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# Bedtime Stories : How to Hope and Cope with the American Dream

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BEDTIME STORIES: HOW TO HOPE AND COPE WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM

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English

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ABSTRACT  
BEDTIME STORIES: HOW TO HOPE AND COPE WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM

A multi-genre work combining New Journalism and literary analysis. The narrator (played by “Girl” in the bedtime stories) presents a critical essay exploring destabilized truths and dangers in an American dream that turns modern man into a machine. The goal is to show how the dream has evolved from the original Puritan dream set out by early American settlers/writers to the Postmodern vision of success (or failure) we read about today and what kind of effect this dream has on the average scholar. The thesis is broken up by reflections on her learning imbedded in dialogue with her always opinionated boyfriend (i.e., bedtime stories). The narrative itself is one student’s pilgrimage through her education on literature and the American dream, focusing on the following major texts to define attainable American goals and unattainable American fairy tales with references to many others: Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” and Cummings’ “Anyone Lived in a Pretty Howtown.”

*“There are three paths that are bad for a man to take: to see the beauty of the world and call it ugly, to get up early to do what is impossible, and to let oneself get carried away by dreams—for whosoever dreams becomes a victim of his own dream.”*

— Simone Schwarz-Bart in “The Bridge of Beyond”

## **PREFACE**

*“It is a complex fate to be an American.”*

– Henry James

Literature both created and destroyed the American dream, indicating that personal identity in the American sense is an illusion created by social propaganda, starting with the Puritan religion and branching, because of a desire for individualism, beyond the grasp of British influence. Escaping social influence embedded in our everyday understanding of the world is impossible. Writing is a basis of socially constructed truth, whether the Bible or a post-apocalyptic novel. The American dream, identified by a common set of goals to be achieved by its followers, was thus constructed by Puritanism (with religious faith reaping bountiful earthly rewards), spurred by capitalism (with physical labor reaping more bountiful earthly pleasures), and challenged by modernism (which questioned the value of these rewards versus the actions taken to attain them). Postmodernists and their successors must deconstruct the illusion and re-write what it means to be American and what it means to be free as promised in the Constitution. If freedom means an exemption from external control, interference, or regulation, and the power to determine action without restraint (dictionary.com), are Americans now truly free? Have they ever been? Or is the work of claiming that freedom still before us?

The history of the American dream, culturally every post-1492 moment of time (including the present), can be read as an ongoing effort to make freedom a tangible product (i.e., earthly reward), especially through the intermingling of Puritanism and

capitalism. This objectification of goals in turn objectifies the humans seeking to achieve them—thus commodifying life processes and man himself. Literary modernism attempts to wake Americans from their reveries by shining light on the mechanization of the dream. This light, however, allows Americans to see primarily the hopelessness of their situation—the truth the culture has tried so hard to veil. Present-day Americans need to reclaim hope without contributing to chaos, and they must continue to recognize the negative effects of a dream made tangible while re-constructing the prevailing dream to motivate realistically without becoming disheartening.

## CHAPTER 1: AIN'T THAT AMERICA?

*“We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.”*

— T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*

The American Dream has a long history that begins before America did, brought to the New World by the earliest Pilgrims in search of a fresh start with high expectations. In *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, Arthur Herman discusses the four stages of the civilization process. In the state of nature, man roams helpless and alone before reaching the formation of pastoral and nomadic communities. These communities then lead to the agrarian state defined by fixed possession of land. Farm life then evolves into urban life, which then allows a civil and commercial stage to emerge (22). Humans call this series of developments “progress.” But is this pattern really progress?

### **A Brief Historical Synopsis of an Evolving Dream:**

**The Puritans.** The Puritans arrived in the New World imagining America as the biblical City on a Hill, the New Eden. Their America would be a shiny beacon of righteousness for everyone to embrace (the diametrical opposite of the falling towers and decrepit Unreal City Eliot’s *The Waste Land* would eventually present). The Puritans’ America was an untouched, uncorrupted paradise where these theocrats could overcome original sin in a culture built on religion:

The American belief in progress drew upon...the nation’s Calvinist past...[T]he Puritans and Pilgrims had seen themselves as the people or ‘race’ that God had selected as His instruments in the world...God’s divine purpose had to be

reflected in every aspect of the conduct and actions of the community, including proclaiming His gospel to the other peoples of the earth. (Herman 147)

**The Revolutionary Spirit.** In the eighteenth-century, an emerging revolutionary spirit introduced the idea of self-definition and individualism through democracy. This was not the religion-based dream of the Puritans nor the monarchy-based rule of the Mother Country. In revolutionary America, men were created equal—they were part of a multi-cultural melting pot where slaves, Native Americans, and Europeans could, in theory, experience freedom. The U.S. Constitution, the defining piece of American literature, guaranteed liberty and justice for all with a Bill of Rights full of clearly defined freedoms. The idea of freedom aired the idea of “individualism.” However, a fine line develops between personal freedom and isolation. Isolation breeds greed, distrust, and ultimately, ego-centrism.

**Manifest Destiny.** In the nineteenth-century era of westward expansion, civilized culture moved toward, and eventually through, the wilderness. The intercontinental railroad united the nation and industrial “conveniences” further destroyed the natural landscape. Manifest destiny assumes that God’s will is for white Anglo-Saxon Americans to own and control the earth: “America was the ‘redeemer nation,’ with a special mission to the rest of the world. That redemptive mission justified America’s westward expansion throughout the nineteenth century as part of its ‘manifest destiny’” (Herman 148). America’s confidence added fuel to the fire of ego-centrism and a desire for “more” became a key goal of the dream.

**Capitalism.** After the Civil War (which was perhaps a result of commodification in itself), industrialism hit full force and money and power redefined democracy. As

millionaires appeared as a result of these new dream signifiers, the new defining belief was that the individual could gain anything he was willing to work for or take risks for. Working together to achieve the dream or relying on divine intervention was no longer a trend. It was every man for himself in a quest for power.

**Modernism.** An emerging post-industrial aesthetic movement reconsiders the American dream. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dreams in literature (as inspired by the goals set by American history) no longer seem attainable. As bleak and depressing as this representation sounds, modernism illuminates the falseness of the fairy tale that is the American dream. Yet many people still follow the earlier powerfully imaginative dreams embedded in the country's history. In fact, however, the ones who cling to the dream the most determinedly are the ones who appear to benefit the least in the nation's most recent literature.

Common components established by the dream include money, social power, leisure, physical appearance, shared morals and values, family, and education. Certain standards need to be achieved in each of these areas, and success in meeting the standards determines each person's place in society and thus his/her happiness in life.

### **Bedtime Story 1: It's a Wonderful Life**

*Girl: I can't sleep. Do you want to get up and play a board game?*

*Boy: Maybe. Let's play The Game of Life.*

*Girl: I don't know. I'm starting to not like Life so much anymore. It's so...fabricated.*

*Boy: It's a game. It has to be fabricated.*

*Girl: But your life, in Life, is all planned out for you. I mean, you are required at a certain point to stop and get married. You are required to stop and buy a house.*

*Boy: That's the beauty of it. In the game, you always succeed. You win the Nobel Peace Prize and retire in Millionaire Estates. Everyone lives happily ever after.*

*Girl: That's not beauty. That's a lie. Kids play this game thinking they can all be doctors and make \$90,000 every ten spaces. In the end, the person who makes the most money wins the game. Is that how real life is supposed to be?*

*Boy: Maybe. But I think love matters too.*

*Girl: There's no divorce space on the game board. Everybody wins in love, too.*

*Boy: I wish life was like that. Did you know the divorce rate is over half?*

*Girl: Unfortunately, real life isn't played by the Milton Bradley rules.*

*Boy: Maybe it could be if we played fair.*

*Girl: What's fair?*

*Boy: I don't know. Ask Milton Bradley.*

A master narrative, an idea literary criticism borrows from anthropology and ethnic studies, involves the study of various cultures and how all people within each culture follow a similar storyline. For U.S. culture, we call the master narrative the American dream. The master narrative explains what it means to be a member of a defined group (family, college, race, etc.) and how each member is defined by his or her connection to the group. In the American dream narrative, told from a default position, there is no limit to growth and progress. The American dream is implicitly or outwardly a Christian narrative in which the default position is white, male, Protestant, middle-class.

Taken from the master narrative perspective, the American dream means giving up a personal identity to take on the identity of the whole. Consider the definition of *freedom* again. The dream negates the premise. Dictionary.com defines *identity* as “the state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions” or “the condition of being oneself or itself, and not another.” The cost of following the American dream is the loss of freedom and the loss of identity. The compensation (or restitution) for that “cost” is viability according to the master narrative. Milton Bradley constructs the master narratives for its games. In a similar way, Puritans and capitalists have constructed America’s master narrative.

### **Bedtime Story 2: A Daydream Believer**

*Girl: When I was eight, I owned a Barbie dream house. It was three stories tall with an elevator and tall white columns. I had a collection of 30 dolls with silky blonde manes and tiny waists, each with a different outfit representing different careers. Yet they all looked the same with their high heels and pink Corvettes.*

*Boy: Sounds like The Stepford Wives. Seriously creepy.*

*Girl: My Barbies had more clothes than I did.*

*Boy: Are you jealous? Do you really need a hot pink tutu to feel complete?*

*Girl: Maybe not a tutu, but I did think I would grow up to live in a Barbie dream house with an elevator, columns, and a pink Corvette in the driveway. I thought I would wear high heels and shiny dresses and never get fat and never stop smiling.*

*Boy: You're not fat.*

*Girl: I'm not smiling, either.*

*“Society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth—i.e., the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.”*

—Michel Foucault in “Truth and Power”

Striving for society’s goals as figured in America’s master narrative leads to the destruction of America, a country established on a foundation of freedom and hope. The dream negates both freedom and hope by setting the same unattainable goals for all Americans—Americans who have already been isolated and pitted against fellow dreamers to see who can achieve the goal first, and not lose it. Thus, desire itself is paradoxically destructive. The more you want the dream’s rewards, the more the dream will hurt you. Achieving its goals will destroy you if the pursuit doesn’t. The American dream promises, but it doesn’t deliver. All men are NOT perceived as equal in society, no matter how much we want to believe they are. In *The Price of the Ticket*, James Baldwin writes: “For it is easy to proclaim all souls equal in the sight of God: it is hard to make men equal on earth, in the sight of men” (158).

It seems easy to see these facts and agree that the American dream is a lie and education should move Americans toward this knowledge, but education has become PART of the dream and a slave to it. Today, the primary goal of education is to lead to better jobs and thus higher status and more material objects to make the educated man more satisfied with life. Education is another commodity bought as stock to attain more commodities. The educated members of society go on to write the discourse that guides the rest. New Journalist Joan Didion titles one of her books to reflect the dream as a bill of goods we have been sold: *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*. Society

becomes dependent on the dream offered by America's "acceptable discourse" and fears the failure to realize the dream for shame of embarrassment. However, no one will admit that we are slaves to the dream. As long as there is a dream, there will be the American brand of exceptionalism where everyone screams, "Not me! I'm the exception. This isn't MY dream!" So...if it is not OUR dream, then whose dream is it, and why do we let it linger?

No matter how much a reader tends to think he or she is the "exception" to the rule, all humans under American influence develop a fundamental desire for the constructed American dream, and they all define this American dream through their interpretation of modern culture. The social entities of mass media define modern culture. In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry writes, "In contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV, and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality,' in which distinctions between these are eroded" (87). These erosions occur when viewers succumb to the desires presented to them. In *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth says, "the critic of narrative, and of the patterns of desire that narratives build in us, can express nothing but a 'personal' desire, when comparing any two narratives, and the critic will thus be expressing, consciously and unconsciously, no more than the interests—goods—of a given power base" (270). No matter how much Americans try to deny it, America is defined and refined by what Americans mentally consume—whether readers take what they read literally or figuratively. Desires are based on what humans see in others (real-life acquaintances or fictional characters), and form out of jealousy or envy toward what others have versus what they themselves do not.

These desires develop into goals, and attaining these goals is the basis of living the dream. Modernist writers seek to change the way Americans perceive and attain those goals, to assist them to “improve [their] desires—to *desire better desires*” (Booth 271). They do this through the use of irony, representing a harsh reality, and showing the reader what NOT to do. Texts like *Death of a Salesman*, without a conventional happy ending, are meant to purge us of the American dream and teach us that it’s not possible to have an ideal life in a real and thus flawed world. Lowering our expectations increases our chances for success. The social dream, no matter how it is defined, should be something to aspire to, but should not be expected as reality (like *Bride* magazine’s Dream Wedding). The de-stabilized characters of modern and post-modern literature should be identified with so that they can de-stabilize the reader. Such characters (like Neddy in John Cheever’s “The Swimmer”) are not truly able to grasp the concept of reality, but the reader can by observing their mistakes.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE MODERN CONDITION**

*“In a broad sense modern is applied to writing marked by a strong and conscious break with tradition....It believes that we create the world in the act of perceiving it.”*

— William Harmon in *A Handbook to Literature* (10<sup>th</sup> edition)

American literary modernism prevailed from 1914 to 1945 (the period of time between the two World Wars). The *Norton Anthology of American Literature* states that the two wars “involved American artists and thinkers with the brutal actualities of large-scale modern war, so different from imaginary heroism” (911). The walls of illusion began to break down as reality struck the nation. Although America’s optimism had long been vaunted, “the senses of a great civilization being destroyed or destroying itself, of social breakdown, and of individual powerlessness became a part of the American experience” during the era of modernism and left Americans with “feelings of fear, disorientation, and, on occasion, liberation” (911). Under the necessity for a new truth, the literary movement’s major goal became “the breakdown of traditional society under the pressures of modernity” (915). The *Norton Anthology* describes modernists as sharing “the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been either destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies” (915).

As physical wars took place around the globe, authors facing internal wars created and re-created literature to represent both struggles. The Modernist movement emerged from actual reactions to war and the negative impact it had on human confidence. It was then fueled by urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. In the traditional sense,

the church, government, economic system, and cultural tradition established the truths that citizens would adopt and the discourses through which those truths could be expressed. In the modern sense, however, no fixed truths exist and humans willfully create their own subjective truths and the discourses necessary to their expression.

