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Masculinity and Sacrifice : Kurt Vonnegut's Aberrant Male Bodies

Sanna MELIN SCHYLLERT

Abstract
Kurt Vonnegut's novels *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *Slapstick* (1976) portray male bodies that diverge from the norm in various ways. I argue that these works allow for a greater diversity of male bodies than many other narratives do. Not only are male non-conforming bodies front and center in many of Vonnegut's stories, they are also embodied by characters that otherwise perform masculinity in traditionally expected ways. In opposition to earlier narratives of afflicted or emasculated soldiers, Vonnegut does not characterize men with disabilities or war wounds as inactive or incompetent, but as significantly able. I argue that these narratives allow non-normative bodies to perform hegemonically male-coded acts, and that the novels illustrate a link between loneliness and toxic masculinity. I discuss sacrifice as a route through which community can be created, thereby facilitating a transformed image of masculinity.

Keywords
Kurt Vonnegut, gender, masculinity, hegemony, emasculation, disability, performativity, sacrifice.

Résumé
Les romans de Kurt Vonnegut *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), et *Slapstick* (1976) dressent le portrait de corps masculins qui s'écartent de la norme à maints égards. Mon postulat est que ces fictions, comparées à beaucoup d'autres, permettent de représenter une plus grande diversité de corps masculins. Non seulement les corps masculins non conformes

occupent une place centrale dans l'oeuvre de Vonnegut, mais ils sont aussi incarnés par des personnages qui, par ailleurs, donnent trait à la masculinité de manières conventionelles et attendues. Contrairement à ce que l'on peut observer dans des récits antérieurs de soldats dépressifs or émasculés, Vonnegut représente des hommes souffrant de handicaps ou de blesures de guerre non pas comme des êtres passifs et incompétents, mais bien comme des individus doués de capacités singulières. Je m'attacherai à démontrer que ces récits permettent aux corps échappant à la norme d'accomplir des actes par excellence masculins d'après les codes prédominants, et que ces trois romans en question illustrent un lien entre solitude et masculinité toxique. Je traiterai du sacrifice comme une voie vers la création du groupe et, par là même, comme moyen de contribuer à une transformation de l'image de la masculinité.

Mots clés
Kurt Vonnegut, genre, masculinité, hégémonie, émasculation, handicap, performativité, sacrifice.

Introduction

Able disabled male bodies

From Newt Hoenikker in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) to Wilbur Swain in *Slapstick* (1976), Kurt Vonnegut's works concern male bodies that diverge from the norm in various ways. I argue that Vonnegut's texts allow for a greater diversity of male bodies than many other narratives do. Not only are the male bodies that deviate from the hegemonic norm front and center in many of his works, they are also embodied by characters that otherwise perform masculinity in traditionally expected ways. In opposition to earlier narratives of afflicted or emasculated soldiers, perhaps best exemplified in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Vonnegut does not characterize men with disabilities or war wounds as inactive or incompetent, but as significantly *able.*

In depicting characters with non-normative bodies, Vonnegut is firmly placed within a tradition that has been acknowledged as typical of the postwar novel: that of centring on 'abnormality' or 'warpedness' as indicative of '[t]he phantasmagoric and horrific realities' (Broer 1994: 2) that are perceived to have plagued western culture since 1945, or even since 1918. Although only one of the three characters I look at here is a World War II veteran, it is undeniable that most, if not all, of Vonnegut's oeuvre was colored by the trauma the author incurred as a young American soldier in Germany. As numerous critics have argued, Vonnegut dealt with his war experiences indirectly through fiction by writing stories that revolve around a humanistic and humane standpoint.[1]

Prior research

Previous research on the gender aspects of Vonnegut's work has noted that, while the female characters are few and far between, Vonnegut was 'interested in the role of women in American society, specifically in the relationship between gender issues and artistic practices' (Farrell, 92). Vonnegut did show himself on more than one occasion to be just as insensitive to the subordination of women as one might expect of a man of his generation. For example, in a stage discussion with Joyce Carol Oates in 2006, where Oates indicated that it is the male sex that predominantly makes war, Vonnegut retorted that 'women are no good at science.' Although it appears to be meant as a joke, and met as such by laughter from the audience, he dismisses Oates and quickly moves on to talk about his own point. If Vonnegut was interested in gender issues, he did not necessarily want to know what women had to say about them.

