

Suffering Sisters, Silent Majorities, and Societal Oppression:
Comparing the Anti-War Themes and Strategies of Kurt Vonnegut's
Slaughterhouse-Five and Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" are quite dissimilar in style, but these two works convey overall anti-war themes. The works were written in different eras, portray different wars, and are strongly influenced by the lives of the authors themselves; however, these unique factors work together in both works to convey similar messages regarding war's oppressive nature and corruption of mankind. Vonnegut and Porter employ various methods to communicate these messages, some unique to the respective works and some shared by the two. The characters of Montana Wildhack and Miranda Gay—two oppressed female characters imprisoned by the war with no means of escape—are examples of a tactic both utilize to demonstrate the negative impact of war, but their femininity serves a different purpose in both works; Porter utilizes her character to convey a feminist message regarding war, while Vonnegut merely uses a female as a method of communicating a general anti-war theme.

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Kurt Vonnegut and Katherine Anne Porter have little in common with respect to their writing—they lived and wrote during different eras; their literary styles are nearly opposite; and while one work contains fantastical elements, the other's style is firmly rooted in reality. These dissimilarities, however, obscure one central, significant commonality: their wartime settings. Vonnegut and Porter write with a shared purpose: to open society's eyes to the corruption that war fosters in society and to the resulting oppression it causes toward those who dare to challenge it. The contextual basis for their respective works sheds a fascinating light on the root of the sentiment that they both share. While each work is a product of different historical contexts and the authors' personal backgrounds, these unique inspirational sources ultimately work to convey nearly identical messages regarding war's oppressing effect on society. Through various methods, these authors both create literary masterpieces that open readers' eyes to the evils surrounding them and call them to action while never becoming propaganda. Some of these methods are unique to the respective works—Vonnegut's shameless shock factor and Porter's emotional realism, for example—while others, such as oppressed female characters, are employed in both, tying the works together and further emphasizing the similarity of their themes.

Cursory readings of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" reveal only their dissimilarities, and this is not an incorrect takeaway; Vonnegut's detached, highly unrealistic satire provides almost a complete antithesis to Porter's intensely

personal, realistic, and emotional tale. These different styles and methods draw different reader reactions, mirroring the slight differences in the themes themselves; however, despite these significant differences, both works convey similar anti-war messages, drawing attention to both the inherent evils of war and the societal corruption that both drives and stems from it.

“So it Goes” and the Flippant Indifference of *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Irony and shock characterize *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Tragic, horrific events occur throughout the novel, but the narrator consistently casually brushes them off. For example, military scouts are shot in the back, their blood “turning the snow to the color of raspberry sherbet,” and a man dies of pneumonia while incarcerated, yet these deaths receive no more than a brief nod before the story proceeds (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 54). The satirical nature of Vonnegut’s novel is clear, however; one would almost certainly never read the ridiculously apathetic, nearly inhuman descriptions of death and evil and believe the author to be completely serious. His extensive use of irony when discussing these horrors creates in the novel a sense of dark humor that often leaves one unsure whether to cringe or laugh. The first chapter, for example, immediately follows a description of the decorative elements of an elevator—its “ornamental iron lace” and “iron twig with two iron lovebirds perched upon it”—with an emotionless, straightforward account of the same elevator crushing and killing a war veteran (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 9). Despite the possibly humorous points, however, Vonnegut’s main tactics for awakening readers from their apathetic slumber are shock and outrage. This strategy is encapsulated in the oft-uttered phrase, “So it goes.” The phrase does not apply only to wartime scenarios; he uses it to respond to situations varying from a grisly elevator death to the death of his wife to

the description of an extraterrestrial destruction of the universe (Vonnegut, 1979).

Vonnegut utilizes this phrase as a tool for opening Americans' eyes to the evils of war and of society and humanity themselves, mimicking the very attitude of detached apathy that he wants his audience to abandon. His satire and irony, therefore, function as a moral looking glass for the reader, making him aware of the monster within himself that devalues human life and simply watches as others suffer, refusing to take a stand against the moral injustice and social corruption that, as Vonnegut suggests, accompany the institution of war.

