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WAR SATIRE AS TRAGEDY: REDEMPTIVE GENRES FOR *CATCH-22* AND
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my sister, Racheal Gillean, in the hope and belief we will continue to make each other proud.

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ABSTRACT

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Athenian tragedy, despite the suffering it depicts, is theorized to offer emotional relief through its power to deliver a cathartic experience. The three plays forming Aeschylus's *Oresteia* show the majestic suffering of noble men and women but eventually offer redemption from the cycle of violence through advancement in civilization and jurisprudence. More than two millennia later, however, the monumental event known as World War II unleashed suffering on such a massive plane that the nobility and grandeur of tragedy, in the Athenian sense, fall short of depicting the scale of human suffering and allowing for the same catharsis found in Athenian tragedy. Later in the twentieth century, novelists Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, who both fought in the war, found a new genre—satire with black humor—for expressing and coping with the traumatic war without unnecessarily ennobling it in the vein of Athenian tragedy. Their respective

novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and *Catch-22* (1961), offer redemption for tragedy by approaching the serious subject of the unprecedented, globally destructive World War II in a counter-intuitive and even amusing way, thus reinforcing the horror of the war without cloaking it with the majesty associated with tragedy.

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I: INTRODUCTION

The post-World War II American novels *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller (1961) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (1969) are typically read as either satire or black comedy—humor with a bite. While these war novels out of necessity deal with the serious subjects associated with World War II, their narrative genres and styles have generally relegated them to a genre whose prestige ranks below that of Athenian tragedy, including Aeschylus's *Oresteia*—which, like these twentieth-century novels, deals with the serious subjects surrounding a mythic war—or even modern tragedy in the literary hierarchy. However, as Ihab Hassan writes in “Laughter in the Dark: The New Voice in American Fiction,” black humor in satirical novels achieves much of tragedy’s gravity and emotional effect on readers: “Nightmare and slapstick do meet in that surreal, comic vision that, recognizing the discrepancies in human life, expresses and mediates them,” in the process “deflect[ing] humor toward anguish” (639). Neither novel downplays the horrors of the World War in which the characters find themselves as participants, and the depiction of war in Heller’s and Vonnegut’s novels leads Hassan to argue that the effect of their humor, which he dubs the “new comedy,” is similar to tragedy’s catharsis in the way it “purges and cleanses,” with “purgation . . . achieved through a comic recognition of the absurd” (640). The anguish Hassan mentions is an acknowledged element of black comedy and its associated absurdism, but satire as a narrative genre is overlooked in that it may also incorporate tragedy, to the extent that absurdist fiction—described in Leon F. Seltzer’s essay on *Catch-22* as “outrageous senselessness”—can serve the higher purposes usually reserved for tragic literature (290). In Edith Hall’s work examining

Greek tragedy, she restates Aristotle's definition of tragedy as the dramatic representation of a serious event that causes suffering for a character so that audience members experience fear and pity in relation to the character (3-4). The absurdist universes established in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* function in the same sense through their representation of their protagonists' suffering during World War II. In this way the shared topic of war, in tandem with the extremities of emotion it invokes, allows these absurdist novels to transcend restrictions of genre and elevate morality to a more cosmic perspective forced by war on a world-wide scale.

Absurdist fiction for Seltzer is inherently more serious than it appears as it tends to use comedy as a means to highlight societal follies or horrors; in contrast, Friedrich Nietzsche's classicist concept of "New Attic Comedy"—a kind of degenerate version of tragedy depicting an everyman rather than a suffering nobleman—condescends to depict "mundane, commonplace, everyday life, which anyone was in a position to judge" (56). That earlier understanding of a "New Comedy" apprehended a fallen version of tragedy no longer able to reach its previous heights after abandoning a suffering god for its hero in favor of the mundane everyman. However, Hassan stresses the point that tragedy fails to reach its previous heights after World War II because the consistency of the well-ordered fate of Athenian tragedy is nonsensical when describing the random, pointless suffering in novels depicting World War II. Therefore, a more recent understanding of war satire elevates Hassan's "new comedy" to assume classical tragedy's role by responding instructively to "the incoherence of life" in an absurdly nonsensical but existentially dangerous post-war society (636).

Athenian tragedy typically explores human failings through the actions of tragic heroes recognized for their nobility, like the well-known Agamemnon and Oedipus, as well as prophetic figures who highlight the role of fate in the proceedings—the archetypal Blind Tiresias and Cassandra of tragedy and myth. The same character archetypes appear in both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, connecting the novels to tragic and satirical-tragic genres. To some degree, the everyman characters Nately and Yossarian in *Catch-22* and Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* function as tragic heroes whose choices and destinies combine to generate suffering, though they depart from the typical nobility of tragic heroes in important ways. Heller’s old man in Rome and Vonnegut’s Tralfamadorians fulfill roles similar to the Delphic Oracle, Tiresias, or even doomed Cassandra, as they speak for the various forces of fate in the novels in ways that other characters cannot observe or comprehend. The fact that Billy Pilgrim and Yossarian have so declined from the classical tragic hero supports Hassan’s reading of “new comedy” as a descendant of Athenian tragedy, since these new heroes are the reader’s intermediaries in providing “a comic recognition of the absurd,” itself a version of fate updated to modern sensibilities (640).

The calamity resulting in the novels from the play between individual choice and fate reflects a theme of Athenian tragedy overall. Specifically, in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, King Agamemnon’s individual choice to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis, the primary driver for fate in the first of the three plays in *Oresteia*, *Agamemnon*, sets in motion a chain of heroic yet catastrophic events for individuals, families, and states that unfold throughout the trilogy. The same theme is only built on

later through the plays, as it is revealed that previous sins of Agamemnon's ancestral House of Atreus provided the initial background for his eventual fated choice. Similarly, the bureaucratic war machinery in *Catch-22* and the universe of *Slaughterhouse-Five* where, the Tralfamadorians explain, all time "simply is," forever already happening and unchanging, serve the function of fate (Vonnegut 86). Characters in these novels and in Aeschylus's tragedies struggle against yet contribute to the endings toward which larger forces push them. Neither Yossarian nor Billy Pilgrim are examined as tragic archetypes in literary scholarship, but in his essay on "Power and Responsibility in *Catch-22*," Stephen Sniderman agrees that, like Agamemnon in *Oresteia*, Yossarian bears responsibility for much of the suffering in Heller's novel.

In addition to the character archetypes shared by Athenian tragedy, *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, twentieth-century absurdism reveals insights into humanity comparable to those examined in tragedy, as discussed in Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's writing on war novels. Ogunyemi argues that "absurdity, admittedly that of war rather than that of the execution of a war novel, has been a dominant feature" of twentieth-century war novels because the commingled horror and ludicrousness of absurdist fiction is necessary to depict modern war's conditions and soldiers' emotions. (208). Absurdism "has come to be a central principle in relating the truth about war," as so many outrageous circumstances occur in war that "could have been really hilarious, if [they] were not so tragic in actuality" (208). Events in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* illustrate this connection through the ways Yossarian's and Billy Pilgrim's actions frequently mirror the choices of characters like Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra, and Orestes

in *Oresteia*, as justifiable intentions lead them to make choices that result in suffering for themselves and others.

The chapters comprising this thesis examine satire as a narrative genre capable of encompassing comedy, romance, and tragedy. Such a generic intersection demonstrates that classical Athenian tragedy and American post-war satire can both inform analysis of the problem of war in the twenty-first century and the ways elements of tragedy and absurdist humor have become part of the contemporary media fabric in the forms of film, political comedy television shows, and even video games that examine both historical and contemporary wars. Chapter one introduces satire and tragedy as narrative genres as well as primary texts and critical traditions to be considered. Chapter two reviews essential elements of tragedy in the literary tradition and *Oresteia* that reappear in war literature of the twentieth century, while also considering the re-classification of tragedy as war literature. Chapter three closely reads *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* with a focus on tragic archetypes in the novels and satirical-tragic subjects that embody the larger view of satire containing tragedy.

The conclusion broadens to larger themes found in the primary sources by considering how the catharsis-driven narrative structure of tragedy and the same structure's adoption into absurdist humor shapes modern understandings of war and our consumption of media that covers war. Understanding the role absurdist humor plays in invoking first horror and pity and then catharsis is particularly important in light of popular political entertainment like *The Daily Show* that focuses on war's absurdity as "a propagandistic effort to uphold an anti-war position" (Ogunyemi 209). This conclusion

offers opportunities to update the appeal of tragedy and consider how satire's popularity in the twenty-first century applies to modern concerns of life in a time of ongoing but distant war. As later chapters will explore, the vast scale involved in modern warfare and the emotional separation from the ongoing violence that distance allows connects to satire and the related genre comedy for the lack of sympathy those genres invoke. The tragic, on the other hand, is able to evoke sympathy even for less momentous suffering because of the family intimacy it depicts. Absurdist humor, while often maintaining the objective distance comedy requires to laugh at the misfortune of others, at times punctures the illusion of distance by forcing the intimacy of wartime violence on the audience and thus elicits the pity and fear, and eventual catharsis, of tragedy—an ability also utilized in war coverage from twenty-first century political comedy hosts, which may be influencing the generation of young adults who put their trust in that interpretation of war.

II: SEEKING TRAGIC PURPOSE IN A POST-WAR AGE

As this thesis's introduction stated, the classical philosophy of tragedy emerged from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which details the purposes and characteristics of tragedy. *Poetics* states that poetry is innately human, originating in our nature as imitative beings. According to Aristotle, imitation is a form of learning observable at the earliest stages of childhood, and we enjoy observing and creating such mimesis in our lives and poetry because "to learn gives the liveliest pleasure" (IV). With the development of an "instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm," poetry emerges and branches in two directions that Aristotle attributes to the subject of mimesis: first, those that "imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men"; and second, "the more trivial sort" that imitated the actions of common types of men in writing what Aristotle called satire or "lampooning verse," which offers mimetic re-takes on other narrative genres (IV). These broad definitions encompass, respectively, tragedy and comedy in the classical sense, with tragedy historically embodying a higher stature of artistry due mainly to its subjects. However, satire combined with tragedy, particularly in twentieth-century literature like *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, functions as an expression by the post-World War II generation of authors to represent the unique cosmic horror of their experiences in that civilization-threatening cataclysm.

This merging of formerly distinct genres can appear in the twentieth century and into the new millennium as a heroic response to a perplexing historical context, but the formal challenges of this fusion must not be underestimated. Comedy differs from tragedy in the prestige of the protagonists, with noble and good men depicted in tragedy

while in comedy more common everymen or humorously flawed characters are featured. As an initial limit on comedy's inferiority, Aristotle says the characters in comedy are of a "lower type" but not "in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly" (V). The defects in comedic characters are ridiculous, but not in a way that is painful or ultimately harmful—as evidenced by the comic mask, which for Aristotle "is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain" (V). Comedy's portrayal of buffoonery without any real harm or suffering makes it less consequential than tragedy, which *Poetics* describes as "an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (VI). Whereas comedy lampoons and subsequently provides some ironic distance from events depicted, tragedy's invocation of pity and fear in the audience creates an intimate, shared space for emotional vulnerability and by doing so "effect[s] the proper purgation of these emotions" through catharsis (VI). To achieve such threatening but healthful effects, Aristotle claims the most important element is the plot because tragedy is an imitation "of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality" (VI). Individual characters are subsequently regarded in *Poetics* as less important than the actions because actions determine the end and drive the drama's plot, which Aristotle deemed the most essential element of poetry. This understanding further illuminates Aristotle's conception of comedy as inconsequential compared to tragedy, based on comedy's ironic distance from events compared with the closeness and emotional vulnerability of tragedy.

The chasm that results between the grandeur of tragedy and the comparative triviality of comedy and satire recurs in the other monumental assessment of tragedy

registered before the twentieth century and its peculiar upheavals of familiar genre divisions. Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and its evaluation of tragedy's origin differs from Aristotle's much earlier description in *Poetics*, which stresses the importance of the action of the play. However, Aristotle's descriptive approach to tragedy may converge with Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy in their shared conception of tragedy's effect on its audience. Aristotle's idea of catharsis allows for purging of negative emotions evoked in sympathy with events depicted on stage, while Nietzsche, instead of evacuating this dread, more directly copes with inescapable horror. Aristotle prioritized the plot in his description of tragedy, while only minimally noticing the role of the chorus as an entity that should be "an integral part of the whole, and share in the action" (XVIII). Nietzsche's definition of tragedy instead depends upon the play between the Dionysiac—found in the ecstatic, disordered satyr chorus, which he defines as the source of tragedy—and the Apolline, represented by the individualized actors whom the chorus observes (14). Nietzsche's tragedy transcends literary ideas of plot and characterization as he imagines "the Greek man of culture" who in the satyr chorus feels his individual identity subsumed into a direct experience of nature:

The metaphysical consolation (with which, as I wish to point out, every true tragedy leaves us), that whatever superficial changes may occur, life is at bottom indestructibly powerful and joyful, is given concrete form as a satyr chorus, a chorus of natural beings, living ineradicably behind all civilization, as it were, remaining the same for ever, regardless of the changing generations and the path of history. (39)

This elevated understanding of tragedy insists on a distance between tragedy and satire, as the latter's connection to comedy—with laughter and seemingly less prestigious subject matter as a connective—is condemned by Nietzsche as the death of tragedy through its relation to New Attic Comedy. As a divergence from the majesty of Aristotle's noble characters in tragedy, Nietzsche's New Attic Comedy portrayed “mundane, commonplace, everyday life, which anyone was in a position to judge”—in contrast to tragedy's appeal to civilized humanity's vestigial links to primitive myth and ritual (Nietzsche 56).

Tragedy, in Nietzsche's understanding, transcends individual experience through the Dionysiac chorus, evoking an ecstatic state that “contains, for its duration, a lethargic element into which all past personal experience is plunged,” causing a separation between the everyday world in which the audience exists and the transcendent reality of the Dionysiac state in which they have “truly seen to the essence of things” (39). The focus on the audience's state while observing tragedy is the key link between Nietzsche and Aristotle, because Nietzsche's Dionysiac state and the way it enables the audience to see to the truth of existence is similar to Aristotle's idea of catharsis as a purpose of tragedy—as Nietzsche writes, art is in fact the only way to relieve the existential horror of confronting reality: “[Art] alone can turn these thoughts of repulsion at the horror and absurdity of existence into ideas compatible with life: these are the *sublime*—the taming of horror through art; and *comedy*—the artistic release from the repulsion of the absurd” (40). Nietzsche's personified art, as savior of a civilized person who forcibly realizes the contingent weight and chaos of existence, enables perspectives and means to manage

unavoidable aspects of existence that twentieth-century literature will confront not through tragedy but through satire and comedy as novels like *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* reimagine the chaos of existence through a satirical perspective.

Nietzsche's understanding of art's reconciliation in tragedy requires, in conjunction with the Dionysiac, the Apolline as a world of dreams and orderly, individualized forms to counter and complement the ecstatic visions of the Dionysiac. Entering the Dionysiac state via the chorus is an essential part of the tragic experience for the audience, because "enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art" (Nietzsche 43). Once the audience reaches a state of Dionysiac enchantment they see themselves as satyrs, which involves "a complete forgetting of the self" (17) and a communing with "artistic powers which spring from nature itself" (18). In this state, the observer sees a new vision outside of himself, which is the Apolline figure embodied by the tragic hero—seen and understood not merely as an actor but the embodiment of the god as in a prophetic dream—and which, according to Nietzsche, completes the dialectic agents of classical tragedy. The emotions the spectator experiences when viewing this transformed Apolline figure are similar to the pain of catharsis described by Aristotle, as the audience sees "the god, with whose suffering [the audience member] had already identified, walking on to the stage. He [the tragic poet] involuntarily translated the entire image of the god that was trembling before his soul to that masked figure, and dissolved its reality into a ghostly unreality"—that is, into the Apolline dream state (45). Nietzsche's reformulations of audience identification compared with Aristotle's less nuanced conception of catharsis opened the genres of comedy and tragedy to reformations

appropriate to the twentieth century. As the audience moved from vicariously experiencing Apolline suffering via the Dionysiac chorus, the mythical and ritualistic aspects of classical tragedy fell away, replaced by a universal awareness of cosmic suffering via worldwide knowledge of and suffering from World War II, which the humor in absurdist twentieth-century novels only emphasizes as a powerful contrast to the novels' absurdist aspects.

In this understanding of the universe tragedy does not attempt to ameliorate or provide therapy for humanity's cosmic situation, or even to teach the audience how to avoid the mistakes made by the tragic heroes, but only to transform temporarily the chaos into the comprehensible sequence of events depicted on stage. Joshua Dienstag engages in apologetics for Nietzsche's arguments by identifying Nietzsche's philosophy of pessimism as the catalyst for a classical understanding of tragedy as a genre. In a clear departure from Aristotle, who believed that tragedy was meant to take advantage of human propensities for learning and mimesis by instructing the audience through depiction of events on the stage, Dienstag explains Nietzsche's philosophy as asserting that "Tragedy simply serves to lay bare for us the horrible situation of human existence that the pre-Socratic philosophers describe, a situation from which our minds would otherwise flee" (87). Nietzsche acknowledges Schopenhauer's philosophy of pessimism, in a self-criticism of *The Birth of Tragedy*, as connecting tragedy with the sublime in such a way that leads to resignation in the face of overwhelming disappointment in existence (Nietzsche 10). However, in *The Birth of Tragedy* itself, Nietzsche describes this philosophy as a combination of dread and "blissful ecstasy," in which the intoxication of

the Dionysiac is found (17). Pessimism here acknowledges and copes with “the chaotic and disordered nature of the world” (88). According to Dienstag, pessimism was the philosophical basis underlying the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, who “grasped the chaotic and disordered nature of the world and only attempted to cope with it, insofar as that was possible” (86). Dienstag’s analysis, differing from Aristotle’s understanding of mimesis, also challenges the argument that tragedy can alleviate strong negative emotions in the audience through catharsis, when the audience identifies with and vicariously experiences the suffering depicted on the stage and is thus purged of those emotions. Pessimistic knowledge on the one hand rejects that catharsis is truly possible on account of the chaotic nature of the universe, while yet recognizing value in depicting and thus recognizing tragic events on stage, because “the tragic outlook is thus generated from a base of pessimistic knowledge. It recommends no cure for the pains of existence, only a public recognition of their depth and power” (Dienstag 87). Nietzsche’s pessimistic embrace of this recognition is evident in how he values the drama of Sophocles and Aeschylus, whose language “surprises us with its Apolline precision and lucidity,” (46) while Euripides’s embodiment of the “New Attic Comedy” led to tragedy’s “miserable and violent death” (55). Dienstag’s exploration of Nietzsche’s pessimism and expansion of the understanding of the genre redeems tragedy through acknowledgment of its power to render chaos orderly, but not to provide any therapeutic benefit. Such a move downgrades tragedy’s healthful, civilizational purpose to a more formal, practical minimum that potentially sees comedy and satire as equal options rather than inferior partners.

This potential understanding of tragedy's application to twentieth-century literature is more expansive than a reading that stopped with Nietzsche would suggest. Dienstag rejects the idea that tragedy has no place outside the historic confines of the ancient Greeks or Shakespearean England. Nietzsche claims that, with the loss of original tragedy, New Attic Comedy emerged in its place with Euripides, when "everyday man pushed his way through the auditorium on to the stage, and the mirror in which only great and bold features had hitherto found expression now showed the painful fidelity that also reflected the blemished lines of nature" (55). In this sense, both Nietzsche and Aristotle note an ugliness in comedy that is not observed in tragedy. Dienstag argues that this concern of Nietzsche's is not fundamentally elitist as it sounds but is rather a rejection of Socratic optimism. Socrates "does not promise eternal happiness, but he does affirm both that virtue results in happiness and that virtue can be taught—thus happiness theoretically is within the grasp of all" (Dienstag 89). The godlike men of classical tragedy possessed many virtues and were still the primary focus of tragic events within their respective plays, which Nietzsche valued as essential to tragedy not because everyday people were too low for tragedy but because the failings of the best of humanity highlights the chaos from which no man can escape. The audience, Dienstag argues, does not learn from the mistakes of those who lack virtue but instead is presented with an ordered moment, pulled from the universal disorder, that represents the chaotic universe's effect on humanity: "Tragic art is the organization of a small portion of an otherwise meaningless world that gives purpose to an individual existence. It is the attempt to impose a temporary form on the inevitable transformation of the world" (90). This important

distinction clarifies that, while not all suffering is tragedy, tragic suffering is not “rare or specific to particular cultures,” or limited “to a particular time, place, or (least of all) class of people” (95). In this case, tragedy is understood as a genre or mode particularly prone to being applicable to a variety of non-traditional settings.

This malleability of tragedy to different times and circumstances based primarily on tensions between the old and new and on the chaos of the universe demonstrates how tragedy can adapt to changing understandings of what is possible in the world.

Indeed, there are several reasons for thinking that the pessimistic account of tragedy, though not as limitless in its definition of the genre as others, is still an expansive one. In the first place, the insistence on the overpowering force of temporal flux means that there are no permanent cultural conditions to oppose (or foster) tragedy. Rather, it is the lack of such permanence that fosters tragedy. . . . [T]ragedy emerges not from static belief but from “the real tension between old and new,” something that occurs in a variety of contexts. (Dienstag 95)

This understanding redefines tragedy as a genre in which the threat of change in “the tension between old and new” is the primary attribute, and although Dienstag draws limits on its boundaries, the acknowledgement of uncertainty inherent in tragedy’s premise cautions against prescribing any definite rules as to tragedy’s obvious secondary characteristics (95). It also allows for the possibility that tragic exposition may combine with satire to explore the same ideas—primarily “that, for better and worse, our lives are not pre-scripted by historical processes or social ties, even as it [pessimism] insists that we act in a context that we cannot control and that therefore we act, in all likelihood,

tragically” (Dienstag 97). This struggle for significant action in uncontrollable contexts that reflect classically tragic themes returns as a major theme of twentieth-century satirical tragic comedy in general and *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in particular, as the novels’ protagonists are swept into events beyond their control that do not conform or connect to ancient orders or sources of traditional myth and ritual.

Dienstag’s introduction of the possibility that tragic and satiric exposition may blend in exploration of a pessimistic understanding of the universe necessitates further consideration of how clear delineations between the divine and demonic—Northrop Frye’s terms for the strong contrast between good and evil embodied in dramatic archetypes of theater—blur as tragedy moves in the twentieth century towards irony and absurdist humor as explained in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Frye’s final essay presents a theory of satire in general as a form combining, to various degrees, the fantastic and the moral, while acknowledging that this grants tremendous leeway in classification. Tragedy as defined by Frye, partly conforming to Aristotle and Nietzsche, is “primarily a vision of the supremacy of the event or mythos. The response to tragedy is ‘this must be,’ or, perhaps more accurately, ‘this does happen’: the event is primary, the explanation of it secondary and variable” (284-5). Frye theorizes that a natural relationship may develop between the tragic and satiric owing to the very nature of the two genres, as tragedy is born “where the revel of satyrs impinges on the appearance of a commanding god, and Dionysus is brought into line with Apollo” (292). This is reflected in the appearance of satyr plays in each tragic Athenian trilogy including Aeschylus’s

Oresteia and its chorus, whose frenzied vision calls to mind the ferocious ecstasy of the Dionysiac:

CHORUS. Now the darkness comes to the fore, now the hope glows through your victims, beating back this raw, relentless anguish gnawing at the heart.

(*Agamemnon* 108-11)

Frye recognizes intrinsic connection between the ostensibly tragic and the potentially ludicrous in the clown scenes and underlying farcical plots of Elizabethan plays, as in the gravedigger scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. According to Frye, while classical critics never rationalized "why a disorganized ribald farce like the satyr-play should be the source of tragedy . . . they were clear that it was" (292). The reasoning became more developed in medieval drama, "where the progression through sacred and heroic *auto* [drama] to tragedy is so much less foreshortened, the development is plainer" (292). The satyr-play as the spring of tragedy, an idea inherent to Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysiac satyr chorus as the birth of tragedy, is due to what Frye calls the "epiphany, the dramatic apocalypse or separation of the divine and the demonic, a point directly opposite the mime, which presents the simply human mixture" (292). In classical tragedy the divisions between the divine and demonic—distinct from Nietzsche's "daemonic" understanding of Socrates's destructive influence on tragedy, in opposition to the Dionysiac (Nietzsche 60)—are extremely sharp, but such clear delineations fade as tragedy becomes more ironic in its move toward more modern absurdist humor.

Frye's description of irony as an agent transferable from ancient myth to modern anomie allows for a spectrum of genre in which tragedy can tend toward irony and

satire—both of which, Frye writes, provide us with “parody-symbolism” that deals with themes more serious than a comedic depiction suggests (321). When irony begins to blend with tragedy, “the sense of inevitable event begins to fade out, and the sources of catastrophe come into view” (285). Rather than myth in the form of gods, fate, or stars dooming the tragic hero, disaster in ironic tragedy is potentially less fatalistic and more open to the chaos of the universe as seen in the war’s supposedly rational but equally inhumane bureaucratic machinery in *Catch-22* and the whimsical universe of *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

In irony catastrophe is either arbitrary and meaningless, the impact of an unconscious (or, in the pathetic fallacy, malignant) world on conscious man, or the result of more or less definable social and psychological forces. Tragedy’s “this must be” becomes irony’s “this at least is,” a concentration on foreground facts and a rejection of mythical superstructures. Thus the ironic drama is a vision of what in theology is called the fallen world, of simple humanity, man as natural man and in conflict with both human and non-human nature. (Frye 285)

In this understanding of irony, catastrophe is as prevalent as in tragedy but the mythical and ritualistic aspects of classical tragedy fall away even as the themes considered remain serious. This grants significant leeway in classification of genre, which becomes more descriptive than prescriptive and extends Frye’s discussion of satire, where “observation is still primary, but as the observed phenomena move from the sinister to the grotesque, they grow more illusory and unsubstantial” (298). This is illustrated via the characterization differences between *Oresteia* and the twentieth-century novels, as when

the ill intentions of a character like *Oresteia*'s Aegisthus, who is dramatically involved in the murder of Agamemnon, devolve via satire into the grotesque ill intentions of Colonel Cathcart, who continues to raise the number of combat missions required of his men so that Yossarian can never complete them in *Catch-22*. While Cathcart's actions are less directly sinister than those of Aegisthus in *Agamemnon*, as "a combination of fantasy and morality," satirical literature may depict potentially grave human concerns to rival those in tragedy. The damage Cathcart does in *Catch-22* echoes throughout the novel, fulfilling the need for "dramatic action" with wide-ranging consequences Aristotle identified in tragedy, so that satire's traditionally unsubstantial appearance or nature is not the problem it appears.

Hayden White extends Northrop Frye's narrative genres into more contemporary usage in his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, in which White elaborates on the ways the different genres function for their readers and, like Frye, connects satire and irony by considering that either intentionally frustrates the normal resolutions audiences expect from romance, tragedy, and comedy (8). Comedy allows for the possibility of hope that man will prevail over difficulties "by the prospect of occasional reconciliations of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds. Such reconciliations are symbolized in the festive occasions which the comic writer traditionally uses to terminate his dramatic accounts of change and transformation" (9). Tragedy rejects those festive occasions excepting those which prove false, and instead relies on "intimations of states of division among men more terrible than that which incited the tragic agon [struggle] at the beginning of the drama" (9). However, the terrible

divisions do not provoke a correspondingly hopeless reaction in the audience, White notes, but instead spur a “gain in consciousness” for those who observed “the fall of the protagonist and the shaking of the world he inhabits which occur at the end of the Tragic play” (9).

Like Dienstag’s understanding of tragedy as a genre that is concerned with the “tension between old and new” without offering the healing of catharsis, the gain in consciousness spurred by tragedy is found not in a transcendence of human suffering but an acknowledgement and temporary encapsulating of a moment of suffering (95). The twentieth-century novels *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* offer their own moments of encapsulated sorrow, as when near the end of *Catch-22* the entire incident of Snowden’s death is revealed and Yossarian’s attitude throughout the novel is suddenly, finally understood: “Man was matter, that was Snowden’s secret. Drop him out a window and he’ll fall. Set fire to him and he’ll burn. Bury him and he’ll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden’s secret. Ripeness was all” (504). The same moments occur in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when after the fire-bombing of Dresden, Billy Pilgrim must face the absolute horror of the devastation in the “corpse mines” left by the bombing, in the midst of which, “the poor old high school teacher, Edgar Derby, was caught with a teapot he had taken from the catacombs. He was arrested for plundering. He was tried and shot” (214). In this case, the absurdity of Derby’s execution for a small theft juxtaposed against the wide-scale destruction and death caused by the fire-bombing reveals the utter pointlessness of the devastation in bringing about any real change. Although the novels are, on their face, black comedy or satire, the

consciousness-gains align with those of tragedy, as they result from an epiphany in which the audience discovers the conditions governing human existence through the experiences of the protagonist:

The reconciliations that occur at the end of Tragedy are much more somber [than in Comedy]; they are more in the nature of resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions, in turn, are asserted to be inalterable and eternal, and the implication is that man cannot change them but must work within them. They set the limits on what may be aspired to and what may be legitimately aimed at in the quest for security and sanity in the world. (White 9)

Unlike Frye's understanding of romance as a genre, which White identifies as depicting "the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall" (8), tragedy and comedy offer freedom from mankind's loss at the Fall as at least a partial release "from the divided state in which men find themselves in this world," which is achieved either through the reconciliation of comedy or the epiphany of tragedy (9). Unlike romance, neither comedy nor tragedy enable true transcendence or escape from the world, but instead require engagement or contemplation of the world as a means of containing or coping with the inherent chaos of the human condition. White's understanding is less pessimistic than Dienstag's conception of the relief offered by tragedy—described as the tragic moment onstage or in print imposing temporary order and meaning on an otherwise chaotic universe—but is nonetheless similar in that both

Dienstag and White see the tragic moment as a relief from the pain of existence these critics identify as springing from different causes.

This idea of the tragic moment offering relief from existential pain blends with comedy through satire, which may adapt more prestigious genres in a new light that highlights tragedy's potential for failure and provides a new way of understanding the tragic (White 8). Satire may adapt tragedy in a way that offers catharsis per Aristotle or in a way that reimagines Nietzsche's comprehension of the inherent chaos of existence, which is seen, respectively in the moment of cathartic understanding when Yossarian is arrested for being in Rome without a pass while the murderer Aarfy goes free (Heller 480), and in the Tralfamadorian's calm explanation of how the universe ends (Vonnegut 117). The idea that tragedy expands in this way is explained by White's interpretation of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and its lasting influence on interpretation of tragedy: "Nietzsche opposed two kinds of false Tragic sensibility: that which interprets the Tragic vision in the Ironic mode, and that which interprets it in the Romantic mode" (334). Rather, Nietzsche understood tragedy as "a *combination* of Dionysiac and Apollonian insights, as tragic apprehensions of the world being discharged in Comic comprehensions of it—and the reverse" (White 334). In this way, an integration of the tragic and comic, especially as it relates to satire, grants a comprehensive understanding of the tragic purpose of alleviating the pain of existence in a chaotic universe.

Satire casts the ambitions of White's other genres of emplotment—romance, tragedy, and comedy—in an ironic light that highlights "the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully" (White 10). This

inadequacy is magnified by the events of World War II and the subsequent novels that must reimagine humanity's place in a universe containing the cosmic horrors of the war. White refers to Satire as the fictional form of the Ironic mode, and posited that stories based in the Ironic mode intentionally frustrate the normal plot resolutions the audience expects from romance, tragedy, and comedy (8). In this sense, satire is the option that remains when the transcendence of the Fall represented by romance, the reconciliation of forces of the natural and human worlds represented by comedy, and the epiphany of the state of the world and man's place in it represented by tragedy are all insufficient to depict man's place in the universe. The satire in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* is then a natural progression of literature due to classical tragedy's inadequacy to contain events unimagined before World War II: the Holocaust, atomic bombs, wide-scale bombings, and other realities of modernized war depicted in the novels. White argues that the emergence of the satirical mode of representation became possible because a level of worldliness and cynicism emerged in literature and in humanity's understanding of itself—that “the world has grown old” (White 10). “Like philosophy itself, Satire ‘paints its gray on gray’ in the awareness of its own inadequacy as an image of reality,” White notes, and argues that satire emerged to prepare human consciousness for a necessary abandonment of any pretenses that grand notions of reconciliation or transcendence presented by other genres can stand up in the face of the pointless horror and inscrutable chaos of the world (10). Rather, satire rejects the possibility of other genres satisfactorily presenting an accurate imagining of the world and “anticipates a return to a mythic apprehension of the world and its processes” (White 10).

The need for satire in adequately depicting human suffering in the twentieth century is advanced by Hassan's "new comedy" regarding American satirical or ironic fiction of the 1960s. Hassan argues that this literature, which he calls "the new comedy," serves some of the same purposes as classic tragedy in a contemporary world that doesn't allow for authentic tragedy. The abnormality of much recent experience is so appalling, Hassan says, that it "shocks and shames us into ironic laughter" (638). Evaluating the absurd in American comedy, he writes that "comedy, broadly conceived, may be understood as a way of making life possible in this world, despite evil or death. Comedy recognizes human limitations, neither in broken pride nor yet in saintly humility but in the spirit of ironic acceptance" (636). Irony and satire are closely connected in Hassan's view as in White's in the way they frustrate reader expectations that are fulfilled in other genres, while Hassan makes the point that the genres address "the follies or vices of man" and with more monstrous actions of humanity (638). Hassan's irony and satire are also both found in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as occasional human follies and vices contribute to the larger monstrosities that Hassan locates in the realm of irony.

The emergence of absurd comedy and its similarities with irony, which of course appeared much earlier than the 1960s, offer life-affirming opportunities in similar ways to classical tragedy. Absurdist humor functions as "a mixture of boisterousness and bitterness, hope and despair" (Hassan 637) and, in echoes of Dienstag's understanding of tragedy, imposes momentary order and provides faithful mimesis without necessarily offering the healing of catharsis. Nietzsche, Frye, and White all argue that tragedy serves a purpose of helping an audience cope with the inescapable state of chaos inherent in

human existence. Further, as White states that irony and satire result from the exhaustion of a world that itself had “grown old,” (10) so too does Hassan view the “new comedy” of the 1960s, such as *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, with all its bleakness, as an answer to the insufficiency or inappropriateness of classical tragedy in a world where traditional myth and ritual fall to irrelevance (637). Hassan even notes a cathartic, purgative possibility for the new satiric comedy similar to Aristotle’s conception of tragedy, in which the “nightmare” of existence meets the absurdity of slapstick in a “deflection of laughter toward anguish,” deepening the cultural relevance of the comic and satiric genres (637). The incongruities of human life, forcibly brought to the attention of the audience, express a sort of catharsis and closure (Hassan 639).

This closure and purgation through enforced recognition can also redeem other genres like satire and tragedy that may have been exhausted by the unacknowledged buffoonery of human existence, Hassan notes. Within satire and tragedy, there is an implicit recognition that a depiction of the madness of the universe may be a first step toward overcoming it, “and by restoring our faith in the surface of life, the simple and tangible things of this world from which tragedy removes itself finally, it may find a way of tightening the bonds of love” and restoring an innocence and vulnerability needed to subsequently restore tragedy (637). Therefore, only through an acceptance of the combination of tragedy and the absurd inherent in the universe—reflected in the literature by the eventual cross-pollination of genres represented in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*—can we achieve catharsis in a contemporary society. Acceptance also opens the possibility of revitalizing genres that have grown stale in a world that continuously

invents new horrors and absurdities, as this thesis will consider in the transition from the small-scale, family tragedies of *Oresteia* to the satirical, post-war novels *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and their struggle to communicate the horrors of war on both personal and massive scales.

III. CONNECTING TRAGEDY TO SATIRE IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY WAR NOVELS

As examined in this thesis's previous chapter, understanding how Greek tragedy functions is important for understanding the tragic genre's role in Western literature and society—both Athenian and contemporary—and, by extension, for interpreting absurdist and satirical literature and art from the twentieth century and beyond. In her introduction to *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun*, Edith Hall writes, "Greek tragedy (which in practice always means 'Athenian tragedy') only matters if you believe that tragedy, more widely defined, has itself played a significant role in your own culture" (1). As Hall elaborates, the dramatic form of tragedy has lastingly impacted our own Western civilization and culture on a popular level, with tragedy entering the everyday lexicon as a generally descriptive term often linked to pointless suffering or overwhelming sadness—a denotation largely disconnected from the concept explored earlier of mimetic depictions of suffering offering existential relief for observers. This signification is not without basis, as Hall identifies suffering as the foundation of the dramatic form as well. To that end, Hall echoes Aristotle when she defines tragedy as "a representation of a serious event that involves suffering, which made audience members feel pity for the sufferer and fear that the same thing could happen to them" (3-4). This makes the subject of war peculiarly suited to tragedy, thanks to the many dimensions of suffering created by war and available for literary or theatrical depiction.

Because war challenges individual humans as well as larger human systems, it can frame both tragedy's family anguishes, as in *Oresteia*, and a parodic skewering of

human bureaucracy, as in *Catch-22*. War is a unique topic for bridging these genres because even at their most ridiculous, the absurdist novels' depiction of suffering lingers to affect their audience with the pity and fear associated with tragedy. In accomplishing affecting representations of war, dramatic tragedy uses themes and tropes such as the downfall of a tragic hero and the interplay between human choice and fate to establish the suffering of the characters and ponder the nature that requires such suffering. This thesis establishes the depiction of these themes through Aeschylus's trilogy of tragedies, *Oresteia*, in order to re-examine them in twentieth century war novels generally—and *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* in particular—that likewise examine human suffering, but through absurdist and surreal approaches.

As the reader might expect, the interplay of a character's free-will decisions with an overriding current of fate and divine will is a major theme of *Oresteia*. The same theme recurs in the later twentieth-century novels *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22*. Disastrous outcomes inescapably follow from choices made by characters who may not have had much true choice at all. The action in the three plays constituting *Oresteia*—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*—apparently begins simply with a wife's plot to avenge the death of her daughter, but the trilogy's backstory exposes a series of agonizing moral decisions fraught with issues of family and military honor. Queen Clytaemnestra and her lover murder King Agamemnon, most immediately for sacrificing his and Clytaemnestra's daughter Iphigenia years earlier in order to win a god's favor for his fleet's journey to wage war on Troy. Before Agamemnon's climactic death, though, Clytaemnestra and the chorus discuss his decision and the results that

followed it, with the chorus's speech revisiting the crisis that beset Agamemnon ten years before the play's events:

CHORUS. 'Obey, obey, or a heavy doom will crush me!—Oh but doom *will* crush me once I rend my child, the glory of my house—a father's hands are stained, blood of a young girl streaks the altar. (*Agamemnon* 206-11)

Despite Agamemnon feeling the weight of his decision, it is clear no ideal outcome exists for him. The goddess Artemis has demanded this sacrifice of Agamemnon if he is to sail to Troy with his men. If he does not, they are all doomed; however, if he does obey the goddess's demand and sacrifices his daughter, he knows that he is also doomed by the same "blood curse" that in other Athenian tragedies famously haunts Oedipus for the murder of a close relative, in that case his father. For Agamemnon to kill his own daughter is an action demanded by the goddess Artemis, but it is clear that regardless of whether the action fulfills the demands of the gods, Agamemnon is still responsible for it and must face the consequences for killing a family member.