While it is true that Vonnegut's female characters are less developed than the male ones, it is important to state that I do not consider the quality of a male-identified writer's female characters as a measure of his personal or professional misogyny, nor the inverse. There is a plethora of Hemingway criticism that provides a cautionary example of how speculative and unhelpful analysis can be generated from trying to elucidate the personality of a writer by

[1] See for instance Abele 2009, Broer 1994, and Klinkowitz 2011, 12.

reading his work, or vice versa. Though Hemingway wrote women that were both believable and rounded characters, he simultaneously cultivated a mythically misogynist public character that affects readings of his work to this day. Despite Vonnegut's playfully postmodern prefaces, where he often lays claim to the truth of his stories, the three works I am concerned with here are fictional. Additionally, it is important to separate misogyny, a disregard for or prejudice against women, from gender essentialism, a belief in fixed and innate qualities assigned to both men and women respectively. We cannot therefore rule out the possibility that Vonnegut had an interest in exploring and questioning gender roles because his attention to female characters was limited. Suffice it to say that he was keener to write male characters than female ones, particularly in work published pre-1980s.[2] It is therefore also hard to find much attention given by critics to Vonnegut's female characters, Susan E. Farrell being a notable exception.[3]

It is more surprising that so few critics and scholars appear to have been interested in aspects of non-hegemonic masculinity in Vonnegut's work. I use the term masculinity here as referring to the social performance of those who identify as male. R.W. Connell's seminal work in the 1990s launched the idea that it is more accurate to talk about masculinities in the plural, as there is more than one type of performance that is validated as male. It is important to note that by masculinity I mean a discursive construction of identity, and not any kind of biologically determined essential quality. My understanding coheres with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005): 'Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting' (836). Masculinities, in short, are subject to change.

Non-Normative Men and the Hegemony

Vonnegut seemed to make a point of writing stories that center on non-normative men, i.e. male-identified characters that do not conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. I define hegemonic masculinity as sets of performances that are invested with a high social value in a given cultural context, allowing for the performer to occupy a dominant position in that context. Vonnegut's non-normative males are generally subject to one or several features that prevent them from being dominant, such as a disability. If gender is an embodied performance, any physical disability will have an impact on that performance. Most mental disabilities will too, since gender performances are subject to constant evaluation and change through social interaction. There is a further aspect of complexity regarding the expectations on gender performance by those with perceived disabilities, which research has shown varies according

[2] Though I have just argued for a non-intentional reading, this does not prevent me from making an observation regarding the biographical circumstance that Vonnegut's female characters improved upon his second marriage.

[3] Other critics often comment on the lack or poor quality of Vonnegut's female characters, but rarely offer an actual reading of them.

to the nature and severity of the disability (Gerschick 1265). Vonnegut plays with such variations by portraying masculinity through non-normative bodies.

Dwarfism in *Cat's Cradle*

In *Cat's Cradle*, a Cold War-inspired apocalypse narrative, Newt Hoenikker's personality is largely shaped by his experience of being physically aberrant in the eyes of others. He is born with dwarfism and viewed by others as odd, a 'diversion [...] for silly or quiet times' (102). Newt's appearance prompts people to either consider him entertainment, stripping him of his humanity altogether, or as a child. His sister in particular acts as if Newt is not an adult, considering him her ward. The narrator, John, is perceptive enough here to understand how Newt's disability unfairly earns him an overprotective sister, who thinks he is 'too immature to deal directly with the outside world.' John goes on to comment that 'Angela was a God-awfully insensitive woman, with no feeling for what smallness meant to Newt' (112). The novel also indicates the insensitivity of those around Newt who praise him in a way that suggests that they expected less of someone of his stature. The blustery man called Crosby talks over Newt's head to the narrator about what sort of men he calls 'pissants':

> "I don't mean a little feller like this." Crosby hung a ham hand on Newt's shoulder. "It isn't size that makes a man a pissant. It's the way he thinks. I've seen men four times as big as this little feller here, and they were pissants. And I've seen little fellers–well, not this little actually, but pretty damn little, by God–and I'd call them real men." "Thanks," said Newt pleasantly, not even glancing at the monstrous hand on his shoulder. Never had I seen a human being better adjusted to such a humiliating physical handicap. I shuddered with admiration (129-30).

The grace with which Newt bears the environment's insensitivity seems typical of a Vonnegut character. He is matter-of-fact about his disability (18) and does not let himself be filled with bitterness towards those who mistreat him, just like Wilbur Swain, who does not reproach his parents for having locked him away in an isolated house for the duration of his childhood. Newt is not victimized by the disability itself, but by the way others treat him. The narrator refers to him as being significantly well 'adjusted' to his handicap (130). He goes through difficult times, though, but they are not all due to his stature. His childhood is marked by the death of his mother and the social incompetence of his father, and his fiancée turns out to be working for the Russian government. Although the story of his life is fraught with adversity, he has no more problems than other, able-bodied characters. The moral of *Cat's Cradle*, as in most of Vonnegut's books, is that the realization of life's meaninglessness does not have to be depressing or disheartening; it is simply a fact, and the best we can do is to take our pleasure where we may find it. Out of those of the book's characters who realize this lesson, it is only Newt who seems to know it already before the apocalypse towards the end.