Slaughterhouse-Five and Vonnegut's Life

While Vonnegut communicates a general message regarding the institution of war, his disdain for it is strongly connected to his personal history. The impact of World War II seems to be the primary source of inspiration for his novel; certain elements are even autobiographical. Like the character of Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut served in World War II, and he both experienced and witnessed events that he also includes in the novel. For example, Vonnegut too was taken as a prisoner of war and witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden (Shields, 2011). Various characters in the novel were also inspired by individuals that he met during his time in the war. Shields (2011) indicates that the character of Edgar Derby was based on a fellow prisoner of war, Michael Palaia, who was court-martialed and later executed for looting food from underground bunkers in Dresden. Despite this connection between the characters, Vonnegut's response to Palaia's death sharply contrasts with his narrator's response to the execution of Derby. Shields (2011) notes that when recounting the execution to his family, "Vonnegut burst into tears. 'The sons of bitches! The sons of bitches!'" (p. 76). His description of Derby's fate on

the last pages of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, does not demonstrate the same emotional response. Derby's death is described succinctly and apathetically in three sentences, receiving no response beyond Vonnegut's signature three-word phrase: "So it goes" (p. 214). This highly ironic response to such a horrific event provides a perfect example of Vonnegut's overall purpose in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*: to draw attention to the dehumanization and corruption of war by exaggerating these very evils.

As one would expect, Vonnegut's experience as a prisoner of war left a lasting impact on him, and the ideas and beliefs that this horrific time instilled in him are evident in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Shields (2011) notes that for Vonnegut, "[w]riting about the Dresden massacre had always been a conundrum" (p. 228), and he never publicly revealed his reasons for continuing to write his novel in spite of this difficulty. He revealed to his loved ones, however, that he found it "important to see creative work through to the end" (p. 229). The "conundrum" (p. 228) that Shields (2011) identifies perhaps reflects the massive personal impact of Vonnegut's time in the war. The unwillingness to publicly discuss his commitment to the novel suggests that his reasoning was perhaps far more personal and, perhaps, painful than he was willing to discuss in a formal and impersonal setting. The author's emotional response to discussing Palaia's death suggests that this may indeed be the case; war has left him scarred and troubled, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* is his own method of drawing attention to the injustices and evils that he both witnessed and experienced.

Regardless of Vonnegut's motivation for writing and finishing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, despite its extensive use of dark humor and satire, the novel clearly conveys

Vonnegut's personal moral code. In a speech delivered to the American Association of Physics Teachers, Vonnegut succinctly and simply defined morality:

‘What does a humanistic physicist do? Why, he watches people, listens to them, thinks about them, wishes them and their planet well. He wouldn't knowingly hurt people. He wouldn't knowingly help politicians or soldiers hurt people. If he comes across a technique that would obviously hurt people, he keeps it to himself. He knows that a scientist can be an accessory to murder most foul. That's simple enough, surely.’ (Shields, 2011, p. 247)

The aspects of morality that he describes are demonstrated throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* through the *amorality* of many of the characters and the ways that they fail to demonstrate morals and regard for human life.

Influence of the Vietnam War

While this outrage and frustration at war is tied to Vonnegut's personal history, the “So it goes” mentality undeniably reflects the overall historical context, as well. Since *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published in 1969, Vonnegut would have written the novel during the course of the Vietnam War. Though the novel itself is set during World War II, Vonnegut employs this wartime setting to communicate anti-war convictions that arose in response to the war in Vietnam. Vonnegut's indifferent narrator exemplifies the American people's response to this controversial historical event.

In November of 1969, President Nixon coined the term “silent majority” (p. 69) in reference to the people of the United States, and this passive group of Americans seems to be the fuel for much of Vonnegut's frustration. While the president acknowledged the open opposition to this war policy by the “vocal minority,” he appealed to what he

believed was the majority of his fellow Americans who supported his executive decisions regarding the war, promoting “patriotism [and] national destiny” and asking this “silent majority” to grant his administration their compliance and support (p. 69). While Nixon certainly understood that the American people were divided in their opinions regarding the war, he seemed to have overestimated the nation’s approval of his war policy, interpreting silence as agreement—essentially the same response as Vonnegut’s repeated, sarcastic apathy toward the horrific events that occur throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Public opinion regarding American involvement in Vietnam was generally divided into two categories: the “doves” and the “hawks” The former of these categories reflected a widespread anti-war sentiment in the United States—by most basic definition, these “doves” were those who opposed the war and supported its end On the other end of the spectrum were the “hawks,” or, simply, the proponents of war (Van der Kroef, 1965). The most clearly defined “hawks” and “doves” represented two extremes of American opinion, while the remainder of the nation wallowed in the middle, likely possessing an opinion regarding the war but not actively promoting their beliefs, preferring to remain silent and keep Vietnam “a long way off” (Barry Goldwater, 1965, qtd. in Van der Kroef, “American Opinion (II)” 1965, p. 22). This lack of activism from the vast “middle ground” of Americans seemed to stem not only from a desire for order and comfort, but also from a lack of deeply-rooted conviction. As indicated by Converse and Schuman (1970), a 1968 poll revealed that fifty-one percent of respondents believed it best that the United States continue bombing North Vietnam; however, after President Johnson chose to cease the bombings, 65% of respondents to the same survey indicated agreement with the president’s decision. Though this shift in opinion indicated a gravitation toward the

anti-war mentality that so many Americans claimed to possess, it evidenced a lack of conviction in the American people; they seemed to align their opinions with those of their leader rather than forming and adhering to their own beliefs. Indeed, Converse and Schuman (1970) argue that “the public entrusted officials to make the detailed policy decisions” (p. 21). This approach of silence and compliance seems to be the factor that led President Nixon to address the supposed “silent majority”; though Americans indeed possessed their own opinions regarding the war, many of which likely did not align with those of their president, they valued peace and civic order over activism and therefore remained silent, granting President Nixon the impression that the majority of Americans agreed with his policies—their response was merely “So it goes.”

Vonnegut’s narrator embodies the “silent majority’s” passive compliance with the nation’s involvement in the war. The character of Montana Wildhack, specifically, embodies this simple, three-word phrase in several different aspects. Though she appears in the novel only a small number of times, she plays a significant role in drawing attention to the American people’s overwhelming lack of conviction regarding war and the corruption that it brings upon society. Upon her arrival in Tralfamadore, Montana in many ways adheres to the stereotype of the beautiful yet submissive girl who is incapable of protecting herself. A pornographic actress of only twenty years who is kidnapped from her life on Earth to become Billy Pilgrim’s mate, she arrives naked on Tralfamadore, emphasizing her vulnerability (Vonnegut, 1969). Montana demonstrates many “damsel in distress” characteristics, and her imprisonment is the most prominent of these characteristics—she is kidnapped and held by the Tralfamadoreans against her will, and though she is not mistreated during her captivity, she is dehumanized and made to be no

more than a zoo animal who exists for others' entertainment (Vonnegut, 1969). This captivity and dehumanization reflect the corruption and evils of both war and society; as demonstrated through characters such as Edgar Derby and the narrator's apathetic attitude throughout the novel, war has no regard for human life, and those who support it often view people as no more than disposable tools for battle and use them as such. Montana's "damsel in distress" characteristics also reflect the apathetic attitude towards war and dehumanization that so infuriates Vonnegut; in fact, one may even say that Montana is "So it goes" incarnate.

Montana's submissiveness to her captors and circumstance reflects the apathy and acceptance that Vonnegut is mocking throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Though she is originally screaming and horrified at her captivity when she is brought to Tralfamadore, she eventually demonstrates acceptance and even peace with her fate. She even gives birth to a child here; her prison essentially becomes her home (Vonnegut, 1979). This shift from resistance to acceptance is reflective of Americans who silently accept the monstrosities that war fosters within their society; though they may originally protest and refuse simply to allow this evil and dehumanization to occur, their voices of truth are eventually silenced. Montana's lack of resistance to her captivity parallels the passive attitude of the Americans who silently accepted the Vietnam War and whom Vonnegut targets with outrage.

Montana's necklace represents this attitude of acceptance as well. The inscription on her locket reads, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" (Vonnegut, 1979, p. 209). Though this prayer is traditionally positive, inspiring peace and faith in

God's sovereignty as well as motivation to fight against injustice in the world, Vonnegut twists this prayer around so that it indicates acceptance and even support of the dehumanization of mankind. If Montana had been released from captivity and regained the autonomy and freedom that she possessed before she was taken prisoner, then this poem would suggest a different conclusion: one should not challenge fate, but simply trust that he will ultimately find peace. However, Montana never escapes. She remains an accepting, submissive captive for, presumably, the rest of her life. By placing this inscription around Montana's neck during the reader's last interaction with this character, Vonnegut suggests that such an attitude of acceptance will result in one becoming comfortable in his own apathy, never taking a stand for the truth and becoming perpetually irrelevant.