Nina Baym explains that “the reader has to dig the structure out. This is why the reader of a modernist work is often said to participate in the actual work of making the poem or story. Often, modernist work is structured as a quest for the very coherence that, on its surface, it seems to lack” (Baym 916). Perhaps this is why many modernist writers experiment with grammar, mechanics, fragmentation, and multiple other techniques that break traditional rules. A major goal of Modernism is to prove socially accepted rules (and the texts that adhere to them) to be false. The most widely accepted piece of writing in the Western world is the Bible:

Because patterns of searching appear in most of the world’s mythologies, many modernist works are unified by reference to myth. Christianity appears among world myths as the basis of Western civilization; and the modern world for some comes into being when circumstances seem to show Christianity to *be* only a myth, a merely human construction for creating order out of, and finding purpose in, meaningless flux. (Baym 916)

**Bedtime Story 3: Lost in Translation**

*Girl: Do you ever think that the Bible could be wrong?*

*Boy: Of course not. It's the word of God.*

*Girl: It's the word of God as written by man.*

*Boy: So? God gave man the words.*

*Girl: Then those words were translated to another language. Then translated to another version. Then books were added. Books were lost. How do we know that what has been written and translated has been done properly? How do we trust writers with such important work?*

*Boy: Because we have to. Our faith makes up for anything that was lost in translation.*

*Girl: Are we responsible for the false interpretations or does our faith set us free even if what we are supposed to read and believe is completely fabricated?*

*Boy: I'd rather believe and be wrong than NOT believe and be wrong.*

*“We are all, it seems, artists constructing homemade worlds of human design.”*

—Ruland and Bradbury in *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*

*“Every legend, moreover, contains its residuum of truth, and the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it.”*

—James Baldwin in *The Price of the Ticket*

When humans are held responsible for creating their own truths rather than believing that an acceptable, general omniscience out there provides truth for us, it is easier to understand art as an individual’s attempt to create and/or convey reality/truth to his/her audience, particularly in the case of Modernist writers, who hold themselves responsible for sharing their fragmented knowledge. The one truth that Modernist writers appear to agree on is articulated in a famous quote by T.S. Eliot in “Burnt Norton”:

“[H]uman kind / cannot bear too much reality” (3). So they try to shift reality in their favor by changing the lens through which it is viewed. Humans do not easily attain their “desires” without a degree of hope—but hope can get the dreamer only so far before he/she butts heads with reality. The goal, then, is to gather as much hope as possible along the journey, even if embracing hope means ignoring truth. The human search for hope (i.e., our Holy Grail) ensues and often becomes desperate. Modern works place emphasis on characters’ interior reality to engage the reader in an independent search for truth and prosperity. Having undertaken this journey, the reader can then decide if the search, whether initiated by the characters or the society in which they live, is worth the effort and if the treasure sought is even worthy of desire. In *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury describe modern writing as

“writing concentrated on the nature of the American Dream, the rise of materialism, the experience of the modern city, the bonds that linked person to person in the moral chain. It documented alienation and disaffiliation but spoke, too, of new American opportunities and possibilities” (376). Modern fiction is different from traditional American master narratives that provide fairy-tale storylines in an organized manner:

The traditional sequences of fictional plot—human beings fulfilling sensible and rational lives against a worthy backdrop of fortunate social reality or benevolent nature—are displaced by an image of man as a small figure in a deterministic system which ironizes by ignoring him in an irresistible evolutionary process wholly indifferent to individuality.

(Ruland 224)

The ultimate goal is to tear down boundaries created by differences that cause Americans shame and isolation to prove that no one has *the* answers and no one is completely alone in the struggles of this world. Isolation turns to indifference through lack of understanding as each person struggles with the same goal. James Baldwin, in writing about the isolation of racism, has located the purpose of modernism in its desire to help man discover himself:

To become involved with the force of life and legend, how each perpetually assumes the guise of the other, creating that dense, many-sided and shifting reality which is the world we live in and the world we make. To tell his story is to begin to liberate us from his image and it is, for the first time, to clothe this phantom with flesh and blood, to deepen, by our

understanding of him and his relationship to us, our understanding of ourselves and of all men. (78)

Baldwin takes the perspective of the black male, but his tone reveals the alienation that is common to all humans. Still, humans think that they are alone and no one else feels as they do. Modernism causes a revision of the truth, revealing all to be struggling for identity in a veiled world where truth is impossible to find: “[M]any American writers came to think of history as an absurd fiction, a massive plot that commanded the self while dissolving its sense of stable reality. Fiction undertook to reappraise the forces loose in the world and the individual’s power to face them” (Ruland 381).

### **Bedtime Story 4: The Important of Being Earnest**

*Girl: I lied to my grandmother. I told her I was a Girl Scout.*

*Boy: Why would you lie about something like that?*

*Girl: I didn't want to lie to her but she had certain expectations. All the little girls who meant anything were Girl Scouts. Like my cousin Amanda. She was a Girl Scout. She sold a lot of cookies.*

*Boy: Why weren't you a Girl Scout?*

*Girl: My parents were always too drunk to take me to the meetings. Anyway, my grandmother asked me why I didn't sell her any cookies. I told her I didn't think she wanted any. She bragged about how many cookies Amanda sold. She asked me how many I sold. I told her about the same. She laughed. She said no one sold as many as Amanda.*

*Boy: Sounds like Amanda was her favorite.*

*Girl: I lied about being a cheerleader, too. In fifth grade in my small town, every normal girl wanted to be a cheerleader. For some reason I didn't, but I waited in line and signed up for tryouts just like everyone else. My mom was a cheerleader. So I lied to my grandmother again.*

*Boy: Did you ever tell your grandmother the truth about Girl Scouts and cheerleading?*

*Girl: No. My grandmother died eight years ago. I don't think she ever really believed I was a Girl Scout or a cheerleader. I cried at her funeral. Not because I wanted to, but because it was the normal thing to do. Everyone else was crying. So I thought about not being her favorite and I cried too.*

### **CHAPTER 3: THE WASTE LAND**

Long considered one of the twentieth century's most significant texts, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is foundational to modernism. The poem is multi-lingual, showing off the author's knowledge of various languages while also proving to his audience that they do not know everything. Eliot complicates the poem through multiple allusions to earlier texts. Its ability to complicate its message through language and allusion is the epitome of the modern twentieth-century literature it inspires.

Experimentation with form and the fragmentation of time lead to new meanings within this work and others that follow it. Instead of wrapping the content in a neat, organized (i.e., fictional) package, the authors represent it as it is, a characteristic borrowed from the earlier Realism, and take it a step further to produce a new message: nothing in life is organized, linear, and fairytale-like—a different message from the American dream narrative that previous texts proposed. All human knowledge is a heap of broken images. These broken images reinforce the purpose of the broken narrative (to demonstrate that there is no fixed or established truth). Fragmentation of time, a major modernist theme, begins in the first section of the poem, "The Burial of the Dead." The poem begins rather than ends with death. Eliot destabilizes the traditional plot to establish a new truth: time is *not* linear. In *Duration and Simultaneity*, Henri Bergson tells us that time is not linear and that all time is present in every moment we live through, a philosophy that will influence the structure of many modernist works.

Thematically, *The Waste Land* examines post-World War I London as a scene of ruin, but also the locale for a search for the sacred, a Holy Grail of sorts, in that particular historical moment, with allusions to past works illuminating the journey as one that transcends time as well as personal identity. In *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and*

*His Context*, Louis Menand writes, “*The Waste Land* is indeed a literary work that seems to regard the present moment—as it is experienced by the individual subject—as a reinscription of the whole of the cultural past, and the cultural past as though it were the autobiography of a single consciousness” (81).

The Holy Grail, as object, has a mass following in literary history. This sacred object figures into literature and certain Christian traditions, most often identified with the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper and said to possess miraculous powers. The Grail plays a different role everywhere it appears, but in most versions of the legend the hero must prove he is worthy to be in its presence. Thus, an inevitable struggle (both physical and spiritual) ensues. The hero must pass a series of tests to prove his value, to the world and/or himself. In Eliot’s poem, *The Fisher King* represents that hero.

In the beginning of the poem, present participle verbs create a progressive momentum; this momentum lets the reader know that the action of the poem is ongoing. Its action happens and rehappens in the very instant, another way for Eliot to manipulate traditional notions of time. Breeding (5.1), mixing (5.2), and stirring (5.3) lead to the creation of something new from various parts, introducing the theme of fertility versus sterility, which will carry throughout the poem and many other works influenced by it, including Cummings’ “Anyone Lived in a Pretty Howtown.” A connected theme is the idea of life in death. Lines 71-72 ask “That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout?” (Eliot 7). This refers both to the irony of fertility springing from death and the resurrection of hidden truths.

Not only is the poem non-linear, but it is also overtly non-traditional. Eliot reverses what Americans have learned in past literary pieces; the life-in-death theme is

only one example. The opening line of the poem inverts what a traditional Romantic poet might write about the seasons. Eliot says, “April is the cruellest month” (5.1). From his perspective, April gives false hope, and hope is bad because failure is inevitable. He goes on to describe winter, which ironically offers comfort and warmth. Spring traditionally represents rebirth and life after the death of winter, often associated with Easter and the resurrection of Christ. Traditional symbols are thus inverted. Since modernism “constitute[s] a lament for a lost sense of purpose, a lost coherence, a lost system of values” (Barry 85), an ever-present desire in Eliot’s poem to make life experience valuable (or fertile) conflicts with memory of past experiences that reduce hope (to sterility). As we will see in Cummings’ “Anyone Lived in a Pretty Howtown,” children are apt to dream more while adults lose the ability to dream; age produces reality and reality produces sterility. Thus, fertility decreases. Winter, typically representing failure and death, offers comfort and protection because expectations are set low. There is comfort in failing when you expect to fail. It feels similar to an achievement because you get what you expect.

Americans pay millions of dollars per weekend to see movies that “will show you fear in a handful of dust” (6.30), but avoid the discomfort of poetry like Eliot’s. It is easier to detach from a fairytale film than from something that goes against the grain and tells you life is NOT a fairytale. The American dream system is reinforced by the media (including all genres of composition, written and visual) and how they portray society. Society tries to meet the expectations set by media outlets (i.e., teen girls thinking they are too fat because they don’t look like anorexic models), but ultimately we fail. Society thus sets itself up for failure and wallows in its diminished comfort (like Eliot’s winter)—

and all are guilty, even the implied author of this poem. In *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth discusses the roles of implied author and implied reader. The closing line of “The Burial of the Dead,” which Eliot borrows from Baudelaire’s “To the Reader,” reflects the poem’s implied author (a narrative authorial presence, aside from the “real-life” or “composing” author) reaching out to the implied reader (one who resides within the text rather than outside of it) in hopes of founding a relationship on understanding and sympathy. In this line, Baudelaire’s French words translate to “Hypocrite reader!—my likeness,—my brother!” (7.76). The implied author creates a very complex relationship with the implied reader by relating all three personal relationships to the reader at once. First the author calls the reader a hypocrite, accusing him/her of, and making him/her feel guilty for, denying reality. Then the author calls the reader his/her likeness because we are all hypocrites who deny reality, then his/her brother because the author needs comfort and someone to agree so that he/she is no longer isolated from the world in his/her own personal reality.

In Part II of the poem, “A Game of Chess,” chess is a metaphor for life, a way of advancing the plot through life choices—or lack thereof: “[A]nd we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door” (9.137-38). Living on, going through the motions, becomes a ritual of putting away the past: “I was neither / living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / looking into the heart of light, the silence” (6.39-41). The poem shows a lack of communication in the game as the rich woman speaks, receiving only confusing echoes from her mate. This scene contrasts with the scene that follows. In a bar, as opposed to the previous scene’s mansion, two women discuss the return of one’s husband from service. The friend tells the wife that her husband will not

want her if she does not improve her physical appearance and her bedroom skills; her husband will leave her for another woman: “[H]e wants a good time, / And if you don’t give it to him, there’s others will” (10.148-49). The friend tells her this as if it would be her own fault if she lost her husband to another woman—as if it is allowable for the husband to cheat on her if she is ugly. In these two scenes, though they take place in London, Eliot brings into question the American dream values of money, physical appearance, and family that drove him to London to write to begin with. Neither woman, the rich nor the poor, seems to be satisfied with her marriage (or children, since the woman in the bar has had an abortion). Both are lonely despite following the American dream sequence and attaining its signifiers. The expected rewards for believing in and pursuing the dream are social mobility, equality, freedom, reward for hard work and ingenuity, a nice home, and a family. Even those who follow all the rules do not end up with perfection, though. When energy is directed toward the ideal picture rather than reality, dreamers set themselves up for this type of failure.

Part III, “The Fire Sermon,” continues the theme of going through the motions: “At the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting” (12.215-17). Human machines sit around waiting for a better present, for the attainment of dreams, for death. Things of this world, including mundane routines, destruction of nature, and greed, are portrayed as all-consuming fires that wipe out signs of hope and fertility. Humans are left with a vacant river where life used to be; now only dead bodies and memories remain. Life is a prison and the key to prison is the escape, which is death: “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison” (19.413-15). Prison exists only in

our minds because we feel the need always to be escaping from something. The escape gives us purpose and a feeling of necessity... and also a reason to fail comfortably.

The final three parts become a search for water (the Holy Grail of the story) after mechanization and human waste have dried up all the water. Water signifies fertility and salvation; it is necessary to create and sustain life. Without such fertility, life becomes hopeless. Water symbolizes cleansing, purification of sin, baptism, rebirth, and salvation. The poem provides multiple allusions to Christ's death and resurrection as a sacrifice for human salvation. In the Christian narrative (as derived from the early Puritan ideals), accepting Christ as Savior of mankind solves everything man screwed up on earth, and his holy water provides relief on earth and a better life after death.

However, water must destroy to save, as in the case of Noah's ark, another Christian narrative. Part IV, "Death by Water," shows life as an extension of death without the rewards. For Christians, those who are saved and purified, death is relief because it saves them from the fiery pit of Earth and beyond. Death by water, as opposed to fire, is positive. Water drowns the Phoenician sailor, allowing salvation and rebirth. He is simultaneously destroyed and saved. Baldwin states that man is "created and defeated by the same circumstances" (3). Water aids birth, and in this situation, fosters death. The poem, with its Grail being water, portrays humans searching the world for water to save themselves from the ruin they have caused. Human imprint has corrupted and dried up the river Thames, so humans wish and search for a second chance. Human destruction of the planet, physically and spiritually, is made clear in the multiple images of decrepit, dirty, barren land that was once fertile. In *The Modern Crisis*, Murray Bookchin discusses this problem: "[P]ollution, industrial degradation of the environment, acid rain, global

warming, and nuclear militarism on a massive scale were all the egregious products of Western capitalism. ‘Capitalism, I would argue, is the cancer of society.... [I]t reduces all relations between human beings, and between human beings and earth, to commodities’” (qtd. in Baldwin 423-24).

The search, superficially commodified, can also be what kills man because it is a selfish act, a search for spiritual things beyond this world within this world. Humans have destroyed the water they were given and thus seek more physical water as proof of spiritual salvation. Wayne Booth states that, “All actions are ‘selfish,’ because we never do anything unless we are convinced that doing it will yield more reward, either immediately or in the long run, than not doing it” (270). Humans misuse the earth for their own benefit, then request forgiveness and replenishment, also for their own benefit.

However, in the Christian narrative, humans receive salvation only through surrender, regardless of baptism or fertility as defined by an earthly perspective. The last line of the poem repeats *shantih* three times; the word translates to “the peace which passeth understanding” (20) —the peace that comes from accepting Jesus Christ as Savior. The narrator is thus presented as a fisher of men. While others seek to save themselves with water, the Fisher King seeks to save others through faith in God. Rather than begging, he waits patiently. A life of monotony no longer matters, and to attain “the peace which passeth understanding,” humans must exchange earthly control for spiritual control. All will be judged and our existence forgotten: gentile, Jew, reader, author. However, giving up earthly control is a large task, not so easily accomplished; even the Fisher King habitually fishes in an empty basin where fish should be. His faith, however, brings true hope in the end when it finally rains and the thunder commands “*Datta*.”

*Dayadhvam. Damyata*” (20.433), which translates to “Give. Sympathize. Control.” Rain brings hope IF the reader and speaker follow the commands. We are all connected by this humanness and should attempt to understand and sympathize even though we can’t always because of isolation, which is mostly brought on by selfishness and/or reaction to social rhetoric. Giving will help ease isolation so that we may sympathize. Sympathy, in return, helps us to control ourselves and our actions and change their outcomes to fertile rather than sterile. “*Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata*” thus becomes a possible solution in reconstructing the American dream based on modern and postmodern principles.

### **Bedtime Story 5: Stairway to Heaven**

Boy: *So what did you think of Legion?*

Girl: *It was okay, but I was really confused by all the Biblical references. Like the angels killing people and Michael and Gabriel fighting against each other.*

Boy: *God sent the angels to kill off mankind because he was tired of their B.S. It's the apocalypse. The angels were just obeying God's wishes.*

Girl: *Oh, so God sometimes sends messages for his followers to kill people?*

Boy: *Yeah, I guess you could say that.*

Girl: *That could explain all the wars going on in the world.*

Boy: *The religious wars.*

Girl: *Aren't all wars religious?*

Boy: *Only the Muslims kill people because they think their God tells them to. Everyone else just fights for land.*

Girl: *Maybe religion and land can be tied together. The Puritans came to America thinking this was the Promised Land that God gave to them because they were his chosen people.*

Boy: *They came for religious freedom, not to kill anyone.*

Girl: *They killed the Indians in order to obtain the land. Thus, they thought God gave them the go ahead for mass murder. Kind of like Hitler.*

Boy: *Are you saying they thought they were superior just because they were white and more civilized than the Indians?*

Girl: *Apparently. I wonder why God made people different colors anyway. It's so...isolating.*

*Boy: Probably for the same reason He made them speak different languages. It all goes back to the Tower of Babel. All the people of the world spoke the same language, so they all got together and decided to build a tower to heaven so they could live like gods.*

*Girl: I guess God didn't like that idea.*

*Boy: He thought they were getting a little too big for their britches. Climbing a tower is not the way He intended for people to get to heaven.*

*Girl: I guess now they try to construct other ways to get to heaven with all their money and knowledge.*

*Boy: I don't think they've made a way. Yet.*

#### CHAPTER 4: ANYONE LIVED IN A PRETTY HOW TOWN

*“He who was living is now dead / We who are living are now dying / With a little  
patience.”*

–T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*

Norman Friedman identifies Cummings’ style best in *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry* when he says, “[Cummings] makes fun of what he praises, and mocks what he reveres; he is seriously funny, comically serious, and classically romantic” (62). His style itself epitomizes binarism. His poems wrap themselves around morals drawn primarily from four interrelated categories of theme: birth, growth, dying, and love. These may sound traditional, but Cummings adds a modernist spin. According to Robert Wegner, “his poems are new views of known things” (12). Critics tend to focus their attention on Cummings’ unique word arrangements and stylistic devices. His peculiar line arrangements and signature capitalization and punctuation deviances, like Eliot’s multilingual allusions, emphasize his subject and theme. Language and theme work together to make the reader think—something the characters in the poem “Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town” (hereafter referenced as ALIAPHT) forget to do. Cummings sets this poem up as a warning so that humans do not fall any farther into the mechanical trap they have set for themselves.

In “nonlecture 2,” Cummings discusses his traditional New England Puritan upbringing. Rather than accepting the wholesome way of life set out for him in Cambridge, he became intrigued by the more deviant lifestyles in neighboring Somerville. Upon observing and comparing the two, he came to this conclusion:

Little by little and bruise by teacup, my doubly disillusioned spirit made an awe-inspiring discovery; which (on more than several occasions) has prevented me from wholly misunderstanding so-called humanity: the discovery, namely, that all groups, gangs, and collectivities—no matter how apparently disparate—are fundamentally alike; and that what makes any world go round is not the trivial difference between a Somerville and a Cambridge, but the immeasurable difference between either of them and individuality. (32)

Drawn from the irony of these personal experiences, “[Cummings] is an amused and angry spectator of the world in general—which is peopled by celebrities, famous fatheads, salesmen, and big shots, and ruled by the hairless old—and sympathetically identifies himself with minorities, the outcast, the underprivileged” (Friedman 11-12). Cummings begins following a path of his own, one that will mirror the path of the title character in *ALIAPHT*.

After college, Cummings was shipped to France with the ambulance corps, where he met fellow writer W. S. Brown. They became good friends because both were nonconformist, antiwar, and anti-authority. This mindset landed them in an internment camp when Brown wrote unflattering letters about the French and his superior officers. Cummings, rather than betraying his friend, stood up for his beliefs and accepted the punishment for being different (Sawyer-Laucanno 36). In his first book, *The Enormous Room*, imprisonment becomes a metaphor for “unlife.” Writing about his departure from the camp, Cummings says that he left “non-existence” and moved back into “reality” (*Room* 314, qtd. in Everson). His subsequent poetry becomes a plea for pro-humanity

individualism. In *Eimi* he writes, “The tragedy of life always hasn’t been and isn’t that some people are poor and others rich, some hungry and others not hungry, some weak and others strong. The tragedy is and always will be that most people are unable to express themselves” (qtd. in Everson 8). Self-expression and communication became key for Cummings. He realized, perhaps through structuralist thinking, that language itself is a barrier between the speaker and the audience—and not just language, but perception of reality itself through the medium of language. Friedman offers an excellent view:

The truth of the matter is that, for Cummings as well as for his speaker, what most of us call the “real” world simply does not exist, not necessarily and just because it is evil but rather because it is external and abstract. No one can feel History, or see a Government; they are made up, they are fake. The artist’s country is himself, and treason or loyalty have meaning only in relationship to that citizenship; people who live in the unworld, since they exist in terms of that world, change when that world changes, succeed when that world succeeds, and collapse when that world collapses...they are dead because they are not true to themselves. (34)

Structuralism is based on the idea that meaning is abstract and must be viewed in the context of a larger picture. Ferdinand de Saussure says that meaning is arbitrary, relational, and constitutive; arbitrary in the fact that language is a mere system of signs used to represent both objects and abstract ideas, relational in the fact that meaning is validated only through context. One must have an opposing force to test meaning against—in other words, a binary system (Barry 41-45). As a structural poet, Cummings mastered the art of binarism. In doing so, he sets himself up to view the world as the

abstraction it is. He is able to distance himself from the world he is living in and writing about, thus able to distance himself from the American dream narrative he deconstructs.

“Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town” begins by introducing its main character, called “anyone.” This pronoun choice implies that the character is too insignificant even to have a name and that it could be one of many people, perhaps you or I. The title puts the reader in fairy-tale mode, as does the whimsical tone. Rearranging the words helps the reader to understand this line better: “[A]nyone lived in how pretty a town.” *How* has double meaning as both an adjective describing the mechanical workings of the town and as an adverb exaggerating its perfection. The reader anticipates a happy tale about a perfect city, probably with a nice moral and a happily-ever-after resolution. The rhyming couplet completed at the end of line 2 adds to the lyrical nursery-rhyme effect, but we quickly learn, through the disturbed rhyme pattern that follows, that this Pleasantville view of “how town” is as distorted as the word arrangement.

Binaries appear throughout the whole poem, beginning with the character names “anyone” and “noone.” In line 2, we see “up” and “down” together, followed by a succession of seasons in line 3 and “sang” and “danced” and “didn’t and did” in line 4. Such binaries continue throughout the poem: “women and men” (l.5), “sowed” and “reaped” (l.7), “joy” and “grief” (l. 14), “any” and “all” (l. 16), “forget” and “remember” and “dong” and “ding” (l. 33). These binaries reinforce the structural aspect of the implied author’s view of the world and the organization of how town.

“Spring summer autumn winter” of line 3 signifies the passing of time, a key element in this poem. Time is the one constant, its relentlessness reiterated throughout the poem as the seasons are repeated in a different order. By line 11, autumn begins the

sequence as the children grow into adults. Line 34 circles it back around to summer as anyone and noone's offspring continue the life cycle. The bells of line 2 also represent the passing of time, as if a chime or alarm of notification lets the residents of "how town" know a moment (however significant or insignificant) has passed. In the final line of the first verse, anyone "sang his didn't" and "danced his did." This implies, as Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* might say, that the world is a stage and we are but players upon it. Society writes our roles for us and we act them out. Humans are simply actors wearing masks to represent various social roles. Anyone is thus viewed as an entertainer as he goes about his daily chores.

The "women and men" (l. 1), referred to by the pronoun "they" (l. 7) in this poem, "cared for anyone not at all" (l. 6). The people of how town are self-absorbed and care only for themselves and what is going on in their own little worlds. However, these men and women are not as important in the larger view as they seem to think they are. By calling them "little and small" (l. 5), the speaker points out their insignificance. In line 7, continuing with the theme of carrying on mundane everyday chores, the people sow and reap. The old cliché goes that you reap what you sow. They "sowed their isn't" and "reaped their same," thus reiterating the negativity and uselessness of the pretty town. Though beautiful to look at and functional on the surface, how town is quite sterile. Whereas Eliot's waste land is physically barren and destroyed, how town's destruction is more discreet and veiled from the viewer. How town is emotionally and intellectually barren. Line 9 introduces another spectrum used in refrain to show the passing of time, here celestial bodies and weather phenomena, grouped as four like the seasons: "sun

moon stars rain.” The speaker rearranges their order throughout the poem, yet the four remain constants throughout time, no matter what is happening in methodical how town.

Verse 3 focuses on the children of how town and their reaction to anyone and his lover, noone. The children are the only ones in the town even to notice the couple’s genuine love and “down they forgot as up they grew” (l. 10). The reverse wordplay lends to the distortion and sadness of the fact that aging increases egocentrism. Baldwin says,

Society, it would seem, is a flimsy structure, beneath contempt, designed by and for all the other people, and experience is nothing more than sensation—so many sensations, added up like arithmetic, give one the rich, full life. They thus lose what it was they so bravely set out to find, their own personalities, which, having been deprived of all nourishment, soon cease, in effect, to exist; and they arrive, finally, at a dangerous disrespect for the personalities of others. (98)

This is exactly what the members of how town have done. Greed has hardened their hearts and made them social machines.

Verse 4 shifts the focus to the character of noone. “When by now” and “tree by leaf” (l.13) signify a how—through parts of a whole. Structurally speaking, the whole is life and the parts are individual experiences in time. During these experiences, noone is able to love anyone. She “laughed his joy” and “cried his grief” (l. 14). She becomes an outsider in how town because she is one of the very few adults able to feel emotions for someone other than herself. Taking into consideration what we know about seasons and common signs that signify them, we can break down the binaries that follow. In line 15, “bird” represents the newness of spring (also birth, or the beginning of life), “snow”

represents winter (coldness in the final stage of life), “stir” also represents life, while “still” represents death. Thus, the passing of time is how her love for him grows (distinguishing her from the others who harden with time). Her care is genuine because his “any” is “all” to her. What matters most to noone is whatever anyone might be feeling. Taken at actual denotative value and in application to actual people, this statement is quite ironic, with a hint of black humor. The poem is literally trying to express that *no one* cares for *anyone* in how town, the representational America. Though the figurative characters have a fairy-tale romance to match the melodious rhythm of the poem, the allegorical value is very bleak but telling.

In verse 5, the “someones” and “everyones” of how town do their “dance” of life. They marry, laugh, cry, sleep, and dream—all the things the American dream (with its mechanics) instructs them to do. The parenthetical insertion of “sleep wake hope and then” mirrors the cycles of the seasons and celestial bodies, because these are also constants in life—particularly effective in showing the personal, mundane factors of everyday life. Line 20 reflects the insignificance in the actions of humans who “said their nevers” and “slept their dream.” Instead of fulfilling their dreams, the “someones” and “everyones” let them lay dormant until death, the final sleep. By saying their nevers, they spend their lives doing the things they said they wouldn’t and not doing the things they should have. Dreams should be lived, not slept through or fulfilled in a mechanical state that resembles dozing. This verse is the halfway point in the poem, and starting here the rhyme goes from musical to uncomfortable. Not only do the lines no longer rhyme, but the juxtaposition of sounds and new mid-sentence line stops make the poem difficult to read aloud.

The sixth stanza further isolates the various characters and promotes the loneliness and gloominess of the individual versus the whole. The three lines following the celestial body/weather repeat, “(and only the snow can begin to explain / how children are apt to forget to remember / with up so floating many bells down)” (l. 22-24), are in parentheses. All seven times parentheses are used in this poem, they appear as reminders of things easily forgotten or overlooked by both the audience and citizens of how town. They serve as reminders that the unimportant is important and vice versa. “Snow,” in line 22, relates back to the weather and season cycle. It relates to winter, the final stage of life, ending in death. Thus, “only the snow can begin to explain” means the following lines cannot be understood until death, and only partly then. Only death explains “how children are apt to forget to remember” (l. 23). The reader is referred back to stanza 3 where transformation with age is first mentioned (also in parentheses). “Forget” and “remember” and the discussion of “children” and “snow” (representing youth and death) bring back the binary system, as does the floating of the bells “up” and “down” in the next line. These bells, repeated verbatim from line 2, also serve as a reminder of the steady, unchanged passing of time from birth to death.

Stanza seven stands out in an important way—it uses the first person pronoun “I.” Line 25 reads, “one day anyone died i guess.” The first-person speaker finally makes the poem personal by mentioning a specific self. He/she does so, however, in an aloof manner. By making the “i” lowercase, the speaker points toward his/her own insignificance. He/she continues by pointing out the insignificance of anyone’s death. Anyone did not die on a specific date, but vaguely on “one day.” Not only is the particular date not noteworthy, but the whole act becomes unimportant when “i guess” is

tagged on the end. The next line is in parentheses, “(and noone stooped to kiss his face)” (l. 26). She was the only citizen in how town who noticed, and her being placed in parentheses perhaps suggests that the speaker is afraid that the reader might have forgotten this fact as well. Again, stop and consider the irony and symbolism in the names of the characters. Noone appears to be a ghost character visible only to select children. Lines 27 and 28 read, “busy folk buried them side by side / little by little and was by was.” X by Y binaries rule the poem up until this point, where X by X balances bring peace to the monotony and distortion in how town as noone joins anyone in death. Only in death do anyone and noone find equality (again, consider the black humor and irony of the terms and their opposite meanings). “Side by side” means they were together. “Little by little” refers back to their insignificance; “was by was” refers to the past tense of their being. In life they were forgotten. In death, they remain forgotten and insignificant.

Stanza eight continues to talk about anyone and noone’s deaths: “all by all and deep by deep / and more by more they dream their sleep / noone and anyone earth by april / wish by spirit and if by yes” (l. 29-32). Lines 29 and 30 draw attention to the tranquility of their death with an exact rhyme and the X by X pattern. “All,” “deep,” and “more” give the impression that the dead are happy with this situation. They have all they need for continued tranquility. It is important to note that anyone and noone “dream their sleep,” as opposed to the living folks of how town, who “slept their dream.” *Slept* is past tense while *dream* is present. Thus, in death there is continuation as opposed to the “was” (l. 28) of living. Life is death and death is life—another binary that echoes *The Waste Land*. Lines 31 and 32 revert back to the X by Y pattern of distortion: “Earth by april” (l.

31), thinking about the seasons and their signifiers, refers to rebirth. Earth represents natural growth and April is in spring, the season of birth and growth. Thus, out of death, the life cycle begins again. A “wish” (l. 32) is a want or desire, and “spirit” (l. 32) is the ghost of the inner self. “If” (l. 32) is a question of possibility while “yes” (l. 32) is a positive answer to that question. The last two lines can be interpreted thusly: The couple dies, but their nature can and will live on through the life cycle, even if their nature appears to others as insignificant.

The ninth and final stanza goes back to the citizens of how town, the “women and men (both dong and ding)” (l. 33). Dong and ding, if read in pattern with other references to the women and men in the poem and the use of parentheses, could mean one of two things—or both. They could refer to sexual organs, or be the chiming of the earlier floating bells. Either way, the binary suggests gender differences. Line 34 repeats the seasons: “summer autumn winter spring.” The poem portrays a complete life/season cycle through the growth of the children watching anyone and noone fall in love and die; then the cycle restarts after their deaths. Here, how town is back to the prime of life. How do they spend this season? Line 35 says they “reaped their sowing and went their came.” From line 7, the reader knows they sowed and reaped nothing but isolation and insignificance. “Went their came” means they ran around doing the same mundane day-to-day activities they did a life cycle earlier. Nothing changed, except the generations. The final line repeats the celestial/weather patterns, but, like the seasons, in a different order: “sun moon stars rain.” Time passes but world views remain constant.

Cummings’ play on semantics and his system of setting up words in unusual binary systems with positive and negative values require the reader to interpret

connotations on a deeper level—one created entirely by the poet, perhaps out of isolation and the expression of his inability to be understood, perhaps out of a need to wake Americans from their dream. Cummings may do it in a different way than other artists, but he reuses the major themes of love, growth, and dying in his poems. “Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town” envelopes them all through the use of their antitheses. He also mentions the binaries of youth and age, innocence and experience, masculine and feminine, active and passive, flesh and spirit, and feeling and not feeling—the major modernist themes. These additional binaries relate to the overall contrast between harmony and disharmony. For Cummings, the only true harmony is found in love. Each set of binary themes has positive and negative connotations that overlap. Friedman notices the trend: “[L]ove transcends death and time; the individual transcends the group; the natural transcends the artificial; and the dream is the true reality” (16). Wegner reiterates this idea:

Only those who are in love are alive and in harmony with the universe; that lack of love accounts for every misinterpretation of life. “Undead” and “notalive” are those who deny love, for they submit to the tyranny of convention and conformity which are sterilizers of the immediate response, which impose rules and ideas of propriety having nothing to do with love as it is felt, and which succeed only in distorting life. (48)

While anyone and noone (through their love) are able truly to live, the other citizens of how town are consumed by conformity and convention, “sowing their isn’t” because progress resides not in industrialization but within the human spirit—a key idea that the American dream springs from but happens to forget when capitalism comes along.

Capitalism includes any form of constant repetition in which routine replaces creative power. For Toynbee, “all established custom and tradition ... represented spiritual sterility” (qtd. in Herman 278). Herman further discusses progress in terms of the core assumptions of historical and cultural pessimism: “[T]hat mass democracy corrupts true political freedom; that technology and positivist science systematically degrade the human spirit; that industrial capitalism tears to tatters the social-cultural fabric of community; and that these trends bring an erosion of vitality and a decadence in arts and manners that spell the imminent end of the West” (296-97). These assumptions lead to a negative view of the American dream and a pessimistic outlook for the future. The lives of *How Town* are an example of this view. The world passes the citizens by in a dreadfully emotionless routine that renews itself with each generation. The two heroes juxtapose the cookie-cutter women and men of *How Town*. By showing emotion they truly “live.” Love becomes a celebration while the process of mundane living is empty ritual, a sort of death by living the dream rather than living through love.

### **Bedtime Story 6: Ants Marching**

*Girl: I was sitting in the library today, doing some reading for my poetry explication (well, I should have been, but really I was just looking out the window) and I noticed all the students walking back and forth across campus like little ants and it made me sad.*

*Boy: Why did that make you sad? People walk back and forth like ants everyday, just going about their business.*

*Girl: Exactly. Everything seems like such a cycle. It's kind of depressing.*

*Boy: You mean waking, showering, sleeping, saying our prayers, paying taxes, calling Grandma, stopping at color-coded traffic signals so other little ants can go about their business?*

*Girl: Precisely. Like little rats in someone's maze.*

*Boy: We kind of are rats in a maze. God's maze.*

*Girl: If it's God's maze, then why do I feel like such a victim?*

*Boy: Because you're writing a poetry explication. That's torture.*

*Girl: That's a grade.*

*Boy: Says the girl who is depressed by the system that makes her go through such motions. You're doing it by choice.*

*Girl: Am I?*

Cummings' poem revolves around cycles of passing time, cycles that involve natural and physical growth but reverse emotional and spiritual growth with age. How town represents a place where the act of doing things becomes more important than the reason for doing them (i.e., what America has become by giving emotional control over to the common American dream). Feeling evaporates and empty rituals remain without the citizens even noticing this shift. In line 7 "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same." Lane pulls a quotation from Galatians 6:7 to explain the connection:

"whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," these townspeople waste their lives and recycle their lovelessness; in time, 'they sowed their isn't they reaped their same / sun moon stars rain,' a similar emptiness descends upon their children" (100). Thus we see an endless cycle of growth without flourish—a decline. All that remains is an interest in reaping and sowing, and sadly the citizens are not even sure what or why they are reaping or sowing because they do not stop to question the established system:

Capitalism's real dangers were spiritual, or as we would say today, psychological. The division of labor in capitalist enterprise turned the product of the worker's labor into a lifeless commodity. What he makes is taken away and sold with no benefit to him.... The worker under capitalism surrenders his autonomy and humanity to the industrial process. Capitalism "reduces him to a machine," and eventually he is replaced by one. Marx concluded that the physical division of labor in capitalism results in the division of men's souls.... [I]t impoverishes the worker both materially and spiritually, producing "idiocy and cretinism." (Baldwin 301)

In the beginning of the poem, children provide a form of hope. Clark says “children are closer to innocence and perceive spiritual truths more directly than adults” (4). Unfortunately, they forget as they grow and thus by adulthood fall into the emotionless majority that births the next generation of hopeful failures and so on.

When discussing Cummings’ treatment of death, it is mandatory to note the distinction between the noun and gerund forms of life/living and death/dying, which also appear in *The Waste Land*. The noun conveys a classification denoting science or artifice. Classification, science, and artificiality are negatives for Cummings. Everson states that, “he was scornful of philosophy, and in later years he continued to dislike purely intellectual pursuits. In his writings it becomes evident that modern science and technology belong to his kingdom of death” (252). He prefers the artistic and transcendent, the unobjects that cannot be bolted down. After all, art and the individual perception of it ARE ultimate reality (even if the participants refuse to perceive it for themselves). Wegner discusses the difference the verb makes: “*Dying*... suggests a movement, an invisible transformation or change of condition that man to no great extent has been able to alter or impede or ritualize or squeeze into a pattern of conformity” (56). Dying is thus natural, an extension of living because, rather than completing a cycle, it restarts it. Dying, as in *The Waste Land*, is the positive alternative to this life.

Life and living, like death and dying, have different meanings. The modernist choice of the individual dream over the socially accepted American dream comes into play here. While the townspeople “slept their dream,” the lovers “dream their sleep.” *Slept* is past tense, showing that it comes to an end when people wake up to live, while the lovers continue to live through dreams after they die. Dying is growth for the lovers

because while alive they are living their dream. For the others, life is a perennial death because they are *not* living their dream.

The group in this poem stands united against the individual, causing isolation.

According to Clark,

The individual as individual is necessarily set against society and against other people as members of society. It is in the individual's unique responses that the value of life inheres....These unique responses are always distrusted and feared by the group. The group needs communication and regularity of behavior in order to function as a group and so necessarily rejects what is most individual about the individual. But what is comprehended by all is no longer alive, no longer a living idea or feeling. (38)

Society as a whole lacks both the communication skills needed and the desire to accept individual thought; thus, the wayward-thinking individual is cast out in the best interest of the functioning group. Madness is the enemy of reason, causing "others" to be segregated and put in asylums because their thoughts are out of the norm. People sometimes go to psychologists because life does not fulfill their expectations. Then they are seen as unstable, as "others," because they do not fit the mold. For the sake of organization and sameness, individualism is prohibited.

For Michel Foucault, all of modern society is a prison with modern man its inmate: "[L]ike rats in a laboratory cage, we find ourselves the subjects of 'supervision of the smallest fragment of life and the body...in the context of the school, the barracks, the hospital or the workshop'" (Herman 355). This idea of individual versus society

relates to Foucault's work in "The Order of Discourse." He discusses the production of discourse and how it is "controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed" in society (210). Those who hold the power create the discourse and choose who may or may not participate in it through procedures of exclusion, particularly prohibition. Thus by viewing the character of anyone as a "madman" because he thinks outside the box, how town considers his words "null and void, having neither truth nor importance, worthless...inadmissible...incapable" (210). However, according to Foucault, the madman's words are often more rational than those of the sane, because only the madman's speech has "the power of uttering a hidden truth, of telling the future, of seeing in naivety what others' wisdom cannot perceive" (211). In fact, Eliot wrote part of *The Waste Land* from a mental institution. By setting up anyone as the individual antithesis to how town, Cummings brings the madman's truths to the forefront without explicitly stating his rationality; rather, he paints an omniscient portrait to allow an outside view of the functions of how town, a reader's panopticon of sorts.

Wegner uses a quote from Emerson to further explain the value of the individual, how he/she is perceived in society, and why:

Categorical definitions of man were deplored by Emerson well over one hundred years ago. In his essay "The American Scholar" he tells us that ideally "there is One Man...Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all." Emerson writes that "the state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man....The priest becomes a form; the attorney a

statute book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of a ship.” This tendency toward allegorical definitions has gone much further in our present society. (38)

Man thus becomes the machine. He is isolated from his own thoughts and actions and is required to fulfill a destiny set by others, i.e., the whole machine. He is no longer a rational being, but a cog. Life becomes mechanical. Thoughts become impertinent, and actions take center stage to make sure the mechanical procedures of “living” are carried out, the same type of human conditioning described by Foucault.

In this world, humans struggle to remain “anyones” like needles in a haystack of “everyones.” Anyone is a pilgrim in a cold, isolated world. The artist is also a pilgrim; one whose journey is telling the story of the pilgrim. *ALIAPHT* has a hopeful ending similar to the Fisher King’s in *The Waste Land*. Both pilgrims face away from the crowd to try to return the world to its natural order before greed takes over. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the textual focus in the following chapter, Billy Pilgrim is also isolated from the world and his dream becomes reality while the men around him become machines:

The charge has often been made against American writers that they do not describe society, and have no interest in it. They only describe individuals in opposition to it, or isolated from it.... American writers do not have a fixed society to describe. The only society they know is one in which nothing is fixed and in which the individual must fight for his identity. (Baldwin 175)

This is why modernism must deal with these frustrations and recognize that the dream alienates, that it must be revised before it makes us all bitter:

The book is more likely to be a symptom of our tension than an examination of it. The time has come, God knows, for us to examine ourselves, but we can do this only if we are willing to free ourselves of the myth of America and try to find out what is really happening here. Every society is really governed by hidden laws, by unspoken but profound assumptions on the part of the people, ours is no exception. It is up to the American writer to find out what these are to be liberated from them, it will be no easy matter...though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect on the world. (Baldwin 175-76)

In reality, the dream itself becomes a bi-directional problem. Isolation is a problem resulting from the pursuit of the dream, and isolation makes the dream even more fictitious as the neighbor becomes the opponent. The two must work together to discover hidden motives in the broken dream sequence and solve the problem through critical thinking and reflection on true desires and personal happiness signifiers.

### **Bedtime Story 7: Rise of the Machines**

*Boy: What did you think of Surrogates?*

*Girl: The idea of robots replacing humans? I don't like it.*

*Boy: I think it's cool. I would love to have a surrogate. I'd never have to feel pain.*

*Girl: But it would take away all emotion.*

*Boy: No, you could still live...you'd just experience everything through a fake body.*

*Girl: While your real body lies dormant.*

*Boy: Exactly! You won't have to fear death.*

*Girl: You won't have to fear anything.*

*Boy: That's the beauty of it.*

*Girl: Does this absence of fear protect bodies from harm or keep humans from feeling true emotions?*

*Boy: In some situations surrogates would be good.*

*Girl: Like police officers. Maybe.*

*Boy: Or the army.*

*Girl: That's pointless. We'll be paying to create more machines to kill machines and it will continue until someone runs out of money. The goal would be to kill the most machines.*

*Boy: Isn't that the same as now? Except the machines are human bodies being killed by other human bodies operating machines created by human bodies.*

*Girl: Touche. But look at Bruce Willis's character. His surrogate is destroyed. Bruce is paranoid and scared to walk around as himself. How sad to fear being yourself and*

*leaving your house without a surrogate. You become dependent on that machine to live your life for you. What kind of life is that?*

*Boy: It's not like that will ever happen. It's just a movie.*

*Girl: Are you sure about that? Every day people are doing everything they can to improve their bodies, whether it's a fad diet, designer clothes, or plastic surgery. Doctors have created artificial limbs...why can't they create artificial cores to attach them to?*

*It'll be like The Terminator.*

*Boy: No, it'll be like termination. The world will end before God allows men to create men.*

*Girl: Wake up. Society creates man every day.*

*Boy: Sigh. We're going to Hell in a handbasket.*

## CHAPTER 5: SLAUGHTER-HOUSE FIVE

*“I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. / I feel my fate in what I cannot fear. / I learn  
by going where I have to go.”*

—Theodore Roethke in “The Waking”

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war novel about an isolated pilgrim living in his own mind, somewhere between individual and social reality, just trying to convey his truth to society. Vonnegut says, “There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters” (164). The American dream, defended by war, displaces man’s personal dream and uses him as a step stool to progress. Vonnegut displaces his characters, their thoughts, and their actions to show America’s use of its citizens as machines. His black humor and fragmentation of time also display the underlying cruelty of a *Catch-22*-esque dream.