Another trait of Newt's is one he has in common with Billy Pilgrim; despite appearances, he is not portrayed as asexual, celibate, or necessarily unattractive. His attitude towards women is respectful, though not servile. This is in stark contrast to John, the first-person narrator, who at

one point in the story casually glosses over a rape scene in which he himself is the aggressor: 'I will not go into the sordid sex episode [...] Suffice it to say that I was both repulsive and repulsed. The girl was not interested in reproduction–hated the idea' (266). The narrator is clearly bothered by and ashamed of the ordeal, but does not convey an awareness of himself as an assailant. He is not proud of his behavior, but he does not understand that he has committed a criminal act, nor that he has traumatized Mona. It is noteworthy that the rape seems to have gone largely unnoticed by Vonnegut critics, while Mona is often described as promiscuous and as a powerful 'siren': 'Under her anesthetizing influence [John] is less likely than ever to know what is real. But it is the discovery that she is as false a mother as she is a lover that engenders a moral awakening and delivers Jonah from the mouth of the whale' (Broer 1994: 65). Broer's analysis has not aged well, and is not only dependent on trusting John as a reliable narrator, but also implicitly identifies with his misogynist perspective of women – who are simplistically portrayed as either mothers or lovers – as ultimately deceitful. Newt's fiancée Zinka is actually the novel's only real example of a woman of duplicity, as she is a Russian spy. The way Newt tells the story of her, however, does not dwell on her being dishonest or false. Though he was tricked, he remembers his lover with fondness and tells John 'of idyllic hours he and his Zinka had spent in each other's arms, cradled in Felix Hoenikker's old white wicker chair, the chair that faced the sea' (128). Newt's equanimity in the face of the later apocalypse seems to be the result of a lesson in sacrifice gained after his affair with Zinka, as he expressly considers himself lucky to have experienced happiness in love, if only for a short time: 'I may not ever have a marriage, but at least I've had a honeymoon' (128).

In this respect, Newt comes across as one of Vonnegut's most hard-boiled characters; reminiscent of the aforementioned Jake Barnes, or two other heroes of Hemingway's, Robert Jordan and Frederic Henry, his short but intense love story has to make up for the fact that life is, ultimately, a disappointment. There has been significant interest in Vonnegut's intellectual relationship with Ernest Hemingway, partly due to Vonnegut's overt disavowal of Hemingway's brand of machismo. At a Hemingway conference in Idaho in 1989, where Vonnegut was an invited keynote speaker, he emphasized that what he perceived of as Hemingway's glorification of war, bullfighting, hunting, and other forms of violence, was 'obsolescent', though Hemingway was 'an artist of the first rank' (Broer 2011: 22). Critics have claimed that the central character in Vonnegut's play *Happy Birthday Wanda June* (1970) is a caricatured Hemingway, a man who not only feels it is necessary to fight for survival, but who seems to enjoy the fighting, too (Burhans 173). There is no doubt that Hemingway had influence on Vonnegut, not least when it came to his reflections on how to represent war experiences in fiction. Comparing *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) to *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Broer finds that the 40 years between the publication of the two novels has brought a greater sensitivity to and recognition of the irreparable damage that war does, mentally as well as physically. Hemingway's early works espouse the philosophy that war is not just senseless violence, but actually beneficial, even necessary, for the men and countries that fight. Reminiscent of René Girard's later theory of scapegoats, Hemingway's stories seem to espouse that men need war in order to channel nascent impulses of violence, turning them into heroism.

In Vonnegut's stories, there are no such apologies for war; it is portrayed as meaningless and inherently sad, and the most sympathetic characters are always those who are least inclined to engage in violent acts. Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a prime example, not just of a non-violent combatant, but of a man who is certainly not better off after the war than he was before. War both damages and furnishes him with a disability that is no less of a handicap because it is invisible. However, Billy's mental disability is described more as a coping mechanism than a hindrance. It is what allows him to temporarily escape the harsh realities of his life, making it liveable despite the circumstances.

The non-violent soldier in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Billy Pilgrim suffers 'a mild nervous collapse' (24) after being discharged from the US Army in 1945. He witnessed the end of the war as a prisoner in Dresden, and was present at the firebombing of the city, an atrocity committed by his countrymen. After electric shock treatment and a hospital stay, Billy is considered well enough to go home. He finishes his education to become an optometrist, marries his fiancée, and starts a family. Over the course of the remainder of his life, however, he experiences both time travel and an alien abduction, events that have been interpreted as the effect of his experiences in the war and subsequent mental ill health. Susanne Vees-Gulani proposes that Billy suffers from PTSD, and argues that critics who previously had suggested that Billy was schizophrenic had not really taken into account the DSM criteria (Vees-Gulani, 176). As no diagnosis is given in the book, however, we cannot know that these experiences are due to Billy's life events, nor can they be conclusively defined as symptoms of a specific mental illness.

While Billy's stories of aliens and being 'unstuck' or 'spastic in time' (23) causes his family to worry, his ability to escape from a war scene, a boring Lions Club meeting, or a charity fundraising call, to another place and time at a moment's notice does seem to work in his favour. A coping mechanism, whether it is applied consciously or unconsciously, is a way to work through trauma, and a tool with which one may face stressful events with less unpleasant feelings and without breaking down. It can involve physical, emotional, and social aspects, and be positive or negative, where negative strategies may temporarily alleviate stress but worsens the issue over time. For Billy, the trips to outer space, and general jumping back and forth through time to other events in his life, are helpful in the sense that he manages to avoid spending his life in a mental institution, though his family consider him, at the very best, a distracted eccentric. 'Father, Father, Father ... what are we going to *do* with you?' (29) exclaims his daughter after she learns that Billy thinks he has been to the faraway planet Tralfamadore and back. Significantly, Billy's fatherhood is portrayed here as non-authoritative and non-hegemonic.

The trauma of being a prisoner of war in Dresden, witnessing the city's destruction, and having to clean up the mess of dead bodies that his compatriots had made is part of Billy's formative years, and shapes his understanding of what performance he is expected to create as an adult male. One of his more meaningful experiences in this episode with regard to gender performance takes place upon his arrival in a German prison camp. Fifty Englishmen have been

in the camp for years when Billy arrives; they are described as 'lusty, ruddy' officers who 'were clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong' (94). The English POWs are 'middle-aged' but with abs 'like washboards'– they have had plenty of time to work on their physique, and, due to 'a clerical error,' plenty of food to lay the foundation for muscle building (93-4). Despite accidentally having had an 'easy' war, the Englishmen are 'adored by the Germans, who thought they were exactly what Englishmen ought to be. They made war look stylish and reasonable, and fun' (94). The performance they give of soldierly masculinity incorporates the spirit of patience and bravery, an ability to make the best of a bad situation, and being good at sport and games. It is significant that the men are officers, because it means that they are from a social class that is taught how to behave stylishly; most officers of the British Armed Forces at this time were from the upper classes (Crang 21). Their age also suggests that a complete gender socialization had occurred prior to taking part in the war. When Billy arrives in the camp, he is wearing a dirty uniform and a coat that is so small it has come to resemble 'a fur-collared vest' (90). The contrast is obvious; he is a dazed, unfit boy in ridiculous clothes, and they are clear-headed, strong men, dressed 'half for battle, half for tennis or croquet' (95). This comedic image is part of the implied criticism of hegemonic forms of masculinity. One of the Englishmen 'touched [Billy] exploratorily here and there, filled with pity.' His prodding is followed by disappointment: '"My God–what have they done to you, lad? This isn't a man. It's a broken kite." "Are you really an American?"' (97) The expected masculinity of an American soldier could not be more thwarted by the apparition of Billy, who 'didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo' (33). Presumably, the Englishmen were expecting the American prisoners to bear more of a resemblance to G.I. Joe. Even if cartoonist Dave Breger's original Joe was rather more boyish in appearance than his post-World War II incarnations, he was at least good-humored, well-fed, and appropriately dressed in uniform.[4]

A fundamental difference between fictional war heroes such as those seen in Hemingway's novels on the one hand, and Billy Pilgrim on the other, is how they embody masculinity. Robert Jordan, Frederic Henry, and Jake Barnes of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), *A Farewell to Arms*, and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), respectively, are, on the whole, of the classic 'hard-boiled' type; today we might refer to their brand of masculinity as toxic.[5] They enjoy violent acts (be it war, bullfighting, or hunting), are promiscuous but unsentimental about women, and lead extremely individualistic lives. Billy, who is drafted (24) rather than a volunteer like Hemingway's soldiers, is far from a violent figure; he is a chaplain's assistant.

> A chaplain's assistant is customarily a figure of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends. In fact, he had no friends. He was a valet to a preacher, expected no promotions or medals, bore no arms, and had a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid (30-1).

[4] The development of the G.I. Joe figure from bespectacled boy in the 1940s to muscular man in the 1950s warrants its own dedicated research, which I unfortunately do not have the space for here.

[5] Hemingway scholars have done much since the 1990s to excavate these characters and find more complexity, but it remains a fact that it is primarily in Hemingway's later fiction that he allows for less toxic men in his works.

This description shows that Billy's role as a soldier is fundamentally non-violent. The image could hardly be further from one portraying toxic masculinity. Physically, he is described as 'preposterous–six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches' (32-3). Billy's religious role in combination with his lack of physical power means that he is not perceived as threatening to other men and does not have the capital of violence that soldiers ordinarily do.

Nevertheless, contrary to Peter C. Kunze's argumentation in his 2012 article 'For the Boys,' I hold that Billy is not emasculated as a character, where emasculation refers to the removal of (hegemonic) masculinity. The two common definitions of the term emasculation is 1) physical castration of someone with male sexual organs, and 2) cultural 'castration' of someone who identifies as male. The latter can be accomplished in a myriad ways, either through the retraction of the social approval of a gender performance, for example by saying 'that's not how a real man would act,' or via the removal of power and top position in a given hierarchy, for example being dominated by a manager or a domestic partner. Billy may be considered senile by his daughter in later episodes of the book, but it does not '[render] him unable to effectively resist through actions or words' (Kunze 52); he quite simply gets up and leaves from under her nurse's supervision to go to New York City (199).

The image of Billy Pilgrim in the war is that of a boy, but in his later life as an adult man with a family and an optometrist business, he does not have low social status or lack of sexual energy; thus, he is not emasculated despite his mental war wounds and 'preposterous' physique. Billy is assigned some characteristics of hegemonic masculinity: he becomes 'rich' (24), drives a Cadillac (166), is elected president of his Lions Club, and 'had a tremendous wang~~(...)~~ [...] You never know who'll get one' (132).[6] Not only has he got a wife on Earth, but a lover on the planet Tralfamadore: Montana Wildhack, a 20 year old film star also abducted by aliens. The relationship between Billy and Montana shows that Billy, while diametrically opposed to the 'glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men' (14) that Hemingway portrays, is as masculine and attractive:

> In time, Montana came to love and trust Billy Pilgrim. He did not touch her until she made it clear that she wanted him to. After she had been on Tralfamadore for what would have been an Earthling week, she asked him shyly if he wouldn't sleep with her. Which he did. It was heavenly (133).

Broer reads this scene as a fantasy and considers Montana an 'onanistic dream' (2009: 185). While a realist reading would certainly place the Tralfamadorian episode in the alternative world within Billy Pilgrim's mind, such an angle makes it difficult to understand why the fantasy of Montana is not more fantastic, and why Billy also fantasizes about unpleasant things that happen on Tralfamadore. Regardless of how much of the novel is 'real' in the fictional universe, Billy remains a man who successfully navigates life after a war that Vonnegut calls

[6] Spatial restrictions prevent me from making an in-depth analysis of Billy Pilgrim in relation to the character Jake Barnes, who loses his genitalia in the First World War in *The Sun Also Rises*.

'The Children's Crusade' (15), because most of the soldiers in it, including Billy, were children. Despite his experiences as a boy, Billy as a grown man does not succumb to a belief in the necessity of violent acts, and must therefore be said to represent non-toxic masculinity.

The 'neanderthaloid' president in *Slapstick*

Similarly, Wilbur Swain, the narrator of *Slapstick*, shows how having a series of romantic heterosexual relationships can be combined with a general ethos of compassion and altruism. Wilbur is born with both physically and mentally aberrant features, but is nevertheless considered intelligent and is allowed to go to school because he learns to read and write. Wilbur and his twin sister Eliza were born

> so ugly that our parents were ashamed. We were monsters [...] We had six fingers on each little hand, and six toes on each little footsie. We had supernumerary nipples as well–two of them apiece. [...] We were *neanderthaloids*. We had the features of adult, fossil, human beings even in infancy–massive brow-ridges, sloping foreheads, and steamshovel jaws. We were supposed to have no intelligence, and to die before we were fourteen (19).

The twins grow up in isolation in a place filled with books, from which they develop intellectually. Together, they 'give birth to a single genius' (35) that is amplified if they are in physical contact with each other. Alone, Wilbur is 'only half of that fine mind.' (36) Separated at age 15, the brother goes to school and eventually becomes the President of the United States of America, while the sister spends her youth 'in an expensive institution for people of her sort' (78), which she manages to leave with the help of a lawyer, but only to live out her life alone in a condominium in Peru. Though Eliza is as intelligent as Wilbur, she is illiterate, and condemned to a life on the margins of an ableist culture; she is unable to follow normal schooling and thereby excluded from further involvement in society. Her characterisation and fate is an implicit criticism of the lack of support for learning disabilities in childcare and schools.