Oresteia's succeeding two plays also make clear that the sacrifice of Iphigenia, however pivotal, was not the original catalyst for the destruction of Agamemnon and his family, but that the force of fate was already determining the choices affecting Agamemnon's family. The family and its observers are preoccupied with a family curse, hinted at by the prophetess Cassandra and fully revealed by Clytaemnestra's lover Aegisthus in a speech at the end of *Agamemnon*. In her apparent madness, as the play builds on the suffering of its characters ahead of tragedy's eventual catharsis, Cassandra tries to convey to the chorus the death that awaits her and Agamemnon, as well as its

deeper catalyst—that Iphigenia’s death at Agamemnon’s hands is only the latest action in a series defining an ill-fated family and binding them to an unrelenting cycle of revenge:

CASSANDRA. No . . . the house that hates god, an echoing womb of guilt,
kinsmen torturing kinsmen, severed heads, slaughterhouse of heroes, soil
streaming blood— (1088-91)

Cassandra as seer here describes the curse on the house of Atreus—Agamemnon’s father and the previous king of Argos who killed his rival brother’s children and fed them to him. This crime is what echoes down through the generations as Cassandra describes guilt that is passed on through a line of kinsmen. Millennia later, this theme repeats in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when Yossarian and Billy Pilgrim find themselves caught up in their own cycle of violence inherited from earlier human choices and to which they contribute through their own actions.

In the cases of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, earlier choices made by characters removed in time from the novels’ action culminated in the disastrous outcome of World War II—an unnecessary cycle of violence and vengeance less intimate and much larger and more world-shattering than that of Greek legend, yet equally inescapable for the later protagonists. The choices made by Billy Pilgrim and Yossarian, although they are average, common people who more closely resemble the “naifs” of satire than noble heroes like those of the house of Atreus, find themselves in situations of fate that they never chose but could not escape. Billy Pilgrim and Yossarian are thus forced into positions that weigh as heavily on them as they pick up their own legacies of

entanglement and guilt, as Cassandra in *Agamemnon* foresees Orestes's torment by avenging spirits:

CASSANDRA. —the Furies!

They cling to the house for life. They sing, sing of the frenzy that began it all,
strain rising on strain, showering curses on the man who tramples on his brother's
bed. (1194-8)

In this speech Cassandra acknowledges the curse on Agamemnon's family due to an earlier act of intra-family violence. Her speech also foreshadows the outcome awaiting Agamemnon's son Orestes, who is absent throughout *Agamemnon* before returning home in *The Libation Bearers*. Orestes chooses in *Oresteia* to fulfill his destined fate by killing his mother Clytaemnestra to avenge Agamemnon's murder. Orestes, though not the progenitor of this family curse, must immerse himself in it as fate drives him and so inherit the guilt that is his birthright, embodied by the Furies who are bound to pursue him until he is eventually redeemed through the end of vengeance-seeking and the introduction of jurisprudence.

Orestes's guilt at the center of *Oresteia* is less personal than structural or inherited. In "Tragedy, Reconsidered," George Steiner describes the genre not as a set of characteristics as in Aristotle's *Poetics*, but as a "generative nucleus of supposition, of reasoned intuition, a minimal but indispensable core shared by 'tragedies' in literature and extending, by analogy, by related metaphor, to other expressive modes"—a "core" classified by Steiner as "original sin" (2). All tragedy in this sense may be traced back to an original fall from grace, making the human condition in itself tragic: "Man is made an

unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this hostile or indifferent earth” (Steiner 2). This situation reasserts itself repeatedly in *Oresteia* as Agamemnon cannot avoid sacrificing his own daughter, monstrously transgressing the taboo against killing one’s own family:

CHORUS. Pain both ways and what is worse? Desert the fleets, fail the alliance?

No, but stop the winds with a virgin’s blood, feed their lust, their fury?—feed

their fury!—Law is law!— (*Agamemnon* 212-6)

Agamemnon’s pyrrhic action leads only to more and more slaughter as fate and the Furies demand bloody vengeance, begetting only continuous retribution until the eventual redemption crafted in the trilogy’s final installment, *The Eumenides*. Similarly, even without direct reference to theology, twentieth-century war novels register an overwhelming latency of human sin or error behind world-shattering events, as horrors of history’s most devastating war are both borne and perpetrated by the protagonists. Even those who know the causes of events beforehand, as Cassandra in *Oresteia* and prophetic figures like the old man in *Catch-22*’s Roman brothel and *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s Tralfamadorians—who see all of time laid out before them—cannot prevent the chain of destruction set in motion by natural fallibility from playing out over the course of their respective narratives.

Cassandra, who appears in *Agamemnon* as both an inspired prophetess and an innocent victim of diverse family curses, puts the anguishing interplay of fate and free will into a tragic framework that applies to the twentieth-century war satires considered here. Her foreknowledge of her own death and the events leading to it reinforces that all

of the suffering depicted is inescapable and predetermined. This theme repeats in the satirical twentieth-century war novels. The fact that the tragic characters cannot escape their suffering and that their own self-determined actions only play into what has been predestined by the gods replicates the irony and complexity of the universe explored by Greek tragedy and extends to satire. Deinstag claims, as discussed in the previous chapter, that tragedy is meant to “lay bare for us the horrible situation of human existence,” a situation that cannot be avoided by any means (87). As Cassandra tells the chorus in *Agamemnon*:

CASSANDRA. Believe me if you will. What will it matter if you won't? It comes when it comes, and soon you'll see it face to face and say the seer was all too true. (1250-3).

Her swan-song, whose prophecy is redeemed by the play's ensuing action, is not meant to change anything about what will happen in the events of the three plays. Therefore, as she tells the chorus, it hardly matters that, because Cassandra is cursed accordingly, they are unable to comprehend her warning concerning tragedy's inevitable outcome. Her foreknowledge is only important for establishing the overall helplessness of the characters within the fate-driven universe they and later satirical protagonists inhabit.

Unlike the chorus, which Nietzsche sees as separate from the audience and perceiving the events as they transpire in the play, the audience understands both Cassandra's own curse of prophecy and her warning's meaning and, like her, knows the past that has led to Agamemnon's approaching murder and what will follow it, but that

audience also can do nothing but observe destiny, destruction, and catastrophe as they come. In describing the prophet's role in the tragedy, Hall writes:

Like each and every audience member, Cassandra can see far beyond the palace facade, into the past and the future; like them, she knows that something terrible is happening inside in the immediate present. But she is as helpless in the face of Agamemnon's suffering as any spectator, and, like them, is a mortal subject to death herself. (216)

What Cassandra prophesies to the chorus, who don't understand some of what she says and are powerless to act on the rest, re-emphasizes Nietzsche's focus on the primacy of the chorus as a connection between the audience and the transcendence of dramatic tragedy. By speaking to the chorus she is in fact telling the audience, who like the members of the chorus and even the named characters become powerless to prevent Cassandra's approaching death even as she warns us of it:

CHORUS: What good are the oracles to men? Words, more words, and the hurt comes on us, endless words and a seer's techniques have brought us terror and the truth. (*Agamemnon* 1134-7)

The chorus can only voice a lament that the audience might speak for themselves, reinforcing the feelings of fear and helplessness in the audience. The conflict between fate and the characters' free will is also reinforced by the chorus as the futility of foreknowledge when it is not acted upon only deepens the suffering.

Characters in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* echo similar sentiments as they see what approaches but are equally powerless to stop it, further blurring the lines

between the genres. Tralfamadorians, whose non-human perception of all of time lets them know all that will happen, tell Billy Pilgrim both when he will die and how the universe ends. This knowledge does not enable the reader, Pilgrim, or even the Tralfamadorians to change or halt any of it. The folly of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s satirical cosmos is as inevitable as the curse on the house of Atreus and Cassandra's death, expressed only in the narrator's flatly fatalistic refrain, "So it goes," which leaves the audience in Athens or readers in post-World War II society with an understanding of their own helplessness in the face of fate's overwhelming force. *Catch-22* features as its prophetic figure the old man in the Roman brothel who in conversation with Natley predicts the youth's death, explaining that he sees the occupying armies in Italy and tells him, "They are going to kill you if you don't watch out, and I can see now that you are not going to watch out" (284). The "they" as determining subject in the old man's prediction implies the existential ambiguity of the forces Natley is caught up in—both familiarly mundane and so great as to be unnamed and to function as a cosmic force equal to pitiless time or the indifferent gods. Though conceivably his own actions might prevent this, Natley is as destined to die as Cassandra and Agamemnon because he is caught up in the larger scheme of the war and in fulfilling his role as a brave young American soldier. Natley's reflexive behavior as a soldier mirrors the way Orestes is caught up in the code of honor that led his father to victory and doom and required Orestes as his son to avenge Agamemnon's death.

Despite such dreadful destiny, Aeschylus's trilogy resolves optimistically as the curse that leads to perpetual bloodshed is eventually overcome. In *The Eumenides*, the

cycle of violence is resolved by the emergence of institutional jurisprudence in a court presided over by another architect of fate, the goddess Athena. Even earlier in the trilogy, foreshadowing emerges to indicate an eventual healing catharsis after the suffering through the promise of something positive resulting from what began as horrible violations of the bonds of kinship. In *Agamemnon*, the potential for tragedy as a redemptive or therapeutic force develops:

CHORUS. But Justice turns the balance scales, sees that we suffer and we suffer
and we learn. (250-2)

Here, the chorus pronounces the value of tragedy in promoting human learning in a vein elaborated on by Aristotle, who in his *Poetics* observes that humans learn through mimesis and the insight that arises through depictions and vicarious experiences of suffering and pleasure. The chorus's pronouncement takes place before Agamemnon's murder but nevertheless holds true when Orestes eventually seeks relief in court because the Furies continue to hound and torment him for Clytaemnestra's murder. Orestes has suffered from his mother's vengeful murder of his father and for his own vengeful murder of his mother, but the suffering has been to a purpose. As Hall notes, the suffering in *Oresteia* "is always underpinned by a sense of inevitability, and a hope that the reason for the suffering in terms of divine purpose may eventually be explained" (200).