In keeping with the modernist belief that humans cannot bear too much reality, Billy Pilgrim tries to escape from himself and his reality through displacement. Americans try to displace the war while Billy Pilgrim tries to displace memory. Unfortunately, time is irrelevant for Billy (in Bergson fashion) as every moment, past and present, occurs simultaneously, causing him to experience a variety of life events non-linearly and without any form of control. In addition to being displaced in time, Billy is also a physical replacement; he replaces a dead chaplain’s assistant in the war. Every character seems to be a replacement for something else. Weary (note the denotation of his name—typical of Vonnegut’s irony, he is actually quite feisty) is also a replacement in

the war; then he is expelled from the three musketeers. Weary displaces his fear of not being accepted by bullying others. He beats people up to disguise insecurity, especially Billy, his only true friend. However, Weary is blind to this psychology because his experience has taught him to trust no one. When the Germans see Weary beating up Pilgrim, “The soldiers’ blue eyes were filled with a bleary civilian curiosity as to why one American would try to murder another one so far from home, and why the victim should laugh” (51). It is an odd scene, and an ironically American one, as are the puns on their names (similar to Cummings’ anyone and noone). Americans, in this scene, appear to be fighting themselves more than the enemy. A similar idea of conflict in war, particularly the internal versus the external, will appear again in Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried.”

Displacement does not stop with human casualties. The German dog on the “mop up” crew is just as displaced as the awkward soldiers who do not belong: “The dog, who sounded so ferocious in the winter distances, was a female German Shepherd. She was shivering. Her tail was between her legs. She had been borrowed that morning from a farmer. She had never been to war before. She had no idea what game was being played. Her name was Princess” (52). The dog represents the soldiers, who also stood with their tails between their legs, mostly because, like Princess, they had no other options. All were commanded to be part of the war by their “owners.” Ironically, and a *Catch-22* cliché, these owners imprison them for the sole purpose of fighting for freedom.

Inanimate objects, like buildings, carry on the illusion of displacement. Billy owns half of three Tastee-Freeze stands, where the product serves as a replacement for ice cream. The slaughterhouse is another example: “It had been built as a shelter for pigs

about to be butchered. Now it was going to serve as a home away from home for one hundred American prisoners of war” (152). A place of death provides shelter for the American soldiers. Consider this representation along with death as a positive alternative to life in both *The Waste Land* and ALIAPHT. Billy’s mother, incorporating the role of religion into the dream, is a substitute organist for various churches (but not a permanent fixture, just a wandering soul). She is fascinated by and collects crucifixes: “Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense out of things she found in a gift shop” (39). The meaning of life is thus searched out in objects—useless trinkets (also consider Edgar Derby’s teapot, which ultimately gets him killed)—perhaps the crucifixes represent her Holy Grail. She hangs one over Billy’s bed, as if playing the role of Virgin Mary. She knows her son is being sacrificed for the good of the country. Weary, also finding happiness and protection in objects, carries a lewd picture of a girl with a Shetland pony in his pocket next to a bullet-proof Bible, a binary of good and evil, representing America’s strengths and fallacies and the fact that in postmodern America, the lines of good and evil are so blurred that these two objects can be treated with equal admiration. In a Times Square bookstore, Billy sees similar examples of America’s fallacies. New York City is a literal wasteland:

In the window were hundreds of books about fucking and buggery and murder, and a street guide to New York City, and a model of the Statue of Liberty with a thermometer on it. Also in the window, speckled with soot and fly shit, were four paperback novels by Billy’s friend, Kilgore Trout.

The news of the day, meanwhile, was being written in a ribbon of lights on

a building to Billy's back. The window reflected the news. It was about power and sports and anger and death. (200)

The store employees tell him the stuff he really wants is in the back, in the adults-only section, and they treat him like a madman when he chooses to purchase a Trout book from the window dressing instead of viewing the same picture of the Shetland pony that Weary carries with him. Innocence is unacceptable, and Billy, who observes everything as a child might, does not fit into the mold created by the American dream. He goes through the motions, but, like the characters of how town, he clearly does not understand them. Billy thinks he has discovered hidden truths, but these truths isolate him from the rest of the world and no one seems to listen to his madness. He thus continues the motion of life even though he knows exactly how events will play out.

According to Arthur Herman, "The modern action hero is... 'a wanderer between two worlds,' that of modern decadence and the higher reality that lies beyond it. He tends to be rude, crude, and inarticulate, as proof of his uncontaminated vitality, while villains invariably speak with sophisticated, civilized accents" (443). Compared to the traditional knight in shining armor, the new hero is realistic. He is confused and meek rather than displaying arrogant courage; we call this new guy the anti-hero. A traditional hero does three things. First, he is on the "right" side; he is a good guy. Second, he exceeds the actions and/or strengths of others on his side (he is the best of the best). Third, he is humbly selfless and considers others above himself. Postmodernism revises the qualities of the traditional hero to those of the anti-hero (not to be confused with the villain). Like his predecessor, the anti-hero is on the right side, but he does not possess extraordinary

qualities or exceed any expectations. He does not come forward as a leader of his side. In fact, he is a regular guy, an “anyone.”

Kurt Vonnegut, narrator as well as author, learns as he goes, taking in the dream and trying to adapt to it. Writing, for him, becomes a way of understanding his world as well as a way to explain his understanding to others. He studies anthropology at the University of Chicago after the war:

At that time, they were teaching that there was absolutely no difference between anybody. They may be teaching that still. Another thing they taught was that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting. Shortly before my father died, he said to me, “You know—you never wrote a story with a villain in it.” I told him that was one of the things I learned in college after the war. (8)

If there are no villains, what is the point of war? Why must innocent people die if there is no right or wrong to be fought over? Perhaps this sort of teaching made Americans feel better about themselves and the human race, provided a veil to protect them from themselves and what they had done in war. The secrets about Dresden are likewise hidden for shame. Vonnegut calls to get information on what happened in Dresden for his book, but public relations tells him that the information is top secret. His reaction: “Top Secret? My God—from *whom?*” (11). Although the U.S. professed to enter WWII for moral purposes, they killed 130,000 in Dresden to save others (less than 130,000). Dresden was bad because its citizens were German; it did not matter that they were elders, women, and children; even though, however, they say villains do not exist. Americans can somehow distance themselves from war and are unable to see the harm it

causes. In reality, war does not make much moral sense, but patriotism is part of the dream. When Toby Keith sings “we’ll put a boot in their ass, it’s the American way,” we are expected to put our fists in the air and cheer for retaliation. Billy’s fellow soldier (and Weary’s avenger), Paul Lazzaro, says, “Anybody ever asks you what the sweetest thing in life is...it’s revenge” (139).

After Billy’s experiences with “truth,” he forbids his son to take part in massacres or feel glee when he hears news of massacres of enemies. He also forbids him to work for companies that produce massacre machinery and to express contempt for people who think we need such machinery. In a fine black humor turn, Billy’s son becomes a Green Beret. After learning the truth about war, life and the war seem useless for the narrator: “I’m an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls. My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin, I work in a lumber mill there” (7). Vonnegut constantly repeats the Yon Yonson limerick that never ends to show the mundane and cyclical pattern of living and the unimportance of being involved in the war. Likewise, Billy and his hospital mate Eliot Rosewater “both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in the war.... So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help” (101).

Irony, for example, Billy’s son being a Green Beret and Billy’s interest in science fiction, is a major fixture in postmodernism, used primarily to illuminate possible truth for the reader. Postmodern literature uses morbid and absurd black humor for the darkly comic purpose of juxtaposing the dream with reality. The death of Edgar Derby is the climax of Vonnegut’s story. The narrator says the event serves this function because “the irony is *so* great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people

are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad" (5). Edgar Derby is shot for stealing a teapot from a dead man. Doesn't the judicial system have more important things to worry about than a soldier pocketing a dead man's trinket (a victimless crime)? Murderers receive mercy everyday and 130,000 civilians were killed in Dresden, but Derby is severely punished.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* are comparable anti-war novels. Heller's original *Catch-22* situation is the epitome of postmodern black humor; it was invented to prevent anyone from avoiding combat missions in World War II and goes as follows:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. "Orr" was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. (Heller 55)

Yossarian, the main character, learns that the *Catch-22* rule does not actually exist; however, because the powers that be claim it exists, and the world believes whatever the powers that be say, the rule must, in fact, be legitimate. Also, since the rule does not truly exist, there is no way to abolish it. Heller uses black humor to show bureaucracy's power

to crush the individual with absurdity. Vonnegut continues Heller's trend in his take on the powerlessness to stop war:

“You know what I say to people when I hear that they're writing anti-war books?” “No, what *do* you say, Harrison Starr?”

I say, “Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?”

What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too. And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death. (3-4)

He has succumbed to the powers that be and accepts the fact that war is inevitable and Americans have no say in the matter. Beyond that, he has given up on optimism in life in general, accepting war and death as equals in a pessimistic Catch-22 situation.

### **Bedtime Story 8: The Last Temptation**

*Boy: I like the concept of this movie. It makes you think about temptation and how important money is.*

*Girl: And how insignificant humans are. The whole movie revolves around The Box. And it talks about our entire lives being in boxes. Our houses are boxes. Our cars. Our televisions, where we get our information. When we die, we are buried in boxes. Our bodies might as well be boxes, too.*

*Boy: The whole world is a box. I guess we are kind of trapped in the box.*

*Girl: But in the movie, humans have a choice. You can hit the button or not hit the button. If you hit it, you get a million dollars and somebody you don't know dies. If you don't give in to the temptation of money, that person lives. If enough people make the right choice, the game ends and everyone lives. Basically, you're killing for money and it becomes an endless cycle.*

*Boy: Are you going to relate this to me joining the military?*

*Girl: You said it, not me. You're the one killing people you don't know for money.*

*Boy: If I kill anyone, it will be for a better reason than money. You just don't want me to go into the military because you don't want to be alone while I'm gone. Remember Steward's altruism coefficient: "If human beings are unable or unwilling to sacrifice individual desires for the greater good of your species, you will have no chance for survival."*

*Girl: That relates to the box, not the military. I just don't believe in war and I think you are joining for the wrong reasons.*

*Boy: Well...let me ask you this...would you push the button?*

*Girl: Of course not!*

*Boy: Seriously? Be honest with yourself. Everybody says they wouldn't, but if the opportunity presented itself...*

*Girl: Would you push the button?*

*Boy: Absolutely.*

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, like most anti-war novels, presents war as a machine and man as a cog. War is depersonalized through use of chemical warfare, airplanes, and other forms of technology that allow humans to distance themselves from death. Soldiers are killed from a distance without physical contact. Dead bodies are even cremated with flame throwers. This detachment causes a process of decivilization and decline of respect for the human being. The nonchalant “So it goes” phrase that is repeated after every death reinforces this idea. Death becomes an inevitable cycle, something accepted and routine (so it goes). Humans, however, do not notice their own acceptance:

“Tralfamadorians...say that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine. It amuses them that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines” (154). When Billy is aboard the German train as a prisoner of war, the mechanization of life is made evident: “To the guards who walked up and down outside, each car became a single organism which ate and drank and excreted through its ventilators. It talked or sometimes yelled through its ventilators, too. In went water and loaves of black bread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and piss and language” (70).

Another example of black humor, one that contrasts with the scene above, is that the author’s best outline of the Dresden story was written on the back of a roll of wallpaper with his daughter’s crayons. In his outline, the war could be seen as a neat, child-like, colorful work of art. His child-like aesthetic vision of the war coincides with how Pilgrim viewed Dresden before and after the bombing. Dresden was ironically introduced to the soldiers as an open city where no one would ever be killed: “The skyline was intricate and voluptuous and enchanted and absurd. It looked like a Sunday school picture of Heaven to Billy Pilgrim. Somebody behind him in the boxcar said,

‘Oz’” (148). After the bombing, four guards remind Billy of a barbershop quartet and Dresden resembles the moon. After their climb across the moon, the soldiers stay in the stable of a blind innkeeper (another clue to Billy Pilgrim’s representing Christ).

Tralfamadore also seems like a heavenly, peaceful place to Pilgrim. The only place NOT viewed as heavenly in this novel is America.

Derby, however, “spoke movingly of the American form of government, with freedom and justice and opportunities and fair play for all. He said there wasn’t a man there who wouldn’t gladly die for those ideals” (164). Those ideals he defends exist on the same plane as the Catch-22 rule—people believe in that dream because the powers that be (from government to the education system) tell them to. Derby’s personal freedom and justice ends in front of a firing squad over a moment of sentiment when he sees the teapot that reminds him of home, that make-believe place of liberty and justice for all. The soldiers become prisoners fighting for freedom—but whose? America is so tied to a capitalist dream that freedom is no longer an option. Pilgrim’s favorite author, Kilgore Trout, writes humorous science fiction that tells the truth: “Trout, incidentally, had written a book about a money tree. It had twenty-dollar bills for leaves. Its flowers were government bonds. Its fruit was diamonds. It attracted human beings who killed each other around the roots and made very good fertilizer” (167). In this image, money means more than human lives and humans die to create it, and through death, make the money trees more fertile. What, then, is the root of all evil? Money or humanity? Trout also tells his dull but sexually attractive fan, Maggie, that all his stories are true because, “if I wrote something that hadn’t really happened, and I tried to sell it, I could go to jail. That’s *fraud*” (171). His lines underscore that humans tend to believe everything they

read. Are authors who do not tell the truth fraudulent? Is it their responsibility to convey hidden truths? Baldwin thinks we mustn't put too much faith in their truths either: "[O]ne can hardly claim for the protest novels the lofty purpose they claim for themselves or share the present optimism concerning them. They emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" (31).

In addition to money, physical appearance is also an important signifier of the dream that plays a large role in the novel. Billy's son goes from teenage troublemaker to all straightened out in the military: "His posture was wonderful and his shoes were shined and his trousers were pressed, and he was a leader of men" (189). A change of clothes makes a new man out of him. Presentation and dress are very important in the military because the military represents the country's power: "What the Englishman said about survival was this: 'If you stop taking pride in your appearance, you will very soon die'" (145). If this is true, Billy should have been dead from the get-go. He never quite fit the dress code. In fact, none of the American soldiers did. Notice the appearance they present upon arriving in Dresden: "[B]earded Billy Pilgrim in his blue toga and silver shoes, with his hands in a muff...little Paul Lazzaro with a broken arm. He was fizzing with rabies...poor old high school teacher, Edgar Derby, mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom" (150). The Dresdeners could not possibly be afraid of the Americans in such dress: "Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera" (150). Billy Pilgrim looks more like Cinderella than a soldier. However, his life is the opposite of a fairy tale. Vonnegut shows how looks can be deceiving and how character should not be determined by the

superficiality of physical appearance. By contrast, on Tralfamadore, Billy's physical appearance is considered no less attractive than actress Montana Wildhack's: "Most Tralfamadorians had no way of knowing Billy's body and face were not beautiful. They supposed that he was a splendid specimen. This had a pleasant effect on Billy, who began to enjoy his body for the first time" (113). Who's to say what is a good human specimen and what is not? Media decide, thus the huge emphasis on beauty in American culture. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but media tells the American eye what to look for. Outward beauty seems to have replaced inner beauty in modern society. A Kilgore Trout story about a robot who drops burning jellied gasoline on humans demonstrates the point: "Nobody held it against him that he dropped jellied gasoline on people. But they found his halitosis unforgiveable. But then he cleared that up, and he was welcomed to the human race" (168). Cruelty to others is acceptable; poor hygiene is not.