In his portrayal, Vonnegut critiques society's gender norms by having Wilbur note that their mutual physical abnormalities are much more of a stigma for Eliza than for him:

> There were a few advantages of being a male two meters tall. I was respected as a basketball player at prep school and college, even though I had very narrow shoulders and a voice like a piccolo, and not the first hints of a beard or pubic hair. [...] But Eliza, who was exactly as tall as I was, could not expect to be welcomed anywhere. There was no conceivable conventional role for a female which could be bent so as to accommodate a twelve-fingered, twelve-toed, four-breasted, *neanderthaloid* half-genius–weighing one quintal, and two meters tall (39).

Eliza's womanhood entails a much greater difficulty with regard to being physically unattractive than Wilbur does as a male, as he shows by recounting an episode from his youth

when a 'pretty girl' tells him: 'You are so ugly, you're the sexiest thing I ever saw' (79). Eliza has social intelligence, can express herself beautifully in speech, and is responsible for the ideas, 'the great intuitive leaping' (36), in a joint work penned by her brother. However, these facts do not trump her physical abnormality and inability to put ideas onto paper, which could have opened the door for her to engage in society. This dependence on literacy is in itself a criticism of how society rewards those who follow the norm, a theme which is explored in many of Vonnegut's texts.[7]

Masculinity and Community

Extended families, *karasses* and *granfalloons*

Cat's Cradle similarly criticizes constructions of society through the philosophy of Bokononism, which concludes that social constructs such as nations are meaningless '*granfalloons'* (*Cat's Cradle*, 92). In fact, the bokononist view seems to be that everything is meaningless except the appreciation of passing joys, a contention that the character Newt Hoenikker supports and expresses through his art (169). However, what *are* presented as meaningful are the kind of social groups that link people together spiritually or cosmically, or in Vonnegut's words, 'teams that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing': *karasses* (2). It is interesting to note that, by the definitions proposed in *Cat's Cradle*, the artificial family structure of Wilbur Swain's invention in *Slapstick* would be a new kind of granfalloon, 'a false karass, of a seeming team that was meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done' (91). These two kinds of team have been used by Vonnegut fans countless times to refer to various social groups; however, what is often overlooked is that this is a Bokononist dogma, and not necessarily representative of what the novel (let alone Vonnegut's fictional universe in general) holds as true or real. Just the fact that the definitions of and distinction between *karass* and *granfalloon* refer to 'God' and 'God's will' should make any reader wary, since God's existence is otherwise highly disputed in Vonnegutian worlds.

Regardless of the value of Bokononist principles, the description of the experiment of artificial families in *Slapstick* suggests that the idea does good. Through the voice of Wilbur, Vonnegut prefaces the project outline by stating that 'there was nothing new about artificial extended families in America. Physicians felt themselves related to other physicians, lawyers to lawyers, writers to writers' (110). On the off-chance that anyone should come along to defend the status quo, Wilbur continues by explaining that 'these were bad sorts of extended families, however. They excluded children and old people and housewives, and losers of every description' (110). The groupings referred to as *granfalloons* in *Cat's Cradle* are of the sort that persons of any gender, age, or ability can belong to – Hoosiers, for instance – and should, as such, be on an

[7] Not least the short story 'Harrison Bergeron' criticizes the homogenisation of post-industrial culture. The story treats the idea that everyone be made alike in an effort to create equality. The characters are therefore obligated to wear contraptions that handicap them. In contrast to the disabilities in the novels discussed in my present text, the handicaps in 'Harrison Bergeron' are not given by nature or chance, but deliberately by an authoritarian regime.

equal footing with Wilbur's extended families, if it were not for the issue of proportional representation:

> 'An ideal extended family [...] should give proportional representation to all sorts of Americans, according to their numbers. The creation of ten thousand such families, say, would provide America with ten thousand parliaments, so to speak, which would discuss sincerely and expertly what only a few hypocrites now discuss with passion, which is the welfare of all mankind' (*Slapstick* 110).

While states (such as Indiana, the Hoosier state) are proportionally represented in the lower house of the United States Congress, the House of Representatives, they are not so in the Senate, where each state has two senators. Certainly, with Wilbur's model where each family has its own parliament, the direct influence on power would be much greater than in the US system of government. However, it is not mainly the proportional representation of the system that is hailed as beneficial; throughout the novel, Wilbur holds that the main purpose of the extended families is to ensure that one will be 'lonesome no more,' as his campaign slogan repeatedly asserts. This cure for loneliness is at once a cure for 'all the damaging excesses of Americans in the past,' which Wilbur thinks 'were motivated by loneliness rather than a fondness for sin' (112). Given that such a system would disrupt the traditional, patriarchal organization of the nuclear family and its extensions, the experiment could be read as a blow against hegemony. More importantly, however, is the emphasis on loneliness as a destructive force.