According to Hall, that same hope underlies all of Aeschylus's tragedies: "that the progress of civilization, although god-ordained, necessary, and magnificent, is bought at the cost of terrible suffering" (200). While members of the house of Atreus and Cassandra suffer under the divine will that leads to their several deaths, the outcome is

not only that the cycle of violence is eventually ended in *The Eumenides* when Orestes appeals to Apollo and Athena, but that a new, less destructive and more restorative system for providing justice to the Athenians emerges as the court formed to judge Orestes will remain intact for future trials:

ATHENA. Here from the heights, terror and reverence, my people's kindred powers will hold them from injustice through the day and through the mild night.
(703-6)

With this resolution in *Oresteia*, Hall writes, "The trilogy portrays how society changes in response to the things people suffer. This is echoed in the shift from private to public space," as the focus on private spaces found in *Agamemnon*'s murders transforms into a focus on the public square, with an Athenian court deciding the outcome in Orestes's criminal trial in *The Eumenides* (211). The democratic institution subsumes the functions of justice formerly performed inadequately by a dysfunctional royal family.

Oresteia's depiction of civilizational progress makes a pointed contrast to what emerges from the suffering in the satirical novels *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where the only apparent result is survival for a few random individuals, along with the realization that all the suffering in the story was pointless. How *Oresteia* treats suffering does align with how the twentieth-century war novels approach suffering, though, because they all can be said to have recognition scenes. In recognition scenes typical of tragedies, audience and characters finally recognize the full extent of the tragic implications of the dramas or novels, per Aristotle's *Poetics*. One of the most impactful recognition scenes in *Oresteia* occurs after Agamemnon's murder, when Aegisthus

reveals his motivation for murdering the king as revenge for Agamemnon's father tricking Aegisthus's father into eating his own children. What was only hinted at in Cassandra's earlier speech is fully revealed by Aegisthus, who elaborates on the curse on the house of Atreus and declares that Agamemnon's murder is just:

AEGISTHUS. So you see him, down. And I, the weaver of Justice, plotted out the kill. Atreus drove us into exile, my struggling father and I, a babe-in arms, his last son, but I became a man and Justice brought me home. (*Agamemnon* 1635-9)

This scene reveals not only the implications for the family of Atreus and what a horribly damaged and damaging family it is, but also indicates the type of world in which the characters exist as one whose overarching powers drive individual humans to play out cosmic dramas at the whims of inscrutable gods, with no restraints or guiding institutions on human behavior beyond traditions of violence—a primitive culture of vengeance and retribution ameliorated in *The Eumenides* by the introduction of the court and jury system.

Similar recognition scenes in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* also crucially reveal the larger drivers of the World War and the universe, respectively, in which the characters are caught up and must play their roles. *Catch-22* shows this most clearly in the brothel scene, when Aarfy has raped and murdered an Italian serving woman. Yossarian is horrified by his actions, but rather than Aarfy being arrested for killing this woman and throwing her body into the street, when the military police arrive at the murder scene, “They arrested Yossarian for being in Rome without a pass” (480). Despite Yossarian's effort to impose order and decency on the events—as he tells Aarfy “You've

murdered a human being. They *are* going to put you in jail. They might even *hang* you!”—the truth of *Catch-22*’s universe is that the war bureaucracy largely functions to prevent sanity and decency from prevailing, because such concepts are antithetical to necessary actions during war (479). The world of *Catch-22* is very different from the world of *Oresteia*, but the driving forces of fate and terrible choices made for each are revealed during these recognition scenes. The strongest connection between the Greek tragedies and Heller’s and Vonnegut’s novels is their shared subject of war, but its treatment is vastly different in the novels compared with the Athenian plays. In *Oresteia*, Agamemnon’s need to win the Trojan War directly causes his execution of his daughter Iphigenia—a very personal but small sacrifice in the larger scale of war, and one which requires the small-scale justice of a single trial. The campaign to defeat Nazi Germany is vast and depersonalized, as the global war that dominates the settings and actions of both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* reflects the enlarged scale of modern warfare, where individual people become largely inconsequential.

The heroic-tragic narrative and the satiric-comic narrative differ in treatment of their common subject, as the unquestioning honor code of warfare portrayed in *Oresteia* gives way, post-World War II, to the anti-militarism of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In *Agamemnon*, the chorus elaborates on the men their city-state has lost during the war with Troy. The tragedy in the description is direct as the chorus grieves the lost men of their community, but while the loss is heavily registered in a testament to the men’s heroic sacrifice, the potential waste of their deaths is less directly weighed:

CHORUS. Home from the pyres he sends them, home from Troy to the loved ones, heavy with tears, the urns brimmed full, the heroes return in gold-dust, dear, light ash for men; and they weep, they praise them, 'He had skill in the swordplay,' 'He went down so tall in the onslaught,' 'All for another's woman.' So they mutter in secret and the rancour steals toward our staunch defenders, Atreus' sons. (435-46)

The emphasis is on the heroism of those who died, with the implication that the only waste stems from the war being fought over Helen instead of a worthier or manlier cause. This depiction of war in ancient Greece contrasts with the "children's crusade" of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, likely because the motivations for describing the wars differs between Aeschylus and Heller and Vonnegut. In "The Functions of War Literature," Catharine Savage Brosman describes one literary depiction of war as the "heroic mode," which fits the Aeschylean chorus's valorization of the dead soldiers and praise of their battle (86). War literature in the heroic mode has as its purpose "the setting of standards of military conduct and the inspiring of a warlike spirit," especially in youths, in whom such literature fosters a sense of nationalistic spirit (86). Modern depictions of war in literature and other media may also fit the heroic mode. The long-running *Call of Duty* video game series, which began in 2003 and had its most recent installment in 2016 with *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, allows the modern player to virtually take part in battles imaginary and real, for example (Altano). Films like Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* in 2014 also valorize both individual soldiers for their heroic acts, and the larger governments from which those soldiers take their orders—contrasting partially with

“Atreus’ sons” who drew rancor from their people for their willingness to allow heroic soldiers to die for a mere woman, indicating at least some limits to heroic militarism in Athenian tragedy.

Brosman also describes an opposing mode of war literature that seeks to promote anti-militarism, which *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* fit. War literature that argues against promotion of military spirit seeks “to demystify war and the military, with its linguistic, behavioral, and other codes, and to support pacifism,” rejecting the fatalistic notion that the sweeping devastation of an event like World War II is inevitable (89). The twentieth-century novels under consideration in this thesis fall into this category. Even *Oresteia* hints briefly at this through the figure and speech of Cassandra—a living spoil of war who in her speech to the chorus laments the hapless sacrifice of her city:

CASSANDRA. Oh the grief, the grief of the city ripped to oblivion. Oh the victims, the flocks my father burned at the wall, rich herds in flames . . . no cure for the doom that took the city after all, and I, her last ember, I go down with her.
(*Agamemnon* 1169-74)

Cassandra’s lament, however, focused on her city’s destined fall as a larger scheme of fate, rather than on war as a potentially avoidable act. In contrast to such submission to the grand power of a destructive fate, the twentieth-century war novels instead dwell upon particular acts of war and the random destruction they leave in their wake, from individual suffering and death to the large-scale depictions of devastating bombings. The differences between how war is depicted in classical tragedy and modern satirical novels suggest how seriously and directly the twentieth-century novels observe how war itself

weighs on all human relations—not just those between families and members of noble houses—perhaps indicating some recognition in modern thought of the democratic suffering caused by war. While war is primarily a backdrop for the house of Atreus’s suffering in *Oresteia*, it provides the immediate setting and determines the conduct and characters in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which through satirical depictions of the same World War establish a new métier for thinking about tragedy or its prestige as a genre of civilizational progress. Brosman writes, “to demythify is also to recognize the power of the myth”; satire of war may reestablish tragic suffering in a mode that can depict the world-scale of the subject matter (95). While Vonnegut and Heller employ satire in this way to depict World War II, it appears to have a broader appeal into the twenty-first century as well, as the next chapter considers.

Classical tragedy as in *Oresteia* may ring hollow in real circumstances of massive, destructive war, and may even threaten to trivialize “the war experience simply by consenting to put it on a plane with other experiences from which fiction and poetry are made” (Brosman 94). Even those wars depicted in Athenian tragedy occurred much earlier in the Mycenaean Age, which freed Athenian tragedy to gaze back from a detached perspective, rather than face the destruction first-hand as Heller and Vonnegut both did as participants in World War II. In his *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell gives an account of his own participation in the Spanish Civil War and highlights how any grand ideals of the war are drowned out for the actual participants, writing, “When you are taking part in events like these you are, I suppose, in a small way, making history, and you ought by rights to feel like an historical character. But you never do, because at such

times the physical details always outweigh everything else” (126). Orwell establishes the stark difference in expectations and reality of his experience, but the satirists seize upon that difference in all its absurdity and use it—as the next chapter explores—to deflate the institutions and participants of war, thereby counteracting the glorification of war that exists in Athenian tragedy through accentuation of its undignified physicality. The satirists are therefore able to reclaim war as an ideal subject for their own genre through repeated references to the ugly and painful physical realities of war, distancing absurdist depictions of war from the romanticized versions in tragedy, even as the overwhelming emotional consequences of war also perhaps allow the satirists to redeem tragic depictions of modern war for their genre.

IV. LAUGHTER FILLS THE VOID OF WAR

As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, twentieth-century novels *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* approach the serious subject of the earth-shattering and globally destructive Second World War in a counter-intuitive, humorous way. That approach reinforces the horror of the war without imbuing it with the grandeur associated with tragedy. Depictions of war in *Oresteia* elevated the heroism of those who fought in the Trojan war, as a type of war literature that in Catherine Brosman's words, risks "glorifying heroism and of seeing in combat a positive moral and cultural function" (93). The absurdity of the twentieth-century novels counteracts the potential glorification of war by simultaneously poking fun at the institutions and participants of war and revealing the human suffering those inadequate institutions inflict on their own participants as well as combatants deemed the enemy. As human warfare reached its current and—one hopes—ultimate peak of mass devastation during the first half of the twentieth century, those writers who fought in World War II were left with the task of depicting the experiences of war. For such a monumental task, the soldiers-turned-writers found the genre of tragedy lacking, its meaning wrung out by the larger tragedy posed by recent events. As a means of exploring that senseless reality, black humor and satire in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* acknowledge the absurdity of tragic ritual and myth in depicting events like the firebombing of Dresden. Simultaneously, they establish a new artistic ritual: laughing at the horror as a way of confronting it, and redeeming tragedy's catharsis or pessimistic acknowledgement by inverting the acknowledgement through humorous expression.

