

“The War Parts, Anyway, Are Pretty Much True”: Negotiating the Reality of World War II in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22*

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While a great deal of work has been done comparing Kurt Vonnegut’s writing to that of other American authors, relatively little sustained analysis has been carried out discussing the links between Vonnegut’s postwar oeuvre and that of some of his 1960s contemporaries.¹ It is clear that many of these writers share much in common, yet, as Christopher Gair points out in *The American Counterculture* (2007), “Oddly . . . recent studies of 1960s counterculture have largely erased literature from its history” (142). Such an inconsistency is all the more surprising when we consider Vonnegut’s well-known and public friendship with the author of *Catch-22* (1961), Joseph Heller. In an oft-quoted 1992 *Playboy* magazine interview between the two authors, both display a warm and familiar rapport with one another, noting that their relationship goes back over twenty years to a literary festival that took place on the day that Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot. Heller recalls fondly of hearing Vonnegut talk on that day: “Kurt Vonnegut gave a speech that was probably the best speech I’ve ever heard. I think I haven’t heard a better one since. He was so casual and so funny and it all seemed extemporaneous” (Mallory para. 16). Vonnegut is similarly complimentary toward Heller, commenting, “He’s a comedian” and describing him as “screamingly funny” (paras. 216, 15). Among the wide range of topics that the two writers discuss is World War II and their firsthand knowledge of the conflict. Heller notes:

It was fun in the beginning. We were kids, nineteen, twenty years old, and had real machine guns in our hands. Not those things at the penny arcades at Coney Island. You got the feeling that there was something glorious about it. Glorious excitement. (para. 80)

However, over the course of the interview, both writers suggest that this initial enthusiasm for the ennobling possibilities of war was soon quashed by the “reality” that they encountered, leading them to deem warfare “an atrocity.” Indeed, the idea that the projected image of war differed from the “reality” the two authors experienced forms a central part of much of their writing. In his essay “The Great American Joke,” author Louis D. Rubin, Jr., suggests that central to all humor is the juxtaposition of an ideal with the reality of life: “The essence of comedy is incongruity.” In this essay I will argue that Rubin’s proposal that a sense of incongruity “lies at the heart of American experience” (109) is of central importance to understanding the comparable satirical impulses behind both Vonnegut’s and Heller’s novels.

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) and *Catch-22* are both frequently referred to as “war” or “antiwar” novels. Both texts engage, often on a personal level, with the effects and aftereffects of war on the individual. Rachel McCoppin concurs with such a sentiment, proposing in her chapter “‘God Damn It, You’ve Got to Be Kind’: War and Altruism in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut” that “World War II is a central component in many of Kurt Vonnegut’s novels” (47). Such a claim can also clearly be applied to many of Heller’s post-*Catch-22* works, including the play *We Bombed in New Haven* (1967), the *Catch-22* sequel *Closing Time* (1994), and Heller’s autobiographical novel *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* (2000). Indeed, in “Joseph Heller’s Combat Experiences in *Catch-22*” Michael C. Scoggins lucidly argues for a reassessment of Heller’s work in terms of its autobiographical elements: “Many of the characters and incidents in *Catch-22* were in fact drawn directly from Heller’s tour of duty, and were simply modified or exaggerated for dramatic effect” (213).

McCoppin outlines the widely recognized semiautobiographical nature of Vonnegut’s writing at the beginning of her chapter, highlighting the recurrent importance of the writer’s experiences of the firebombing of Dresden: