abused woman discovering that she was a great writer" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 52). In fact it is Marilee who ultimately opened Rabo's eyes to the female experience in war, and the desperate need for real change in the interpretation of humanity and its connectedness with warfare.

Marilee, during their climactic reunion after 14 years of separation, presents a disturbing but true account of the often overlooked experience of women in war:

... wherever you went there were women who would do anything for food or protection for themselves and the children and the old people... The whole point of war is to put women everywhere in that condition. It's always men against women, with the men only pretending to fight among themselves (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 215).

Along with these literal wars, women continually fight metaphorical battles against a misogynist society. Vonnegut, through Marilee, cuts deep into the contemporary state of "maleness", calling men, with their track record as instigators of wars and violent fighters and plunders, "not only useless and idiotic, but downright dangerous" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 219).
Rabo is dangerous in his own right following the war because he becomes basically useless as a husband, father, and artist. When returning to painting, even in a different genre he still fights a “blank”. His earlier lack of soul is aggravated and intensified by the silence that follows atrocity, by the struggle with exactly how to articulate a massacre. It is not the case, and never was, that Rabo had no soul or did not know how to incorporate it into his art work; he was afraid of taking responsibility for his actions: “My soul knows my meat is doing bad things, and is embarrassed. But my meat just keeps right on doing bad, dumb things” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 246). Rabo insists that his “soul” and his “meat” are separate, and though Kitchen, to whom Rabo speaks these words, laughs, his response sums up Rabo’s and many an artist’s anxiety: “I would hate to be responsible for what my meat does” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 246).

However, Rabo does feel guilt for the harm his paintings and his career as a painter inflicts on others. When eight giant canvases that were formerly an all blue painting are returned after their paint peeled away, Rabo makes it his next project to make them as white as possible. His “eccentric project was an exorcism of an unhappy past, a symbolic repairing of all the damage [he] had done to myself and others during my brief career as a painter” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 263). The paintings do not remain blank, for at his second wife’s funeral, Rabo has “his strongest vision of human souls unencumbered” and rushes off to create his culminating masterpiece, a painting he describes as his “Renaissance” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 265). Rabo pours his soul into painting a marvelous and detailed picture of where he was standing “when the sun came up the day the Second World War ended in Europe” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 268). The scene includes thousands of tiny figures painted with painstaking accuracy, and all ages, sexes, and nationalities were represented. He explains that there “is a war story to go with every figure in the picture, no matter how small” (Vonnegut, Bluebeard 270). However, creating this “painting that depicts life and death” truthfully and powerfully was only the first step in Rabo’s process of rebirth (Rampton 22). Completing it only helped Rabo “to become the empty and
peaceful old man” he was when Circe walked into his life; he needed an audience apart from himself as the final element of his artistic self-actualization (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 266).

Not until Rabo finally shares the big secret hidden in his potato barn, first with Circe and then with the public, can his struggle with identity and responsibility in art finally be reconciled and synthesized. Rabo’s giant painting of where he was that morning also illustrates, literally and figuratively, Vonnegut’s hope for real, positive change in humanity (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 268). It pays tribute to the experiences of countless people so often overshadowed by the glory-stories of American male soldiers. Also, because Rabo encourages the viewers to make up the stories for all the people in the painting, it promotes a union between “the creator of the painting and the spectator (who acts as co-creator by making up stories about the depicted figure) (Rampton 22).

Finally, the artist moves past paintings marked by conceit, and having only self-contained, static meaning. His masterpiece, while confronting his past, also looks forward, focusing on the new day dawning on life after the war. The painting “pictures the women and men whose uniforms finally had no relevance to the binary opposition that had structured the war. The dynamic interplay of the two images is a complementarity made possible by the participation of the viewer” (Rackstraw 141). Along with the powerful statement it offers to his audience for generations to come, Rabo finally reconciles his gift and his heart, his meat and his soul. He realizes that it is “time for [his] soul, which ha[d] been ashamed of [his] meat for so long, to thank [it] for finally doing something wonderful” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 286).

Vonnegut reinforces and solidifies his feminist sentiments by entitling Rabo’s monumental and soulful painting, the vehicle for the artist’s personal growth and truest portrayal of the full experience of war, “Now It’s Women’s Turn” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 273). In his novel *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut calls for a radical reconstruction of “male” warfare, which too often discounts the horrors women suffer because of war. He dares us to take on a more feminine perspective of not only war, but also life, modeling women because “All they ever think of
planning in the dirt is the seed of something beautiful or edible. The only missile they can ever think of throwing at anybody is a ball or a bridal bouquet” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 216). These images aid in a conclusion that is peace-full and also truly peaceful. Rabo finds true peace with himself: “Oh, happy Meat. Oh, happy Soul. Oh, happy Rabo Karabekian” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 287). Rabo’s hope and pride extend outward, channeling through his painting and moving in and through his audience. Likewise, the power of Vonnegut’s novel, the inviting echoes and whispers of peace, remain with us, resonating in our hearts.

Through these three novels Vonnegut reveals the complex responsibility of the artist to help us catch a glimpse of the truth in times of war. We see the artist’s role in unmasking our pretensions to simple goodness that become magnified by war. *Mother Night* presents the mask found in personality, *Slaughterhouse-Five* in society, and *Bluebeard* in gender relations¹. Vonnegut, a responsible and moral artist, now commissions us, as intelligent and competent readers, to act as co-creators in this long but worthwhile journey towards a peaceful renovation of ourselves, our country, and our lives. Through his fiction we can see the harmful binary mindset that poisons our society, one that tries to neatly categorize the world’s problems into black and white, or good versus evil. He openly criticizes “the illusion engendered by World War Two: that in the war between good and evil we are always, perfectly and naturally, on the side of good. This is what makes us so unrestrained in the uses of weaponry,” such as what occurred in Dresden (Vonnegut, *Wampeters* 214). Witnessing the brutal truth about what America and Americans have sometimes done in war is difficult, no doubt. So it goes. Vonnegut compellingly presents us with the truth about not only warfare, but also ourselves. Sharing his experiences and gifts with us, he guides us into his world of humanistic pacifism and gently entreats us to follow him; however, he can only leave the choice of our final destination up to us.

¹ This summary of the three novels is based on a response Dr. Peter Powers made to the December 1, 2003 draft of this paper.
Works Cited