"Memory and desire" (Eliot 5.3) link the past, present, and future, causing the delineation of time in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as Billy time travels involuntarily. Thanks to Tralfamadore, he does not see time linearly but as one big picture: "Tralfamadorians don't see human beings as two-legged creatures.... [T]hey see them as great millipedes—'with babies' legs at one end and old people's legs at the other'" (87). Rather than living in a moment, Tralfamadorians are able to see history (and all its knowledge) laid out before their eyes. Like history, their writing is unfragmented and whole, making their ability to understand each other an uncomplicated process: "their reading material is true art, with no beginning or end, just one major impact or message left by the author. They are 'many marvelous moments seen all at one time'" (88). Billy says that "as an

earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars” (20), but on Trafamadore, time does not matter—therefore neither does death or the fear of dying:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist.... Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say...which is “so it goes.” (27)

Under the influence of such knowledge of time, Billy imagines the war in rewind, from the deaths backward to women making the killing machines to the chemicals that go in them being buried back in the ground where they can’t harm anyone to the soldiers going back to high school then to babies, all the way back to Adam and Eve, before humans destroyed their paradise. Then he feels guilty and considers himself a pillar of salt (like Lot’s wife in the Bible story) for looking back on the war (Sodom and Gomorrah). Once he learns that the future is already set and uncontrollable, he gives up hope of changing his own.

Mary O’Hare, wife of one of the veterans from Vonnegut’s war experience, thinks that war is encouraged by books and movies and is given a fairy-tale aspect that makes all young men want to be heroes: “You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs” (14). To appease Mary, the subtitle of Vonnegut’s book is *The Children’s Crusade*. Vonnegut,

who includes himself as a character in the book, does not discuss war as a fairy tale or a story that can be told, similar to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Vonnegut's explanation to his publisher makes it clear that war is not an easy subject to convey truth about:

It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is except for the bird. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "*Poo-tee-weet?*" (19)

**Bedtime Story 9: Back to the Future**

*Girl: Do you think time travel is possible?*

*Boy: No, if it was, we would have figured out how to do it already.*

*Girl: How long have humans been around?*

*Boy: I don't know, 10,000 years?*

*Girl: Have you noticed that all of our inventions have been fairly recent? I mean, fire is natural. People were satisfied with just fire. Electricity was the first big finding.*

*Boy: That was only in the last 100 years or so.*

*Girl: What makes people want to discover new things? How do they get the idea for it?*

*Boy: Competition? Or maybe they're not satisfied with what they have and they want something better.*

*Girl: Was everyone just happy with what they had before electricity and suddenly, because of competition or unhappiness, they felt like they needed more? If so, with all the technological advances today, people must really be unsatisfied with life. We may have time travel soon.*

*Boy: I don't believe in it. It's not tangible.*

*Girl: Neither is God, but you believe in that.*

*Boy: God is different.*

*Girl: What if he's not? What if he was created as a comfort object for humans so that they would have something to hope for? Since life is so dissatisfying and all.*

*Boy: You can have your truths. Let me have mine.*

*“He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls.”*

—Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Like Billy Pilgrim, *Wise Blood's* Hazel Motes is just an isolated pilgrim living in his own mind, somewhere between individual and social reality, just trying to convey his truth to society. Hazel Motes has discovered the answers to life through non-religion in the Church Without Christ. In his self-created and self-defined church, religion is not complicated by a Jesus who died, lives, or redeems. His church is about a truth that money cannot buy and only he can understand and a hope that does not rely on anything real or not real. Hazel controls his thoughts and fears through denial. One of his sermons states, “Your conscience is a trick. It don’t exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it’s no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you” (O’Connor 166). “Haze” blinds himself to be rid of this conscience, which is in the actual visions of the sinful world around him that desperately needs a Savior *and* in the thoughts in his head that tell him everything he sees is true, a double vision. As a child, he wants to grow up and be a preacher like his grandfather. After some time in war and failing to convert his friends, he gives in to the ease of peer pressure. He finds security in his new disbelief with this rationale: “I don’t have to run from anything because I don’t believe in anything” (72). The truth is too much for him to bear, so he pretends he knows the truth by avoiding its existence altogether. It becomes easier to run by pretending he is not running. Asa Hawks, a false prophet, tells Haze, “you got eyes and see not, ears and hear not, but you’ll have to see sometime” (50). Sight thus comes to symbolize Haze’s

freedom from (and oppression by) belief. Sabbath Lily says, “I like his eyes. They don’t look like they see what he’s looking at but they keep on looking” (105). This line represents Hazel well. He has no idea what he is doing besides trying to escape himself, first through religion then anti-religion, both of which torment him. A “Dear Mary” letter gives the following advice on religion: “a religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and do not let it warf [sic] you” (117). This statement is ironic in its actual application to religion and especially in its application to Hazel, who cannot settle for either extreme. The experience inevitably “warfs” him; therefore, he blinds himself to get rid of the visions (i.e., the truth).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim and Montana Wildhack find themselves in a dome in a zoo on the planet Tralfamadore, where the aliens observe their every move. The inhabitants of the new planet treat them as specimens, trying to mimic their natural habitat and manipulate time to get them to act a certain way. To simulate night, the zookeepers place a navy blue canopy over their dome. They hope this courtesy will comfort the humans and encourage them to mate so that the natives can watch. The couple is under constant surveillance, trapped in an all-seeing panopticon, and time is irrelevant (a la Foucault and Bergson, respectively). Even though the Earthlings see through the deception, human nature causes them to mate anyway. During an interview, they ask Billy if he is happy there. He replies, “About as happy as I was on Earth” (Vonnegut 114), implying that on Earth he is also manipulated and controlled. At least he finds peace on Tralfamadore; here, people think he is interesting rather than ugly, and he gets to have sex with a movie star. The war on Earth is a far worse prison; he must constantly watch his back and try to perform to the expectations of man. He has no more

of a chance at personal happiness on Earth than on another planet. He comes to accept the Tralfamadorian belief that “every creature and plant in the universe is a machine” (Vonnegut 154), including humans, and he acts as such. This belief gives him purpose in a world where “Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present, and the future” (Vonnegut 60). The Tralfamadorians state that Earth is the only planet where there is any mention of free will, a concept that must obviously be false. While Hazel Motes finds truth in blindness, Billy finds truth in the imaginary world of Tralfamadore.

The characters (and their worlds) in both texts are “shored against [their] ruins” (Eliot 20.430). Montana and Billy succumb to human urges and create porn (her film specialty) for the Tralfamadorians. Ironically, Montana wears a pendant with the serenity prayer, popular as the Alcoholics Anonymous motto. Billy also has a plaque in his office with the same quotation: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to always tell the difference” (Vonnegut 60). Billy’s desire to tell the truth can be likened to the Fisher King’s attempt to fish in an empty lake. Neither is successful, but both feel their job has been given to them. Hazel and Billy both attempt to show their fellow humans “fear in a handful of dust” (Eliot 6.30), whether it’s by proving aliens exist or sorting out the prophets from the profits.

In the first essay in *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion also writes about time, in an American way as opposed to *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s Tralfamadorian way: “[T]ime past is not believed to have any bearing upon time present or future, out in the golden land where every day the world is born anew” (28). Arthwell Hayton marries his children’s governess, Wenche Berg. This is his new beginning after his mistress allegedly

murders his wife. They have an extravagant American dream-like wedding in the “Chapel of Roses” with a “reception for seventy-five in the dining room of Rose Garden Village.... The bridegroom was in black tie, with a white carnation in his buttonhole, the bride wore a long white *peau de soie* dress and carried a bouquet of sweetheart roses with stephanotis streamers. A coronet of seed pearls held her illusion veil” (Didion 28). The reader should pick up on the irony of the situation for the new bride, who is well aware of the past situation and the fact that her husband may have played a role in his ex-wife’s murder and that he definitely cheated on her with a woman accused of killing her husband to be with him. Her veil is ironic, hiding the reality of the situation because it interferes with *her* American dream, the perfect marriage. In another essay, titled “On Self-Respect,” Didion turns the light on herself: “I would like to believe that my dread then was for the human condition, but of course it was for me, because I wanted a baby and did not have one and because I wanted to own the house that cost \$1000 a month to rent and because I had a hangover” (139). Her situation compares to Wenche’s, except Didion pulls away the veil. She admits that even though it is hard, she can look beyond the veil to see her dream for what it is and what she has without doing something desperate to achieve it. She goes on to say “self-deception remains the most difficult deception” (143), perhaps a lesson that she could teach Hazel Motes. She also has a lesson to explain Billy Pilgrim and the Tralfamadorians: “We are brought up in the ethic that others, any others, all others, are by definition more interesting than ourselves” (136).

Each set of characters runs from the truth as they discover it. The irony is that they hide it beneath a bigger lie. Eliot Rosewater says to a psychiatrist, “I think you guys

are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (Vonnegut 101). The reader's job is to recognize the irony for what it is and learn from it. As Didion states, "Without [self-respect], one eventually discovers the final turn of the screw: one runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home" (148).

**Bedtime Story 10: If I Could Make a Living Out of Loving You**

*Girl: Why are you enlisting again?*

*Boy: A lot of reasons. Mostly to grow up, to become a man. It will teach me discipline and prepare me for the real world.*

*Girl: College does that.*

*Boy: And college costs money. Which the military pays for. We will be set for life.*

*Girl: But at what cost? It will take six years from us. And you could get hurt. Life isn't just about money. We can live on love. I don't want to lose you. I'd rather have you than any amount of money in the world.*

*Boy: You're worried I'll change. I promise I won't. When I come back, I'll be the same guy you fell in love with.*

*Girl: You promise you're not joining just to get the bonus? You're not doing it just to buy the RX-8, are you?*

*Boy: The RX-8 is just a bonus. And just think...school paid for. A house.*

*Girl: Life is about more than material objects.*

*Boy: Will you marry me?*

*Girl: What?!*

*Boy: I'm serious. Marry me. This isn't how I planned to propose, but this is what I want. I want you to know that I won't change, that we will start our lives together. Before I even leave. Let's get married. This summer. I love you.*

*Girl: I love you too! I have to call my mom and tell her I'm engaged!*

## **CHAPTER 6: THE THINGS THEY CARRIED**

*“Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit.”*

—T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*

Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried” is the first short story in a collection of the same title in third person point-of-view mostly from the perspective of the character Jimmy Cross. This story focuses on the narrator’s experiences in the Vietnam War. O’Brien separates the short story into thirteen sections, alternating the focus between mundane mechanics and emotional feelings. These two distinct categories end up merging because war leads the soldiers to forget there is a separation between objects and emotions. Converting their intangible loads into tangible objects they can physically carry allows the soldiers an illusion of safety. The story emphasizes interior reality and the tensions between internal and external loads that add dual weight. Each man’s isolation and physical representation of emotional baggage industrializes man as a commodity and his feelings as mere objects. The exposition relays the soldiers’ physical loads through scientific, dry description and their emotional loads through Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s interior monologue. Personalities are externally defined by the objects they choose to carry as opposed to the internal conflicts they choose to keep hidden. These soldiers go through the motions, “humping” what they must; their assigned duty is to carry the weight of the country (in physical, material, emotional, psychological and sacrificial aspects). As observed in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, war is a machine that produces disillusionment about the goal (freedom) to be attained. Herman says that “man is

condemned to be free through isolation and thus loneliness” (339). Like Atlas, each soldier is thus condemned to carry the weight of the world on his own shoulders.

O’Brien presents a sense of timelessness as the temporal story takes place mostly in Cross’s head. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross (J.C.) plays the role of a wartime pilgrim, placing himself in the position of Jesus Christ (J.C.) to sacrifice his own personal beliefs and desires for the betterment of his country and his troops. Cross must balance his duties as lieutenant with his personal desires and dreams. He is physically in Vietnam but mentally on the Jersey Shore with Martha, the girl he left behind. He must sacrifice his daydreams of Martha and the objects he carries to represent her (including a stone she gave him from the shore). His daydreams about Martha are interrupted and replaced with images of Ted Lavender’s death.

Dehumanization, through the experiences of war, makes Lieutenant Cross the emotionless machine he was sent to be. He blames Lavender’s death on his own daydreams: “Ted Lavender was dead because [Cross] loved her so much and could not stop thinking about her” (894). His daydreams of walking along the beach with Martha, carrying nothing, bring him guilt and add to the emotional baggage he is trying so hard to dump rather than hump. If he had been focusing on his job rather than on a girl and personal leisure, Lavender would not have died. Cross feels the solution is to isolate himself from the others so that he can do what he was sent there to do. Although he wants to show compassion and camaraderie, he decides to be a *real* man: “He would show strength, distancing himself. . . . [H]is obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor” (902). Cross has seen “fear in a handful of dust” (Eliot l. 30) through the death of Lavender and decides to put his lands in order by

being the rough-neck, brave, demanding, emotionless, mechanical lieutenant America sent him there to be.

The soldiers in “The Things They Carried” all carry ghosts, the ghosts of fellow soldiers lost in battle. They carry what they can and cannot see, the pain of the past and the possible pain of the future: “[I]magination was a killer” (11). They carry everything they can, “partly for safety, partly for the illusion of safety” (11). “They [carry] their own lives. The pressures [are] enormous” (15). War itself is an illusion, an invisible apparatus to contend with, for these soldiers who do not even know what they are fighting for or why they are bearing their loads: “[T]hey had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring” (15). In fact, their reasons for being there are not patriotic at all: “They carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. They died so as not to die of embarrassment” (21). They were “too frightened to be cowards” (22). For them, “the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything” (16). If they can continue to bear the load, they will survive it and finally make it home with some dignity. However, there is also the ironic fact that “for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry” (18). As is the case in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, these soldiers appear as confused, cowardly misfits forced into their positions rather than choosing freely to represent their country and its dream. These soldiers have been “shored against their ruin” (Eliot l. 30) by the position the American

Dream has put them in. America's goal is to defend herself and her allies and show her strength in times of battle to stand up for what is right. *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *The Things They Carried* (as an entire short-story collection) challenge American stereotypes of soldiers. Traditionally, fictional men are constructed as brave heroes, but modernist theory breaks down the stereotyped social roles to reveal insecurities produced by the baggage of these expectations.

Survival becomes key and both ends of the emotional spectrum, love and fear, must be done away with in order to survive. Love is dangerous and irresponsible. Fear is cowardly and shameful. Thus, they need also to do away with every emotion in between just to get the job done. They bear heavy and rarely personal loads. They attempt to share each other's personal loads because they feel guilty for bearing their own, as if they aren't allowed to have emotions or personal needs. However, the attempts are futile because they isolate themselves behind a rough exterior rather than sharing their guilt-ridden personal loads.