This very fate demonstrates the consequences of remaining compliant and submissive rather than standing for the truth. Though essentially placed on display as a zoo animal, the Tralfamadorians do not abuse her—they grant her a home in which to live, albeit in an artificial and controlled environment—and she even receives the blessing of a child from her captivity in Tralfamadore; however she is never set free; she remains a captive until the last time she appears in the novel. She may still be alive and comfortable, but she lives in constant captivity without genuine freedom or autonomy. The Tralfamadorians are able to control her surroundings and essentially manipulate her; for example, they “pla[y] with the clocks. . .and watc[h] the little Earthling family through peepholes (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 208). In her last appearance in the novel, Vonnegut describes her behavior as mechanical and structured; when she nurses her and Billy's baby, for example, she “move[s] the baby from one breast to the other, because

the moment [is] so structured that she *ha[s]* to do so” (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 207). Montana Wildhack is alive, but she is not truly *living*.

The Invisible Prison: War as an Oppressor in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider”

As *Slaughterhouse-Five* highlights the injustice and corruption of war, Katherine Anne Porter’s “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” provides a glimpse into the oppressive effects of war on society. In contrast with Vonnegut’s surreal satire which utilizes shock and irony to highlight society’s apathy, Porter creates a realistic, relatable story which provides an emotional, personal glimpse into the plight of one oppressed by the societal results of war. This story of tragic, young love conveys an opposition to war which presumably stems from Porter’s own views, suggesting this story’s purpose as a social commentary highlighting the detrimental effects of war. Indeed, throughout this story, war negatively impacts both the whole of society and the individuals within it. Some become corrupted by the false sense of honor that promoting war brings, while others are forced to support the war regardless of their personal convictions, lest they experience the wrath of a hyper-patriotic society so deluded by false ideas of honor that it imprisons its own members. By emphasizing the detrimental effects of war rather than glorifying it, Porter both indicates her own anti-war sentiment and suggests truth as the ultimate victor over the false glory of war.

Through her short novel, Porter exemplifies the societal corruption caused by war and demonstrates its crippling effect on the women who are expected to adhere to forced patriotism and volunteering. Katherine Himmelwright (2005) identifies the struggle between individual beliefs and a society who demands ideological conformity as key to the structure of “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” and indeed, Porter weaves the clash between

intrinsic and societal reactions to the war throughout the entire story. From the work's opening, Porter openly conveys Miranda's opposition toward the war; when harassed by the Liberty Bond salesman, she cries inwardly, "Suppose I were not a coward, but said what I really thought? Supposed I said to hell with this filthy war?" (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 273). Though outwardly Miranda conforms to society's patriotic expectations by, for example, serving at the military hospital and dancing with the soldiers, her inward contempt for the war and even for patriotism prevents her from completely surrendering to the overwhelming patriotism of society. Rather than portraying Miranda as a coward who would rather be accepted by society than shamed for her beliefs, Porter evokes sympathy on Miranda's behalf, suggesting the protagonist as a helpless victim rather than a cowardly fraud. While Miranda clearly possesses her own convictions regarding the war, the popular attitude of patriotism that exists within the community leaves her unable to express her true feelings; she instead must remain "desperately silent" (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 273). The war therefore robs her—and any others who oppose it—of a voice, figuratively beating into submission, or at least irrelevance, any who do not agree with the most socially acceptable view. By portraying Miranda as the oppressed and war-supporting society as the oppressor, Porter calls one to empathize with both herself and her protagonist.