As this thesis's first chapter explored, *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* deal with serious themes but have not been evaluated with the assumption that they may function with the same purpose as tragedies. They have instead generally been treated as less important literary works than classical tragedies, which are so esteemed that, as Clayton Koelb writes in "'Tragedy' as an Evaluative Term," what is typically considered a purely descriptive term classifying a certain type of literature with distinct traits also includes "a substantial element of evaluation . . . and that in the writings of some recent critics this element has become so dominant that it is indeed hard to distinguish between 'tragedy' and 'masterpiece'" (69). With this concept of tragedy as an evaluative term assessing the merits of a literary piece, rather than as a purely descriptive term, the satirical absurdist novels—particularly in their relation to comedy via the connecting element of laughter—are assumed to be unworthy of the same elevated literary study as tragedy. Koelb takes this analysis even further, repeating Aristotle's definitions of tragedy as poetic imitation of superior men and comedy as imitating lesser men: "This difference in the value of the objects imitated suggests a parallel difference in the value of the genres doing the imitating" (70). The idea that the subjects of comedy are more frivolous is correct on the surface, as the naïf figure of Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is unquestionably less serious than a tragic figure such as *Agamemnon's* Cassandra. However, analysis of how comedic and absurdist elements of twentieth-century novels represent serious themes of war contradicts the assumption that evaluation of such novels is fully completed by dismissing them merely as satirical or absurdist comedies.

After considering the serious themes of tragedy found in *Oresteia*, the characters and scenarios in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* appear ridiculous. One of the more outlandish themes of *Catch-22* is the apparent conspiracy surrounding documents signed by Washington Irving, which leads to several internal investigations and the persecution of the chaplain. *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers its own absurd moments, as when Billy Pilgrim comes unstuck in time and experiences a war movie in reverse so that bombers draw bombs back into themselves, thereby putting out the fires resulting from the explosions, and fly them back to bases for disassembly. However, serious implications emerge as events in the novels play out or come under increased scrutiny. Melvin Maddocks considers the reasoning for this sort of comedic interpretation of war in literature in “Comedy and War.” Maddocks argues that war literature is frequently comic because, “if the purpose of comedy is to expose the insanity of everyday life, then war may be judged the ultimate insanity, and the comedian’s ultimate challenge” (22). The very title of *Catch-22* exemplifies the absolute insanity of the war’s bureaucracy and how it promotes insanity in the war’s participants. According to the novel, when seeking to be declared mentally unfit for duty as Yossarian frequently attempts to do, “There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind” (52). For a reader, *Catch-22* as a concept is humorous on its surface due to its absurdity, but for the novel’s soldiers it is a trap that forces anyone caught in the net of the war bureaucracy to remain in it until death, in the case of many of the novel’s characters—or desertion, as when Yossarian finally refuses to remain a willing participant in the war. In these cases,

where real events are ridiculous in theory but in reality end in disastrous outcomes, satire can serve as a substitute for tragedy to achieve similar effects or explore similar conflicts.

Maddocks establishes war literature as the rightful territory of comedy while dismissing modern war literature as tragedy because as the scale of war has grown, “the idea of tragedy has been corrupted, emptied of meaning” (33). His argument invites consideration of how satire can encompass multiple genres including tragedy and comedy, and harks back to Frye’s theory that a natural relationship may develop between the tragic and satiric owing to the relationship between the Dionysiac and Apolline. Through their satirical novels, Heller and Vonnegut explore how depictions of war can be both tragic and comic, and how treating war irreverently via comedy reinforces without romanticizing the seriousness of the subject. When Billy Pilgrim is in the Tralfamadorian exhibit in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he describes the horrors of war to them in a grand speech, expecting them to agree with the necessity of such events to achieve the goal of a peaceful society, and is baffled when they instead are bemused by his stupidity. The Tralfamadorians explain that, due to how they experience time, they already know how Earth, Tralfamadore, and the entire universe will be destroyed, telling Billy Pilgrim, “We blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for our flying saucers. A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears” (117). A large portion of the novel focuses on Billy Pilgrim’s experiences in World War II and how they affect him, but when he presents what he thinks he has learned and gained from the experiences of war, he is instantly deflated by the Tralfamadorians. Pilgrim says, “I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen,

who were proud of fighting pure evil at the time,” but the Tralfamadoreans dismiss his supposed revelation and instead present him with the knowledge of a wider, uncaring Universe in which human suffering is irrelevant (116). In the face of so much suffering without larger meaning, catharsis delivered by Athenian tragedy rings hollow and Billy’s epiphany offers no outlet for the discharge of horror and pity.

As Maddocks admits, this disconnect between the seriousness of the subject and the apparent callousness in which satire deals does not immediately make a familiar fit, but the resulting discomfort may effectively communicate the impact of war on a scale that literature had never before imagined or described. The solution to the problem of depicting the massive horror of World War II led to the emergence of a new variety of satire, Maddocks writes: “Faced by a devastation earlier generations could not have comprehended, twentieth-century war comedians turned to what came to be called ‘black humor’” (27). As an extension or companion to absurdism, black humor exposes the serious themes considered in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, encouraging readers both to laugh and wince over situations and figures made ridiculous and painful by the terrible events depicted.

As a novel rich in examples of black humor, many of *Catch-22*’s more poignant scenes revolve around Yossarian’s decision on his mission to Ferrara to take his group of planes over the target a second time, which leads to the destruction of one of his squadron’s planes and the death of Kraft and the other crew members, as well as the death of Snowden in Yossarian’s own crew. The situation and Yossarian’s feelings about it are quite serious, as the narrator tells us that Yossarian goes to answer to his superiors

for this fatal decision with mixed feelings about the deaths of Kraft and the others and his own role in them, “for they had all died in the distance of a mute and secluded agony at a moment when he was up to his own ass in the same vile, excruciating dilemma of duty and damnation” (158). His superiors are unsure how to respond to this situation, as Yossarian’s success in destroying the target on his second run did not comply with his training, which required him to drop his bombs on the first run regardless of whether he could hit his target. Witnessing the ensuing struggle in the mind of Colonel Cathcart, egged on by Colonel Korn, highlights the absurdity of the military bureaucracy’s rigid expectations and its irrational incompetence to apply them to the unpredictable scenarios unfolding in the novel. This darkly humorous disconnect emerges with painful clarity when Colonel Cathcart tells Yossarian, “It’s not that I’m being sentimental or anything. I don’t give a damn about the men or the airplane. It’s just that it looks so lousy on the report. How am I going to cover up something like this in the report?” (159). The military brass smooth the Ferrara debacle over, of course, by giving Yossarian a medal and promoting him to Captain—ironical outcomes that influence Yossarian’s attitude toward the war and the military, and which drive the rest of the novel’s events. As Colonel Korn reflects, the medal and promotion are ways of forcing normalcy onto an abnormal backdrop of the violence of war: “You know, that might be the answer—to act boastfully about something we ought to be ashamed of. That’s a trick that never seems to fail” (160). The ridiculous premise of the guilt-stricken Yossarian being the beneficiary of bureaucratic responses that seek to quickly rebuild a façade of order over a chaotic event

is a prime example of what Maddocks calls the “middle-management” of war, which provides perfect fodder for the black humor of war comedy (30).

The reflexive dismissal of *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* as serious works on account of their black humor and its connection to comedy—the “lesser” genre—could have important literary implications, as Eric Solomon notes in “From ‘Christ in Flanders’ to *Catch-22*: An Approach to War Fiction”: “[*Catch-22*] has been called immoral because, unlike most of his predecessors in the tradition of war fiction, Joseph Heller ordinarily makes us laugh where our expectations call for tears” (860). However, the absurdity of a world at war begets the novel’s absurdity—“thus in revolting against what is revolting, in the Swiftian agony, macabre exaggeration turns pathos to humor” (860). While Solomon does draw a parallel between pathos and humor, he sees a distinction between tragedy and Heller’s satire, calling the figures “sardonic not tragic”—indicating that the bitterness that emerges in Heller’s black humor is absent from the more straightforward pathos of tragedy (860). However, in addition to similarities discussed earlier in this thesis such as the prophetic figures in *Oresteia* and in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, other similarities between the works emerge that establish the twentieth-century war novels not only as sardonic reflections of true tragedy, but as tragic in the literary sense on their own terms.

The protagonists of the two novels are undoubtedly less grand than the noble heroes of Athenian tragedy but, in many ways, they serve as the new tragic heroes, while characters in more esteemed positions are singularly malevolent or incompetent. In *Catch-22*, Yossarian is only a Captain but holds much of the power of action in the novel

as his choices shape the lives of other characters. According to Sniderman's analysis, "it is Yossarian who controls things," (251) although he is not aware of it "and spends much of his time blaming others—Cathcart, Milo, 'they'—for his predicament. What Yossarian learns in the course of the book is that he, and no-one else, is in control of his fate" (252). This holds some truth for the novel's relationship with tragedy, as in tragedy fate itself may drive events, but characters must still make the choices they feel helplessly driven to by the larger force of fate. Yossarian likewise feels that he is caught up in the events of the war and helpless to do anything for himself or others who share his predicament, and he often pleads ineffectually to ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen or Major Major to intervene to save his life. It is not until he resolves to run away at the close of the novel that he realizes how much power he actually holds in his fight against his fate. As James Mullican describes in "A Burkean Approach to *Catch-22*," Yossarian is variously a victim, exploiter, and survivor within the novel, and he faces the threat of disgrace multiple times for disobeying orders or behaving recklessly around superior officers. However, in the end he finds it within himself to take noble action to live up to his ideals, as twisted or limited as they may seem:

Yossarian eventually ends up as a survivor with integrity by becoming an outsider and renouncing the values and potential rewards of the bureaucracy. Yossarian does not, however, totally give up the symbolism of patriotism. He values love of country, valor in its service, and the symbols of that valor. What he cannot tolerate is the misuse of these ideals for personal ends. (Mullican 46)

As in *Oresteia*, Yossarian is caught up in the larger forces of fate, here embodied by the war and the military bureaucracy keeping him in the war, but although his actions do not make him into the noble, larger-than-life hero of Greek tragedy like Agamemnon or Orestes, he makes decisions to maintain his own integrity on his terms.