Each character therefore carries personal objects to represent repressed emotions, including love and fear. Lavender carries tranquilizers to numb him of all feeling, emotional and physical. After his death, the other soldiers keep mentioning how he probably felt nothing because of all the tranquilizers he took. They were his defense mechanism, his way to avoid all forms of pain. The other soldiers are in awe, and perhaps even a little jealous, that Lavender no longer has to bear a load; again, death appears to be a welcome alternative to life. Jimmy carries the stone from Martha, the one representing his love for her situated along the boundary where the land meets the water. This object also represents the boundaries between fiction and reality—the dream of what Jimmy

wants (a night on the beach with Martha) and the reality of what he has (a tour in the mud with his troops). Kiowa carries a Bible as his physical and emotional comfort (like Weary in *Slaughterhouse-Five*). The Bible, the ultimate book of hope and survival, also blurs the lines separating fiction and reality.

Alienation results from not being able to realize the self intellectually, emotionally, or sensually and thus having nothing personal to contribute to a team. Baldwin quotes Fromm on the limits of man's freedom: "[T]he modern American citizen is free to do only one of two things: he can 'fall in step like a marching soldier or a worker on the endless belt. He can act; but the sense of independence, significance, has gone'" (315). The personal dream has deteriorated to the point that acceptance of the universal dream is the only viable option.

Lack of communication and fragmentation of language between the soldiers result from repressed emotion and focusing on the impersonal. "The Things They Carried" offers an interesting play on the distinction between actuality and reality versus fiction when discussing the mechanical reactions of the soldiers to death, something they fear but accept as reality only on a dream-like plane: "They used hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased*, they'd say. *Offed*, *lit up*, *zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors and the war came at them in 3-D.... [I]t seemed scripted.... [T]hey had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy" (22). The soldiers try to detach themselves from the situation in order to repress emotion and reality, just as Vonnegut introduces "so it goes" as a defense mechanism for making death mechanical and insignificant in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In a later story in the collection, O'Brien explains further,

In Vietnam, too, we had ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead. Shaking hands, that was one way. By slighting death, by acting, we pretended it was not the terrible thing it was. By our language, which was both hard and wistful, we transformed the bodies into piles of waste.... I learned that words make a difference. It's easier to cope with a kicked bucket than a corpse; if it isn't human, it doesn't matter much if it's dead. (238)

Dehumanization is thus offered as an effective means of not bearing too much reality. The soldiers are better able to “sleep their dream” if they disconnect truth from their reality. Like Hazel Motes, they think pretending that the truth of reality does not exist, and blinding themselves to this truth, is easier than facing the reality. However, in the end the soldiers will come up as blind as the civilians back home who have refused to care so much that they have forgotten how, as Norman Bowker notices on his return to his hometown after the war,

The town could not talk, and would not listen. “How'd you like to hear about the war” he might have asked, but the place could only blink and shrug. It had no memory, therefore no guilt. The taxes got paid and the votes got counted and the agencies of government did their work briskly and politely. It was a brisk, polite town. It did not know shit about shit, and it did not care to know. (143)

This town sounds eerily like How Town, with the soldiers and their bottled stories representing “anyone.” Americans hide what they do know and protect themselves from learning more in order to retain what faith they can in humanity and those who control it.

They refuse to acknowledge that they have power to control their own actions; it is much easier to let someone else control external reality. If it gets messed up, someone else must take the blame. In such a dynamic, though, no American can represent the independence we boast about and the freedom we fight for.

In the introduction to *The Price of the Ticket*, Baldwin tells a story of his brother's tour of war duty that relates well to the soldiers in "The Things They Carried" and *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

My brother, describing his life in uniform, did not seem to be representing the America his uniform was meant to represent: he had never seen the America his uniform was meant to represent. Had anyone? Did he know, had he met, anyone who had? Did anyone *live* there? Judging from the great gulf fixed between their conduct and their principles, it seemed unlikely. (xv)

Sadly, the ideals Americans hold in common are the ones with negative connotations. We are united by the things that scare us most rather than by love. The things people do not know, the things they fear, and their hopelessness are often what hold them together.

Failure, fear, isolation, and shame are a means of connection for the soldiers:

Together we understood what terror was: you're not human anymore. You're a shadow. You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in. You know you're about to die. And it's not a movie and you aren't a hero and all you can do is whimper and wait. This, now, was something we shared. (O'Brien 211)

Postmodernism has a way of reconstructing the truths modernism deconstructs to show the desperation of the human condition. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states that,

The later nineteenth century is the age of modernity as an achieved reality, where science and technology, including networks of mass communication and transportation, reshape human perceptions. There is no clear distinction, then, between the natural and the artificial in experience.... De-realization affects both the subject and the objects of experience, such that their sense of identity, constancy, and substance is upset or dissolved. Kierkegaard...describes modern society as a network of relations in which individuals are leveled into an abstract phantom known as “the public.”... The modern public, in contrast to ancient and medieval communities, is a creation of the press, which is the only instrument capable of holding together the mass of unreal individuals “who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization.” In this sense, society has become a realization of abstract thought, held together by an artificial and all-pervasive medium speaking for everyone and for no one.... Human subjects themselves experience this de-realization because commodities are products of their labor. Workers paradoxically lose their being in realizing themselves, and this becomes emblematic for those professing a postmodern sensibility. (Aylesworth)

In the postmodernist take, the arts, sciences, and all socially perceived and accepted knowledge have taken control over individual thought to the point that the human spirit feels powerless and thus thoughtless. Man begins viewing himself as the commodity society has pegged him as. Martin Heidegger, another postmodern theorist, discusses how all objects, natural and manmade, are now viewed only according to how they can help mankind:

The mountain is not a mountain but a standing supply of coal, the Rhine is not the Rhine but an engine for hydro-electric energy, and humans are not humans but reserves of manpower. The experience of the modern world, then, is the experience of being's withdrawal in face of the enframing and its sway over beings. However, humans are affected by this withdrawal in moments of anxiety or boredom, and therein lies the way to a possible return of being. (Aylesworth)

Heidegger's theory offers a return to hope, an opportunity for mankind to reclaim the self, even if spurred only by sheer boredom. For Postmodernists, art is the cure for useless boredom and thus the reclamation of self. Aylesworth considers the Postmodern condition as a series of language games: "Inventing new codes and reshaping information is a large part of the production of knowledge." New experimentation with language can encourage new individual understanding of the self and how to relate to society. He goes on to say: "Since thought cannot activate itself as *thinking*, Deleuze says it must suffer violence if it is to awaken and move. Art, science, and philosophy deploy such violence insofar as they are transformative and experimental."

Transformative and experimental art become new knowledge of the self.

The Postmodernist view of art relates to O'Brien's purpose in telling a story:

“The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness” (230). Man is thus awakened by his own creation of words, no longer accepting the words and symbols provided by others but putting his own on the page and experimenting with it. Art translates to power when it is shared with others and becomes a point of communication and “aliveness.”

### **Bedtime Story 11: Miss Independent**

*Girl: Let's suppose you're right. Let's suppose the Bible is the only real truth in the whole world. Why are there so many different religions that believe so many opposite truths?*

*Boy: Because the same information can be interpreted in different ways.*

*Girl: Then who is right?*

*Boy: Everyone. Perception is reality. We all have our own truths and our beliefs and we are judged on our own personal relationships with God.*

*Girl: Perception is reality? So there is no real truth beyond what we know?*

*Boy: Exactly. And each day when we learn new things, we build on those truths and develop them further. When a bunch of people develop similar truths, it can be a common truth; something universally accepted.*

*Girl: What about people with memory loss? They can't accept a common truth. They can't accept their own truths because they have nothing to build on beyond what they have known for the last few seconds. Would you still love me if I had that disease?*

*Would you marry me if I woke up every morning and you had to remind me who I am?*

*Boy: I don't think I could handle that. Having to dictate who someone is.*

*Girl: The government, media, schools...those socially accepted institutions who determine the common truths do it every day. You think we dictate who we are?*

*Boy: To an extent. I think we can control our own ideas and emotions. We are independent.*

*Girl: Sometimes I think we are dependent. We are dependent on lawmakers and weather forecasters. We are dependent on our cell phones and microwaves.*

*Boy: We are dependent on God and we are dependent on each other, and only on each other to an extent. I could survive without you if I had to. I'm not afraid of being alone.*

*Girl: I know I am! What are you afraid of?*

*Boy: Spiders. Death. My dad had this drug-dealer friend who was paranoid schizophrenic and he thought some guy was going to kill him so he hid in the closet all the time.*

*Girl: Because he was dependent on drugs? How did that work out for him?*

*Boy: Eventually he killed himself so he wouldn't have to live in fear anymore.*

*Girl: That makes no sense. He feared death so he died to escape the fear?*

*Boy: Ironic, huh?*

*Girl: There's nothing to fear but fear itself.*

*Boy: That's not true. We are supposed to "Fear God."*

*Girl: Fear of what he can do if we don't believe, not fear of God himself. It's the same with the human system right? We need to fear human actions, but not humans themselves.*

*Boy: Well, I've learned one thing. Trust no one. And depend on no one.*

*“The war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.”*

—Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried*

Short stories must approach the reader in a different way than a novel to have the same impact. The stories “The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien, and “The Swimmer,” by John Cheever, have a common theme: they focus on the journey of one character, a pilgrim, resulting from a tragic loss. Each story is told through external details that give the reader an idea of the character’s inner state. Fragmentation of character in combination with outside forces introduces theme, or moral, sensually and materialistically as an easier way for readers in a capitalistic society to relate. By the end of the journey, the character (and the reader) change as a result of the journey.

Each story can be analyzed using theorist Charles May’s “Chekhov and the Modern Short Story.” Chekhov is a forerunner of modernism and minimalism and highly influential in the development of the short-story genre. May praises Chekhov’s “ability to dispense with a striking incident, his impressionism, and his freedom from the literary conventions of the highly plotted and formalized story,” and he states that Chekhov’s originality “marked the beginnings of a new or ‘modern’ kind of short fiction that combined the specific detail of realism with the poetic lyricism of romanticism” (199). May seeks three characteristics in a good, modern Chekhovian short story: first, the character sets the mood; second, details are as minimal as possible, centering around one major event; third, the story blurs the lines between dream and reality.

Plot, as in reality, should be subordinate to character. The majority of the plot, occurring after the objective correlative (“a detailed event, description, or characterization that served as a sort of objectification or formula for the emotion sought for” [May 202]), should develop inside the mind of the character, thus allowing the character and the objective correlative associated with him/her to set the mood. Because of the restrictions of length, a realistic short story must center on one major event that “focuses on a revelatory break-up of the rhythm of everyday reality” (200). This short form of realism (AKA impressionism) has to focus on “an experience under the influence of a particular mood and therefore depend[s] more on tone than on plot as a principle of unity” (200). In “The Things They Carried,” the objective correlative is the death of Lavender. The details of the story develop from the characters’ reactions (particularly Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s) to his death. After the major event, the action of the story itself does not change much, only the character, and the changes in the character affect the mood of the story (and thus the message to the reader). Cross goes from being a lovesick daydreamer to being a responsible, emotionless leader. The mood becomes more somber and mechanical while the soldiers go about business as usual.

In “The Swimmer,” the objective correlative revolves around Neddy Merrill’s loss of his family and home. The details behind Neddy’s loss are never fully explained. In fact, it is halfway through the story (and Neddy’s cross-county swimming expedition) before the reader even realizes something is amiss when Mrs. Halloran mentions being sorry to hear about his misfortunes, the house, and the children. Neddy denies any changes in his life and comes across as especially oblivious to any misfortunes. Because the story is written from a third-person limited perspective, the reader sees what is going

on only from Neddy's point of view. The entire day's journey symbolizes a series of summers recounted in Neddy's mind. Time has been fragmented and manipulated in his mind. The story begins in the "morning," thus a reflection of many years back, when Neddy is a happy, rich, popular married fellow with many friendly neighbors. His exuberance and "slenderness of youth" are magnified and "he might have been compared to a summer's day.... [T]he impression was definitely one of youth, sport, and clement weather" (Cheever 215). The mood of the story reflects his inner state, which suddenly changes with the weather. Midway through the story, a storm (symbolic of the tragedy) approaches and the mood changes as his inner state does. Neddy battles the storm, physically and mentally, just as Cross weathers the storm of war in his journey.

May's concept of minimalism breaks the plot down to one base event in an otherwise mundane existence. It shapes a moment as a learning opportunity or possible epiphany. Rather than employing a traditional plot, the story focuses instead "on a single situation in which everyday reality is broken up by a crisis" (May 201). In these stories, the mundane is broken up by the objective correlative, and the plot moves forward within the character's inner state based on his/her mood. However, since the limited narration is unreliable, the authors place clues to the characters' "actualities" (as opposed to realities, which only appear internally) in the external; the stories express "a complex inner state by presenting selected concrete details rather than by presenting either a parabolic form or by depicting the mind of the character. Significant reality for Chekhov is inner rather than outer reality, but the problem... is how to create an illusion of inner reality by focusing on external details only" (202). For Chekhov, the objective correlative serves as a springboard for bouncing the inner out and vice versa. It mirrors the idea of production

and consumption in the American dream, with focus on the creation of art to express the inner “actuality” as a means of finding oneself.

In “The Things They Carried,” the external loads the soldiers carry represent the internal loads that really bear them down. The lengthy descriptions of necessary objects double as metaphors for the internal while also showing the mechanical side of war, and thus the dehumanization of the man at war: “[T]hey carried... whatever seemed appropriate as a means of killing or staying alive.... They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried” (O’Brien 7); they later even refer to their loads as “the great American war chest” (16). In reality, the loads are not the war chests, but the men who carry them.

In “The Swimmer,” the weather plays a large role in Neddy’s journey, as well as the reaction of his neighbors to his pilgrimage. In the beginning he holds an “inexplicable contempt for men who did not hurl themselves into pools” and “he never used a ladder” (Cheever 216). Neddy sees his journey as leisurely and enjoyable, something exciting to try on a lazy Sunday: “Making his way home by an uncommon route gave him the feeling that he was a pilgrim, an explorer, a man with a destiny, and he knew that he would find friends all along the way; friends would line the banks of the Lucinda River” (216). He begins optimistically, and perhaps carelessly, turning upper-class swimming pools into something more dangerous and exciting, while naming the metaphorical river after his wife—the first clue that maybe his wife is more a memory than a permanent fixture in his daily life. Initially his neighbors greet him excitedly, happy that he has finally made an appearance after all the invitations he and his wife have turned down. He gets warm invitations and free drinks at their bars. He refers to these banks of the

Lucinda River as “bonny and lush” (217). Then he hears thunder and the landscape suddenly grows dark—a change in mood occurs in both the setting and the characters. Neddy notes that the next set of neighbors have gone away for summer, when they have obviously been gone much longer. His memory begins failing him here and the reader catches on to his unreliability: “Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of truth?” (218). He quickly dismisses this possibility but the reader does not. Neddy moves on to cross the highway, where he is “exposed to all kinds of ridicule, he seemed pitiful” (218). Next, he must face the “public,” which he thinks “might contaminate himself—damage his own prosperousness and charm” until he reminds himself that “he was an explorer, a pilgrim, and that this was merely a stagnant bend in the Lucinda River” (219). Facing common man appears to be something he does not do regularly; he is facing his worst fears for the first time during this journey through unfamiliar waters. Once he makes it past the naked Hallorans, he becomes depressed: “[T]he worst of it was the cold in his bones and the feeling that he might never be warm again” (220). He wonders if he has lost weight in the space of one afternoon and also notices many autumnal effects, such as falling leaves and the scent of firewood, another sign of significantly elapsed time. A conversation with Helen Sachs makes him even more doubtful of his own mental stability: “Was he losing his memory, had his gift for concealing painful facts let him forget that he had sold his house, that his children were in trouble, and that his friend had been ill?” (220). He is then rebuffed by usually cordial Biswangers (and their part-time bartender), causing a loss of social (and thus self-esteem). He is also rebuffed by his ex-mistress, Shirley Adams, who refuses to give him more money—even though he does not remember ever

taking money from her. He can no longer see the summer constellations in the sky and becomes so tired that “he paddled to the ladder and climbed out” (221), just like those men he held in contempt earlier in the day. He thinks “it was probably the first time in his adult life that he had ever cried, certainly the first time in his life that he had ever felt so miserable, cold, tired, and bewildered” (222). Neddy finally comes full circle—finally comes to terms with his outer reality. For the first time, he takes the steps rather than diving in. His triumph (and the egocentric attitude that got him to it) seems vague and unnecessary after all the effort.