Given that psychologists have found links between loneliness and hegemonically masculine ideals (Blazina et al 2007), Wilbur's campaign against loneliness can be understood as a campaign against toxic masculinity. Loneliness is an important theme in all three of the novels, most overtly in *Slapstick*, with its 'Lonesome No More' subtitle. The slogan comes across as an idea that came to fruition in the mid-1970s, but that was existent already in the early 1960s text *Cat's Cradle*. The loneliness that Newt comes from and returns to after his relationship with Zinka is not due to his stature; in fact, the entire novel is populated by lonely figures. The narrator starts his trajectory as a divorcee who dives into a work project to distract him from cigarettes and booze, and ends it in a supposed suicide. The scientist who invented ice-nine, along with his two able-bodied children, are also fundamentally lonely figures despite having spouses and families. Even the beloved Mona is alone in a sense, as she performs boko-maru – the forbidden, intimate act of foot soles touching – with everyone and anyone without ever showing attachment to any of her admirers. As for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a case has been made for Billy Pilgrim to be considered lonely despite having people around him. Kevin Brown goes so far as to argue that 'almost none of the characters have meaningful relationships with anyone' (106). Artificially created families, then, do not come out of nowhere; Vonnegut had been writing around the problematic issue of loneliness for over a decade when *Slapstick* appeared.

While recognising loneliness as a problem, homosocial masculinity is not shown to be a good cure for lonely Vonnegut characters. As Brown contends, the American soldiers in

Slaughterhouse-Five are not helped by any kind of comradeship. The bond they share is disrupted by a fight to survive, and, just like the apparent *karass* of John in *Cat's Cradle*, they end up betraying each other to act according to what they think will serve their own separate interests. In accordance with Vonnegut's overall tendency toward heteronormativity, his male characters are more inclined to look for a female mate with whom to form 'a *duprass*, which is a *karass* composed of only two persons' (*Cat's Cradle*, 86). *Slapstick* is the sorrowful acknowledgement that even a *duprass* as complete as that of Wilbur and Eliza can be exploded by external forces. Whether Vonnegut was thinking of his own sister or his first wife, or both, as his other half in this respect does not diminish the apparent grief that his 1976 text imparts. Even if the idea of artificial families is a successful one in the novel's universe, it cannot replace for Wilbur that which Eliza was to him: a person together with whom he became more than one part of a couple.

Sacrifices and scapegoats

Those who are identified as aberrant in Vonnegut's novels are even further disassociated from their respective communities because of their disability than their able-bodied counterparts; they could even be classed as scapegoats in René Girard's sense, as their isolation is an attempt at restoring order. Newt's break with Zinka, Wilbur's separation from Eliza, and Billy Pilgrim's retreat from chronological reality are disruptive for the individual characters, but simultaneously the only way in which their respective narratives can be structured: through their individual sacrifices of togetherness and intimacy.

Newt seems to be reconciled to the sacrifice he makes due to Zinka: 'She broke my heart. I didn't like that much. But that was the price. In this world, you get what you pay for' (128). It is tempting to think of this as a transactional gift-sacrifice where Newt paid for his honeymoon with Zinka by giving up a chemical weapon that was in his possession. However, he actually indicates that the sacrifice consists of having his heart broken, a highly symbolic offering of little market value. He describes here the idea that unless you are prepared to give yourself wholeheartedly, to sacrifice your heart, you will not be able to receive love from another person fully, to engage in a community that consists of two people.

Newt is not the only one of Vonnegut's characters who appears to make sacrifices for a community. Billy Pilgrim's is perhaps the most obvious, as his story revolves around a war service that left him scarred for life. His sacrifice is not physical, but it affects him and his life profoundly to the point where he is unable to live a normal life. His episodes of time-travel and dazed confusion can be read as direct consequences of his time as a soldier. Wilbur's sacrifice is also that of service to his country, but where Billy is one of thousands who takes on a recognised form of duty in order to keep his country safe, Wilbur does so by holding public office. He gives up his career in medicine to run for senator and then president, all to eradicate what he feels is humanity's greatest issue: loneliness. As he assumes the presidency, he remarks that the past postholder Nixon's problems, referring to Watergate, were due to 'loneliness of an especially virulent sort'; he 'yearned to partake of the brotherhood [of] Organized Crime' (*Slapstick*, 116). In order to combat the evils that stem from loneliness, a scheme is rolled out

in which the people of the United States are reorganized into new, artificially constructed extended families, and issued new surnames. Wilbur does not just sacrifice his work as a medical man to his politics, but also his marriage; when his wife Sophie Rothschild learns that she is henceforth to be known by the family name Peanut-3, she 'divorced me, of course, and skeedaddled [sic] with her jewelry and furs and paintings and gold bricks' (124).