In addition to highlighting the oppressive effect of war, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" also demonstrates war's power to corrupt even the originally positive elements of society. This consequence of war is perhaps the most insidious, as this corruption taints the most positive elements of society, and these elements are able to continue disguising themselves as good even after they have been entirely corrupted by war. In itself,

patriotism is not inherently negative, nor are men automatically oppressive or dehumanizing towards women; however, war corrupts them both. The Liberty Bond presentation at the theater, for example, illustrates this corruption. During the presentation, an American flag hangs in the background, “improperly and disrespectfully exposed, nailed at each upper corner, gathered in the middle and nailed again, sagging dustily” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 292-3). War serves as the corrupting factor that turns the American flag, a symbol of freedom and patriotism, into an emblem of disrespect and false commitment to the values which the flag is intended to represent. As Miranda notes, the entire Liberty Bond presentation appears to be a ploy for the presenter’s own personal recognition and a sense of importance rather than actually promoting patriotism: “for once in his life he was an important fellow in an impressive situation, and he reveled, rolling his words in an actorish tone” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 293). Just as the man behaves as an actor, war has created a façade out of the “patriotism” that the dominant members of Miranda’s community claim. War therefore possesses the capacity to corrupt even the most innocent, trusted elements of society.

By corrupting the good in society, war also corrupts perhaps the purest element that exists: truth. As Youngblood (1959) notes in “Structure and Imagery in Katherine Anne Porter’s ‘Pale Horse, Pale Rider,’” “The war creates fear and suspicion, distrust and hypocrisy, which transforms daily reality into a disturbing set of distorting mirrors” (p. 345). War therefore possesses the terrifying ability to blot out or at least disguise the truth; in fact, war in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” seems to require dishonesty to even survive as an important force within the community. Both Miranda and Towney present the strongest examples of this, as Porter unashamedly indicates their inward disdain despite

their outward compliance and support for the war. Towney, for instance, is “all open-faced glory and goodness, willing to sacrifice herself for her country,” though she expresses contrary feelings when speaking privately with Miranda (p. 286). Likewise, despite Miranda’s self-acknowledged disapproval of the war, she outwardly supports it, perhaps even enthusiastically: she admits to Adam, “I write pieces advising other young women to knit and roll bandages and do without sugar and help win the war” (p. 281). Miranda and Towney’s occupations as writers also demonstrate the struggle between reality and the false truth that war has imposed upon society. As writers, their vocational purpose is to relay information to the public; they impart truth to their readers. The obstacles that they encounter to their writing, especially from males, however, indicate the conflict between war and truth. During their career beginnings as reporters, their desire to report the truth is attacked; the subjects of investigation “we[ep] painfully and implor[e] the young reporters to suppress the worst of the story” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 275). Now, however, the women’s positions as gossip columnist and entertainment reporter, respectively, leave them little opportunity to share relevant truth with the rest of the world. In fact, such positions suggest that they convey embellished perceptions of the world and false stories regarding other human beings; now, they, too can spread only lies. Because they see the ugly, unpleasant truth about the war, their voices of truth must be silenced.

Miranda’s character draws several striking similarities with Montana Wildhack: she is an oppressed female character utilized by the author to demonstrate the corrupting influence of war on society and the consequences that result when nothing is done about it. While unlike Montana the character of Miranda maintains her literal autonomy and

freedom, Miranda imprisoned in a far more subtle way: by the pressures of society.

Miranda is pressured throughout the story to support a war that she does not truly support at all, lest she suffer persecution or even estrangement at the hands of the more powerful members of society who demand “patriotism” and conformity. The Liberty Bond salesmen provide a clear example of this oppression, bullying and even threatening Miranda into complying with their wishes (Porter, 1939/1972, pp. 272-3). Miranda also differs from Montana in that she never actually accepts or embraces the ideals of war, nor does she fully succumb to the pressures imposed upon her and other frustrated members of society, especially women, to support the war effort. For example, she expresses her disdain for dancing with the soldiers (Porter, 1939/1972), and she inwardly expresses her frustration and longing for freedom: “we dare not say a word to each other of our desperation, we are speechless animals letting ourselves be destroyed, and why?” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 291). Despite her feelings, however, she still conforms to society’s expectations—she still dances with the soldiers; she still tends to the wounded; and she still, as she admits to Adam, “write[s] pieces advising other young women to knit and roll bandages and do without sugar and help win the war” (p. 281). Though she does not inwardly submit to the desires of her oppressors, she still outwardly complies.

Miranda may not openly take a stand for what she believes is right, but Porter tells Miranda’s story with such realism and intimacy that one easily relates to her and understands her frustration yet outward compliance with the demands of society. In this relatable nature of her protagonist, Porter constructs her strongest argument against the evils of war. While Vonnegut relies on irony and outrage to call his audience to action, utilizing a shock factor throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* to evoke a sense of urgency,

Porter focuses on portraying her characters as beautifully and imperfectly human. Readers are in tune with Miranda's most private thoughts, fears, and desires. They experience her dreams, and they are as shocked and devastated as she is when she discovers Adam has died. Porter's method of awakening her audience to the corrupting power of war is, therefore, less direct than Vonnegut's, but through its intimate and realistic style, it calls readers to put themselves in Miranda's shoes and to consider Porter's perspective from their own point of view.

Influence of Porter's Life

As *Slaughterhouse-Five* draws clear parallels between Billy Pilgrim's story and Vonnegut's personal life, Miranda's story also contains several elements that were clearly inspired by Porter's life. Miranda's story mirrors Porter's own in many ways; in fact, Porter described Miranda's emotional change following her survival of the influenza and the war as "a piece of 'biography in the deeper sense'" (Givner, 1982, p. 129). Like her protagonist in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Porter was a newspaper reporter as well as a survivor of the influenza epidemic. Porter herself became very ill, but was nursed by a young, healthy soldier whom she had never met before—the inspiration for the character of Adam. Sadly, "Alexander—the Adam of [Porter's] World War I story" (p. 128), died from influenza ten days later (p. 127). Miranda is clearly a fictional representation of Porter herself, providing a glimpse into the emotions and thoughts the author encountered during this difficult time in her life.

Miranda's struggle against patriarchal oppression reflects Porter's similar struggle to overcome the gender expectations imposed upon her, suggesting the author's personal identification with Miranda's perspective. Himmelwright (2005) affirms that the war

indeed creates a set of expectations that Miranda finds difficult to fulfill. She states:

Miranda *is* indirectly affected by the war. Many of her difficulties emerge from her inability to adhere to the vastly conflicting ways in which society attempts to define her role. As a result, she struggles against the requirements that seek to define her role as a supportive woman on the home front. (p. 725)

The war establishes an expected role of all women as supporters and nurturers, as evidenced in their volunteer positions as nurses and dancing partners. Stout (2013) indicates that such a differentiation of gender roles was a key element of society during the years of Porter's youth. She also notes, however, that Porter eventually left Texas "seeking to escape living models of womanhood" (p. 99). Miranda's plight therefore reflects Porter's own struggle to escape the traditional expectations imposed upon her from a very young age, and by pairing this plight with the consequences of war, Porter indicates a frustration with both sources of injustice. In fact, Porter establishes a direct connection between the two, suggesting war as a tool utilized to keep women in their place rather than allowing them to form their own identity. From Miranda's perspective, war "keeps [women] busy and makes them feel useful, and all these women running wild with the men away are dangerous, if they aren't given something to keep their little minds out of mischief. . . Keeping still and quiet will win the war" (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 290). The sarcastic nature of this passage indicates Miranda's disgust for the traditional gender roles that war upholds, and Miranda's status as a relatable protagonist rather than an amoral enemy suggests Porter's similarity of opinion. While Vonnegut's and Porter's personal histories differ significantly, and while the drastic stylistic differences of the

works reflect the differences between the authors, the literary products of their lives demonstrate similar convictions and messages.

Historical context: Women in World War I

As Slaughterhouse-Five is strongly influenced by the Vietnam War, World War I played a significant role in the development of “Pale Horse, Pale Rider.” The story’s wartime setting is an obvious example of this influence, but the war’s impact on women during this historical era plays a particularly significant role in this work. Examining the status and struggles of women during World War I provides insight into the contextual inspiration for Porter’s short novel.

Despite the negative aspects of war that Porter highlights in “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” World War I positively affected women by granting them opportunities that they never had in the past. Lettie Gavin (1997) notes:

[T]he War, in fact, marked the beginning of a new era in the history of women, both in the United States and in Europe. Many believed that those four years of war liberated women from old molds and stereotypes, provided new opportunities for them, and made them economically independent. Women working diligently and efficiently laid the foundation for higher wages, better jobs, improved working conditions, and a more competitive status in the labor market. (p. ix)

In fact, this era in American history marks the very first time women were allowed to enlist in the military; in early 1917, 200 young women became official Navy yeomen (Gavin, 1997). This change was a massive step for the recognition of women’s ability and value outside of roles traditionally ascribed to them. As noted by Gavin (1997), in the context of the Navy, they were treated as equals: they earned the same wages as men, but

they were also punished equally. They were often given more menial, “busywork” tasks, but some female yeomen were permitted to travel overseas and fulfill positions such as torpedo assembler and fingerprint expert. Miranda and Towney’s jobs as reporters demonstrates this increase in female opportunity; they work alongside men performing similar work, and though they have been demoted, “they [were] both. . .real reporters once” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 274). They are not enlisted in the military, but wartime society has granted them opportunities that they previously would not have been afforded.

Not surprisingly given the era, most did not accept this change with open arms; men still held the power in society, and though the women’s suffrage movement had already occurred, it was not yet legally implemented (Gavin, 1997, p. 2). Gavin (1997) notes, “It would seem no one was completely pleased with the order; the concept of women in the military was unheard of” (p. 2). The decision to allow women to enlist faced a great deal of public backlash, and as Gavin (1997) highlights, “[e]ven the Navy’s own board of legal advisors reacted violently. ‘W-o-m-e-n in the Navy, fantastic, ridiculous,’ they cried. ‘Petticoats in the Navy! Dam’d outrage! Helluva mess! Back to the sea f’r me!’” (p. 2). While neither Miranda nor Towney is enlisted in the war, the way they are treated in their profession demonstrates this resistance toward women’s involvement in traditionally male fields. They are “degraded publicly to routine female jobs” as soon as they commit an error, though neither of them can “see what else they could possibly have done,” and now their coworkers view them as “nice girls, but fools” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 275). Chuck, one of Miranda and Towney’s male coworkers, even suggests that “Florence Nightingale ruined wars” by caring for soldiers rather than

allowing them to “perish where they fall” (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 287). Though the opportunities now granted to women could greatly benefit both the military and the nation as a whole, the potential benefits could not permeate the public’s resistance to change.

While many women aided in the war effort by actually enlisting in the military, far more women played other indispensable roles, joining together to demonstrate their own patriotism, intellect, and strength. Gavin (1997) identifies many such roles and contributions; for example, the Salvation Army was sent to France due to the urging of Evangeline Booth, its U.S. commander, and this organization utilized both men and women alike to provide support for the troops. The Red Cross also used female aid workers both in the United States and Europe alike to tend to the wounded, teach proper health care, and provide humanitarian aid. Such organizations as these gave women the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership and intellect. Gavin (1997) provides an example of such an individual: Elizabeth Ashe, who led the American Red Cross pediatric unit to France in order to provide health care for thousands of European children and whose work led to the opening of multiple health care centers. Though the malnutrition and sickness that resulted from the war were tragic, these tragic results allowed women such as Ashe to demonstrate their diligence, compassion, and leadership ability. Women were able to fulfill massively important roles that they may not have been permitted by society to fill under other circumstances.

Porter, however, identifies the falsity of a view of wartime America that portrays a progressive society that united all Americans through a common sense of patriotism and duty. Such an idealized view would be held by individuals such as the Liberty Bond

salesman, perhaps, but those who do not possess such views, such as Towney and Miranda, demonstrate the oppressive and hypocritical effects of war on the less-powerful members of society. Indeed, underneath these heroic acts of patriotism and sacrifice lies a sinister truth that typical stories of home front heroism fail to identify: many who outwardly supported the war effort only did so out of a sense of obligation or even fear. Christopher Capozzola (2008) discusses voluntarism within the context of World War I America—it “had many definitions. It denoted an expression of consent. It referred to organized activity outside state auspices. It was also an act of unpaid labor” (p. 85). Capozzola (2008) also notes that rather than being a means of demonstrating patriotism, for most women, volunteering was a burden that they could hardly afford—and certainly did not want—to bear: “[t]hey found it hard to spare time on behalf of a war effort that many of them didn’t much care for in the first place” (p. 85). The societal pressure to support the war effort was not limited to a sense of obligation, however. Capozzola (2008) notes that coercion played a major role in persuading women to volunteer: “Coercion...operated differently in women’s organizations than in the male vigilante societies that dominated headlines. Although women did not by and large experience or participate in physical violence, coercion still abounded” (p. 86). The same war and “patriotism” that allowed countless women opportunities to enter the workforce and which inspired female leaders to save and impact countless lives actually imprisoned people within their own homes and lives, ultimately leading to contempt and frustration—the exact opposite of the devotion they were expected to feel for their country.