Despite the differences in its narrative structure from *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* offers a similar opportunity for a somewhat ridiculous protagonist to outshine more prestigious characters in his choice to align himself with his ideals, even when they conflict with a larger force, against which he may be powerless. In *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade, or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism*, Todd Davis argues that "Much like Hemingway's Nick Adams or Heller's Yossarian, Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim has been shaken to his very foundation by the bombs of war and longs to reconcile himself to the experience. But reconciliation is not to be his" (76). In this instance, Billy Pilgrim is facing the larger forces of war, of the uncaring universe in which he exists, and of the human and societal pressures to ascribe some redemptive meaning to the war and destruction he—and Vonnegut himself—witnessed in Dresden. Billy Pilgrim does this by rejecting the notion that the war is in any way grand or important and becoming "unstuck in time" in the same way as the Tralfamadorians (Vonnegut 23). This "enables him to work around the war, not through it," as Davis says, and because causality is interrupted along with the concept of time, it robs the events of the war of any larger meaning, embodying "the failure of traditional narratives to explain the violation of war" (76). This disruption of familiar narrative structure enables the narrator, who stands in as a semi-autobiographical version of Vonnegut, to fulfill his own

promise from the book's first chapter, when he vows to call his war book *The Children's Crusade*.

Pilgrim himself notes the obvious call to draw meaning from the horrors he has witnessed during his speech to the Tralfamadorians, when he says, "Earthlings must be the terrors of the Universe! If other planets aren't now in danger from Earth, they soon will be. So tell me the secret so I can take it back to Earth and save us all: How can a planet live at peace?" (116). Then, however, comes the punchline: "Billy felt that he had spoken soaringly. He was baffled when he saw the Tralfamadorians close their little hands on their eyes. He knew from past experience what this meant: He was being stupid" (116). Of course, the Tralfamadorian understanding of time makes human war meaningless to the larger cosmos, and to the humans themselves, who, while they are suffering during the Dresden bombing, operate as though perfectly happy and healthy at other times. Billy comes to embrace this view himself, even though his wife, daughter, and most of society encourage a different understanding of war generally, and World War II specifically. As the narrator notes in the first chapter, the wife of his old war buddy, who "thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies," is angry that he wants to write about the war because she fears he will glorify it and contribute to society's view of war as grand (15). Choosing to reject the view held by all other institutions, Billy Pilgrim instead embraces the view held by the Tralfamadorians and, like Yossarian, is ennobled by his unwillingness to continue to participate in a system that in any way glorifies the destruction of the war.

All of this is not to say that the black humor that emerged in twentieth century war novels constitutes a precise equivalent to classical tragedy, but rather that tragedy in a post-war society fails to fulfill the original purposes of consolation, either through purgation of catharsis or acknowledgement of existential dread, because the shattering realities of World War II left the genre of tragedy hollow or inapplicable. Maddocks argues that, as the genre of tragedy loses its meaning, “comedy is left to fill in the gap—to bear witness to the dark side of life, including war” (33). It does so in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which through black humor convey the pathos expected of classical tragedy—as when the bombing of Dresden is described in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the American prisoners of war are housed in the meat locker, which the narrator tells us “was a very safe shelter. All that happened down there was an occasional shower of calcimine,” while their German captors “had, before the raid began, gone to the comforts of their own homes in Dresden. They were all being killed with their families” (177). The deadpan delivery of these facts is much different than the dramatic speeches in *Oresteia* but is nevertheless successful in provoking a discomfiting reaction in the reader. As Maddocks writes, “The ‘humor of despair’ may never be able to do what tragedy at its best (like Greek tragedy) does: purge the soul with pity and terror. But comedy can and does purge the mind of hypocrisy” (34). Comedy’s cousins—black humor and satire—do not elevate man, as *Oresteia* frequently does in depicting superior and noble men like Agamemnon and Orestes. Black humor and satire instead reinforce the reality of humanity’s inability to overcome our warlike nature, and puncture any overinflated sense of inherent nobility in humanity:

“Thou shalt not kill” is the commandment at the center of every religion, every philosophy. Everybody hates war—everybody says so. “Never again” is the cry after every war. But attention spans are short: if the survivors don’t forget, the children of survivors do. Why are those old men with no legs sitting in wheelchairs, selling apples? (Maddocks 34)

Maddocks’s quotation pessimistically implies that we are doomed by our own natures and short lives to repeat the same cycles of violence no matter how terrible, as *Slaughterhouse-Five* notes in response to the usefulness of writing an anti-war book with the cheeky question, “Why don’t you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?” (3). The tragedy of *Oresteia* may be emotionally affecting, but its optimistic ending in which relentless, devastating vengeance gives place to order-imposing systems of justice rings hollow in a much later civilization that progresses from classical Athens but that repeats the same horrors and fails to hold itself accountable, preferring instead to ritually purge the negative emotions and artificially start afresh. In its conclusion, this thesis will explore how war satire may shine a light on this hypocrisy and attempt to hold the real-life power structures responsible for war accountable, while attempting to counteract the ongoing glorification of war in some current media.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis's initial chapters established how the genres of satire and black comedy supply an equivalent to the catharsis usually expected of Athenian tragedy in post-World War II satirical novels. However, despite the massive shift in human understanding and artistic rendering of war following World War II, war on a smaller but nonetheless devastating scale has continued on with barely an interruption since. Even *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, both of which repeatedly use the juxtaposition of absurd humor and the horrors of World War II to build feelings of fear and pity in readers, were unable when they were published in the 1960s to sufficiently influence U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Just as World War II followed the earlier Great War—at the time naively expected to end all wars—warfare of course continues into the twenty-first century alongside the media examining it. Some of that media, such as Kathryn Bigelow's critically acclaimed 2008 film *The Hurt Locker*, is more closely related to our culture's idea of classical tragedy in its serious treatment of its subject matter and its flawed but nobly conflicted characters. However, popular media during the present global conflicts—including the longest U.S. military engagement in history, the War in Afghanistan that began more than sixteen years ago—abounds with both satire and black comedy. Current popular political entertainment like Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* highlights war's absurdity in what Ogunyemi calls “a propagandistic effort to uphold an anti-war position” (209). Scores of artists and creators since World War II take up this mantle as an “inevitable” task intended to counteract pro-militaristic propaganda produced by governments and in

popular entertainment, like the *Call of Duty* video game franchise discussed earlier (Ogunyemi 209).

Even though anti-war art and literature have obviously not ended warfare, the effort to discourage war that currently flourishes in the late-night comedy scene certainly coincides with and likely contributes to an overall decline in pro-war sentiment in the United States. The connection is especially clear when you consider that in 2014, a Public Religion Research Institute poll found that more than one in every ten young adults considered either *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, both Comedy Central political-comedy shows, as their most trusted news source—indicating that a large sub-section of the Millennial generation prefers even their current events coverage to temper truth with humor skewering the absurdity of reality.

An attitude shift has certainly coincided with this trend. Following President Donald Trump's August 2017 proposal to increase the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, *Politico* reported that a poll conducted by the publication found that Americans have indeed become convinced that the War in Afghanistan is futile. Under a quarter of voters in 2017 believe the U.S. is winning the war and only a fifth agree that increasing the number of troops is a good idea (Shepard). It stands to reason that the absurdity of a war whose futility and ridiculousness are remarked on repeatedly by clever and insightful men and women has managed to influence thinking on those same issues in the emerging electorate. This seems particularly likely as other hosts like John Oliver with *Last Week Tonight* and Samantha Bee with *Full Frontal* have created their own successful series in the same vein as the earlier political comedy shows no longer airing.

The dramatic setting of the shows even harkens back to theater and *Oresteia*, as the host speaks to the studio audience and the much larger television audience observes the interactions between the host and his audience, allowing a collective building of emotion in much the same way as an Athenian audience would have observed and emotionally connected with the interactions between the chorus and main actors in a tragic performance. Episodes of satirical political shows may even mirror the tragic structure, as early subjects of mild interest build to sometimes, very serious subjects—including well-known events of historic military importance, like the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, and the execution of nationally declared enemies like Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden. However, as the catharsis is often long-coming in reality, like *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the political comedy shows ameliorate the poignant and painful current events under discussion with uncomfortable humor meant to highlight the absurdity of a world in which such events occur.

In addition to changing attitudes toward war, war itself has changed with the introduction of technologies like drones, for example, that provide a manner of “critical distance” from the actual warfare and that drastically reduce overall casualties while still inflicting psychological damage to those who participate in war. Even the viewing experience for citizens has changed, as new aerial video and surveillance technologies employed in media-coverage of war provide video-game-like visuals for television audiences, adding to the mental and physical distancing effects of modern war technology. With less mass destruction in wars waged by the west, but a potentially larger mental toll taken on those who wage the wars, the question of how war literature

will confront new realities of distant but ongoing war emerges. As the focus on devastation returns to the individual, interior struggles today's high-tech warfare creates in people it affects, the potential may emerge for a rebirth of tragedy as a viable genre for war fiction. With lessening public support for today's wars, and a world convinced of war's futility in spite of decisions made by elected officials and military leaders, the writers and artists of the twenty-first century and beyond may find room again to hope unironically for something nobler in telling the smaller stories of suffering. So long as the modern world continues to fulfill the Tralfamadorian promise that "the idea of preventing war on Earth is stupid," (117) however, the "humor of despair" offered by black humor supplies its own brand of catharsis to "purge the [modern] mind of hypocrisy" (Maddocks 34). Thus, satire and black humor continue to offer their own forms of emotional and existential relief in a world where war prevents tragedy from providing true catharsis.

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