While Billy Pilgrim's sacrifice seems of a more inevitable and common sort, Wilbur's belief in the system of artificial families and fanatical work to turn his theory into practice is a little more difficult to justify. However, when Sophie Rothschild questions his sanity and looks in disdain at the people outside their gate who claim a new kinship with them, he explains why the 'humane new laws' of belonging are worth sacrificing everything he has:

> [The people outside the gates] have never had a friend or a relative. They have had to believe all their lives that they were perhaps sent to the wrong Universe, since no one has ever bid them welcome or given them anything to do. [...] They are dazedly seeking brothers and sisters and cousins which their President has suddenly given to them from their nation's social treasure, which was until now untapped. [...] The simple experience of companionship is going to allow them to climb the evolutionary ladder in a matter of hours or days, or weeks at most. It will not be a hallucination [...] when I see them become human beings [...] (123)

All you need for humanity to become a little more human is companionship, suggests Wilbur, and the disenfranchised outsiders for whom such companionship is out of bounds in our current social system will be the main beneficiaries of his new families. Importantly though, he also implies that the benefit will serve the country in general, since these people will improve themselves through the 'simple experience of companionship' which removes the expenditure from the government to keep such people safe and occupied. The benefits of companionship may require some further sacrifices from the Rothschilds, though.

The link between sacrifice, companionship, and masculinity crystallizes in the characters of Newt, Billy and Wilbur. Newt's sacrifice for a momentary happiness with Zinka, the war service or Billy Pilgrim, and Wilbur's sacrifice for his belief in the campaign against loneliness may seem disparate, but they all relate to human interconnectedness. Looking at the bigger picture of sacrifice, including its religious usages both historically and today, suggests that the purpose of sacrifice is to increase an experience of intersubjectivity, that is a shared cognition of any particular event, or a mutual understanding within a given social group. The group can be termed a community through its creation of a sense of belonging, which is achieved through partaking in the sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice in its original sense, to make something holy, is inherently transcendental in the sense that it effectuates a move from the worldly, physical realm to that which is spiritual and sacred. The fundamental definition of the term within anthropology is that which was given by Hubert and Mauss over 120 years ago, describing sacrifice as 'a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of a moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned' (13). In sacrificial rites, animals that are proposed to the gods must first undergo a

transformation into symbols of the sacred. This transformation does not only apply to the sacrificial object or victim, but extends also to the performer of the sacrifice, which could be a single person or, more commonly, an entire community: 'Through this proximity the victim, who already represents the gods, comes to represent the sacrifier also' (Hubert and Mauss, 32). The understanding of sacrifice as change-making is key.

Conclusion

In order for the rethinking of male bodies to be accomplished in these narratives, sacrifice is needed as a route through which a changed masculine ideal can be perceived. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, sacrifice in the form of war service has a complex relationship with the male body. Billy Pilgrim's body is intact, but his mind changes; it sustains the impact of his war service and transforms him into a time-traveler and patient in a mental hospital. In *Slapstick*, the service to society that concerns the male character with an aberrant body, Wilbur Swain, is not related to war specifically, but is nonetheless a form of sacrifice. Wilbur Swain in *Slapstick* serves his country as its president, but also as a philanthropist. He is born an outcast due to physical abnormalities, but uses his wealth to build a children's hospital, and later to launch a new system of families in society. Through his sacrifice, he changes from being 'one half of a brain' to a founder of a new and improved social security system. Newt Hoenikker on the other hand sacrifices his country for love by providing the USSR with a chemical weapon in exchange for a honeymoon. The experience changes him; he turns from studying medicine to artistry after Zinka leaves him. His sacrifice turns him from the typically malecoded area of 'hard' science to the non-hegemonic fine arts.

The texts in which Vonnegut describes disability contain characters that, far from traditional stories of afflicted men, overcome their physical and mental aberrations by subscribing to a somewhat distanced but sympathetic view of their life and fellow human beings. Rather than being emasculated, Wilbur Swain, Billy Pilgrim, and Newt Hoenikker prove to be able to hold high office, woo beautiful women, and create meaningful works of art, respectively. These are all indicators of hegemonic masculinity, which are embodied/performed/enacted through atypical male bodies. Additionally, these characters represent non-toxic masculinities in being respectful to women and avoiding violence. In contrast to other narratives of disability, Vonnegut brings out both the foolishness of those who view disability with disdain or pity, and the significant abilities of his disabled characters.

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Biographical information

Sanna MELIN SCHYLLERT currently teaches phonology at Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle, having previously worked with research evaluation at University College London, and in teaching and administrative roles at the University of Westminster and Lund University. Her research primarily concerns the concepts of gender, sacrifice, and the self in 20th century narratives. Publications include articles and chapters on the works of Mary Butts, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and May Sinclair. She is currently working on a project that concerns apocalyptic thought and masculinity in post-1945 literature.