Montana Wildhack and Miranda Gay: Vonnegut and Porter's "Suffering Sisters"

Though they are imprisoned and oppressed in different ways, Montana Wildhack and Miranda Gay are central to conveying their authors' messages against war. These women have nearly nothing in common—one is a celebrity while the other is a reporter struggling to survive, and one is a prisoner in an alien world while the other lives in wartime America—but both ladies share the plight of imprisonment. Though Miranda is not a literal prisoner as Montana is, both characters are trapped by forces beyond their control, and both Porter and Vonnegut utilize these "suffering sisters" as a means to convey messages regarding war and its corruption of society.

Feminist Icons?

As significant female characters, both Montana Wildhack and Miranda Gay bring some elements of feminism into their respective stories and open the possibility of feminist interpretation, and one could certainly examine the works from this perspective. Nevertheless, despite the similarities between these ladies and the oppression that they both experience, Porter alone seems to convey her message with a feminist intent, while Vonnegut's use of the "damsel in distress" archetype is merely another means of highlighting the dehumanizing and oppressive effects of war rather than specifically drawing attention to feminism. Montana is indeed a significant female character, but her weakness and submissiveness reflect Vonnegut's theme overall; these characteristics do not only pertain to female characters in the novel. Individuals throughout the work are victims of war and its consequences, and Montana functions to provide a living, human example of what becomes of those who, like the narrator, simply respond, "So it goes."

Her significance to the theme is in her characteristics as a prisoner who merely accepts her fate, rather than in her womanhood.

In contrast, Miranda's character and plight indicate a feminist intent in addition to Porter's general argument against the corruption of war. Miranda is significant in that she demonstrates the general oppressive nature of war toward those who do not support it, but she is also significant as a woman; through her, Porter emphasizes the patriarchal dominance of the war effort and expresses her frustration with it. In "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," war functions as an oppressive force toward female characters, both directly and symbolically. War's silencing effect presumably applies to all those who oppose it, but this oppressed group consists mainly of women, while the vast majority of those who support the war in this story are males. The Liberty Bond salespeople of the story, for example, are always men, and the two who harass Miranda sit on her desk without invitation and fail to "move, or take off their hats" out of respect for her (Porter, 1939/1972, p. 272). These representatives of the war effort openly disrespect her, as if their war association grants them the right to subjugate women. The war also places women into the direct service of men; for example, Miranda volunteers at the hospital and dances with the soldiers though she hates performing these acts of service. Of the hospital, she remarks, "Never again will I come here, this is no sort of thing to be doing. This is disgusting," and her fellow volunteer likewise expresses her disdain: "I don't know what good it does, really. . . I don't like this" (p. 277). The other volunteer's nearly immediate negation of her complaint, however, indicates that the war has created an environment in which a woman cannot safely voice her opinions to anyone outside the small, oppressed feminine sphere; she remarks, "'I suppose it's all right, though'. . .

cautiously,” (p. 277) as if voicing her own opinion will endanger her. She is only permitted by society to behave patriotically; her personal convictions hold no relevance and even risk drawing society’s judgment and wrath upon her.

Conclusion: *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s Shock Factor and “Pale Horse, Pale Rider”’s Emotional Realism

Vonnegut and Porter both call attention to the social consequences of war, imploring readers to recognize oppression and corruption that they may have overlooked. Though one may compare their styles and methods of evoking emotional responses, neither author performs this task “better” than the other. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a mirror that shows only one’s ugliest features, while “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” is a walk alongside a frustrated, struggling friend. Where one falls short, the other succeeds, and what one overlooks, the other magnifies. Vonnegut and Porter wrote their works in different eras and out of unique personal situations; therefore, these works contrast greatly with one another, but tied together through their themes and characters suffering from the same plight, the works complement each other and represent slightly different perspectives on the same controversial issues. Montana Wildhack once enjoyed beauty, fame, and material success while on Earth, while Miranda Gay is overlooked by most of society and can barely survive—yet neither Montana’s earthly riches nor Miranda’s inward cries for help can free them from the captivity that the ideals of war imposes upon them. These ideals may imprison others, or they may imprison oneself, but, as both characters demonstrate, these ideals corrupt some of the most beautiful elements of society and the world and prevent the truth from being revealed.

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