Chekhov is ambiguous in combining the psychic with the real. In O’Brien’s and Cheever’s stories as well, the reader has difficulty determining which facts are “true” and which are figments of the characters’ imaginations. “The conflict between the presentational self and the problematic ‘real’ self” (May 206) creates a whole new challenge for the reader who must piece together fact and fiction and determine why each exists in the same story. The authors pit reality (inner and external) against fiction, and fiction against human actuality. Each journey discussed above posits the character against himself to establish a truth or moral in the face of a dilemma, just as the journeys do in *The Waste Land* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Because their human reactions seem unconventional, the mental stabilities of anti-heroes Neddy and Jimmy are brought into question. Their perseverance stems from failure. When the outcomes of the crisis events do not suit the characters’ desires, an attempt to make things right becomes a dire necessity. Neddy spends quite a bit of time reflecting on the circumstance and purpose of his cross-county swim:

He could have gone back, back to the Westerhazys', where Lucinda would still be sitting in the sun. He had signed nothing, vowed nothing, pledged nothing, not even to himself. Why, believing as he did, that all human obduracy was susceptible to common sense, was he unable to turn back? Why was he determined to complete his journey even if it meant putting his life in danger? At what point had this prank, this joke, this piece of horseplay become serious? He could not go back, he could not even recall with any clearness the green water at the Westerhazys', the sense of inhaling the day's components, the friendly and relaxed voices saying that they had *drunk* too much. In the space of an hour, more or less, he had covered a distance that made his return impossible. (Cheever 218)

This magnificent passage lets the reader inside Neddy's brain in a way that allows, finally, understanding of the distortion of time and the symbolism of the journey. Neddy knows he cannot go back and is not even sure he can go forward, but he must do *something*. He appears almost to accept that things are now different and that his journey cannot undo the past. He attempts to link inner and outer realities, but out of fear of standing still, he keeps moving. Even after he becomes cold, tired, and depressed, he still feels "that he had no freedom of choice about his means of travel" (220).

May argues that "the ultimate result of these characteristics is the modernist and postmodernist focus on reality itself as a fictional construct" (199). May also quotes fellow theorist Suzanne C. Ferguson on this topic: "[W]hen all we have in the world is our own experience of it, all received knowledge becomes suspect, and the very nature of knowledge becomes problematic" (208). Therefore, we must "confront the possibility

that we cannot know anything for certain, that the processes we follow in search for truth may yield only fictions” (208). This statement can be applied to the realities of all the characters; their realities are no more false or distorted than those of the reader. May goes on to say, “If reality is a fiction, an artistic construct, then art perhaps provides the only means to experience reality” (208). Thus, the characters’ realities might be MORE real than the reader’s because truth for the reader cannot exist outside of the artistic construct of the story. However, Chekhov believes that “art as a means to experience true reality is a complex religious, aesthetic, and sympathetic process” (209). The reader must accept the realities of the fiction based on his or her prior knowledge bank, and the story must hold some commonly accepted truth, value, or moral to appeal to the reality of the reader and cause him or her to adapt the new truth as personally useful and meaningful.

Human existence as we know it is a fictional construct in which we are taught the languages, mannerisms, and acceptable behaviors necessary to communicate and co-exist. At some point, as it is in the minds of these characters, everything is fiction. This fiction is then digested over and over again until it becomes socially acceptable and thereby labeled “truth.” Perhaps the central Chekhovian themes of isolation, need for human sympathy, and moral failure of inaction (all present in the stories discussed here) extend beyond the literary world into the live-action version, thus reinforcing the ambiguous nature of the psychic and the external.

“As he rose and fell /He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the  
whirlpool.”

—T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*

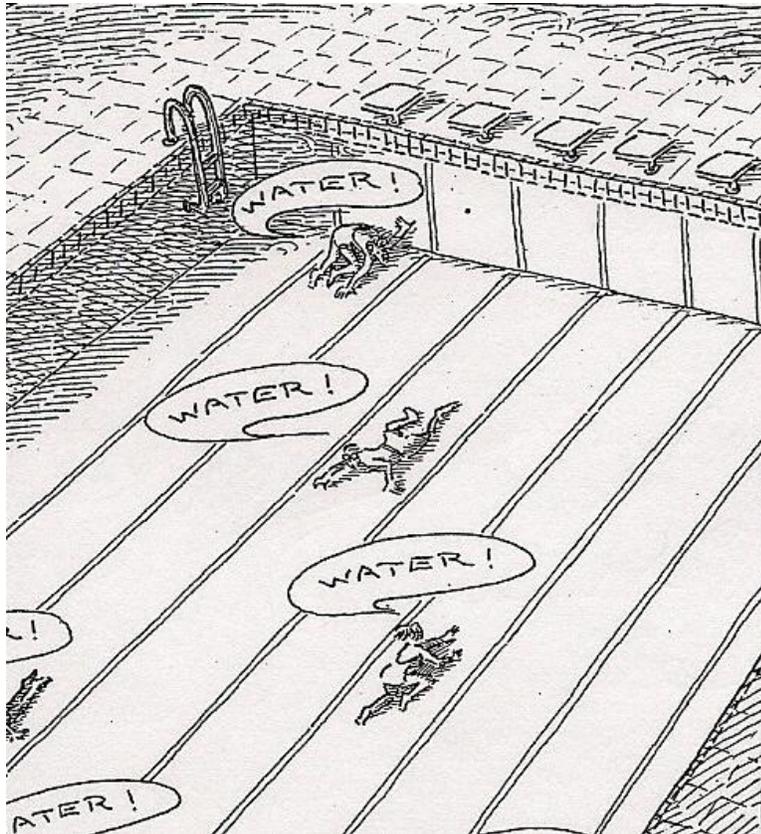
Neddy calls himself a pilgrim from the get-go, with his chase for the American dream being his quest for the Holy Grail. He represents another Christian anti-hero, proving no one is perfect; everyone is caught up in a dream world that is difficult to wake from. Like Billy Pilgrim and Jimmy Cross, Neddy ignores reality. A jaded dream embedded in social consequence corrupts his illusions about his goal. From the beginning, Neddy relies on alcohol to sustain him, making him an unreliable narrator/anti-hero. While most Christians think of Sunday as the Lord’s Day, Neddy spends it recovering from a hangover. He starts his journey by saying no one has recovered from drinking too much last night. Throughout the story, does he ever really recover from any of the “too much” of reality? He is “shored against his ruin” by a lazy Sunday wasting away. The story is full of signs of decay, particularly superficiality and emotional stagnation. This story returns to the water theme from *The Waste Land*, where the reader is warned of death by water. Can swimming (his journey) cleanse him or is it too late to put his lands in order?

Water (of various types) stands in as metaphor. Neddy names the river Lucinda, after his wife. The “river” as a whole is the connection of bodies of water that will carry him home. Lucinda means “light.” His wife, who is no longer in his life, represents the light that can guide him to reality. The public pool versus private pools represents a major issue for an upper-class fellow. The public pool is dirty and gritty, with silly rules to follow—rules he chooses not to observe. Everyone is equal in the public pool and must

abide by rules. No one there pities or shelters him, a stranger in a whole new, unfamiliar world beyond his upper-middle-class neighborhood. He automatically assumes “public” is a bad thing because he is terrified of his truth being exposed—to himself more than to anyone else.

Neddy has a damaged sense of truth, a repressed reality. He has been a snob to his neighbors, yet he is well-liked at the beginning of his journey (when he feels youthful). As the day passes, his neighbors begin to find him an annoying burden. He loses his social esteem. Status is very important to him; thus, he subconsciously misinterprets their cold-shouldered reactions (reflecting his internal state). The closer he gets to home (i.e., reality), the darker and more unpleasant the weather and his neighbors get. The real world sneaks up on him and he finds no one at home. Neddy’s situation relates back to what Didion says about the reality of people who cannot respect themselves: “Without [self-respect], one eventually discovers the final turn of the screw: one runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home” (148). Cheever also warns “against nostalgia as the solution to disappointment in the present.” He writes with a “sense of confusion” over how to deal with the “pervasive absurdity” in the world (Waldeland 89). The fragmentation of reality, for both the author and the characters, creates a realistic platform for the reader to relate to and commiserate with. Similar to a theme from *Wise Blood*, Neddy experiences blindness on multiple levels. Because truth is too much, characters choose to disguise or displace it until they are ready to face it. Being blind, however, does not keep them from looking for their Holy Grail; it only makes the journey more complicated. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim relays a memory of his dad teaching him to swim. His dad sends him out in the water on his own and Billy lets

himself sink, almost drown. He resents his father for rescuing him. Neddy, who refuses to believe the truth about his situation told by the neighbors, also prefers not to be rescued. Sink or swim, however, this postmodern journey is one that the characters must complete in their own way.



This picture depicts, on the most basic level, humans attempting to swim without water. It can be viewed as a metaphor for the society constructed to achieve the American dream. Each person is isolated in his/her own lane begging for salvation, healing waters, and hope. It is a pilgrimage of monotony, a force of habit, and a ritual to keep going in search of water. Notice that the figures swim in different directions and in a life organized in isolated lanes with a lack of communication among lanes, even though all the participants seek the same goal. Searching separately for an assigned hope (in this

case, water) will not bring relief. All human similarities come through sympathy about shared isolation, but that sympathy is hard to communicate because of the isolation (another *Catch-22* situation). The first step is giving up the monotonous routine and the selfish focus on competition to reach the goal bigger, better, or faster. Step two: get out of the lane, help each other out of the pool, and find water without waiting for the American dream to deliver it.

## CHAPTER 8: DON'T STOP BELIEVING

*“It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.”*

– from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

Modernity dampens the view of hope through works such as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Foucault discusses the play in terms of the characters representing modernity’s last man awaiting a “metaphysics of presence” AKA Godot AKA God who never arrives: “Meanwhile they find themselves with nothing to do, nothing to say. They disguise their anxiety in a welter of self-important and meaningless chatter, all the while hoping that the mystery of life will be revealed to them—in vain” (qtd. in Sherman 350). Basically, the characters represent “everyman” in search of the meaning of life (or the Holy Grail). Life itself can thus be seen as Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” (Sherman 353) with all humans playing Greek mythology’s role of Sisyphus, pushing the boulder up the hill over and over. Humanity is a science experiment. Perhaps Foucault is right and we are rats in a maze; however, if that is the case, we are also the scientists that put each other in the maze: “The world in which people find themselves is not simply a vindictive plot imposed on them from above; it is also the world they have helped to make. They have helped to make, and helped to sustain, it by sharing the assumptions which hold their world together” (Baldwin 155). Baldwin describes the role of the reader (especially the exceptional “not me” reader who thinks the rules of the American dream do not apply to him/her) from the modernist perspective: “[I]t is ourselves we are watching, ourselves we are damning, or—condescendingly—bending to save” (6). The characters we read

about are the “anyones” and “everyones” and we, as Americans, must choose which character to be: the one who tries to escape the maze or the one who makes do within it.

New young-adult texts of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries question the morality in turning humans into lab rats, including popular novels *The Giver*, *The Bar Code Tattoo*, and *Uglies*. In Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, a 12-year-old boy learns to question the utopian community he lives in, one where they have created their own nonviolent perfection by eliminating weather, color, career choices, and emotions, including love and fear. In Suzanne Weyn’s *The Bar Code Tattoo*, humans are marked as commodities and their lives exist via a required wrist barcode. One girl challenges the system. Likewise, in Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* trilogy, one teenage girl challenges her community, a community that requires teens to get makeovers to turn them into “pretties.” Texts like these teach students that individualism is okay, even if it means fighting against a system that seems determined to make everyone the same.

Texts like these also question why the American dream tries to force believers to conform to certain standards. If we are not broken, why should the American Dream insist on fixing us? In the short story “The Sandman,” Donald Barthelme asks the same question. A man writes a letter to his girlfriend’s psychiatrist, Dr. Hodder:

You reason: If Susan is happy or at least functioning in the present state of affairs (that is, moving from man to man as a silver dollar moves from hand to hand), then why is she seeing a shrink? Something is wrong. New behavior is indicated. Susan is to get married and live happily ever after. May I offer another view? That is, that “seeing a shrink” might be precisely a maneuver in a situation in which Susan *does not want* to get

married and live happily ever after? That getting married and living happily ever after might be, for Susan, the worst of fates, and that in order to validate her nonacceptance of this norm she defines herself to herself as shrink-needing? That you are actually certifying the behavior which you seek to change? (When she says to you that she's not shrinkable, you should listen.) (195)

His logic makes sense and relates back to Vonnegut's ideas on psychologists creating new issues for people to be treated for and Foucault's ideas on people who think outside the box being considered "mad" by society. Barthelme goes on to question the doctor: "What do you do with a patient who finds the world unsatisfactory? The world *is* unsatisfactory; only a fool would deny it.... Susan's perception that America has somehow got hold of the greed ethic and that the greed ethic has turned America into a tidy little hell is not, I think, wrong. What do you do with such a perception? Apply Band-Aids, I suppose" (197). When "others" do not see the popular choice as the satisfactory choice, their madness is either hidden (by self or others) or shamed, sometimes both. The goal here is to accept the differences as possibilities rather than abnormalities.

Baldwin says, "Now, this country is going to be transformed. It will not be transformed by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me. I don't believe any longer that we can afford to say that it is entirely out of our hands. We made the world we're living in and we have to make it over" (244). Human knowledge is a heap of broken images introduced to man by means of government, society, culture, and especially literature. Our interpretation/perception of this knowledge (individually as opposed to

mass opinion) results in personal/actual truth and transcends anything socially presented or accepted, a scary and difficult concept to grasp:

The postwar world, the cultural drive toward what has become known as the postmodern, can be viewed as opposed responses to the challenge of heterodoxy, a root disagreement reducible to the distinction between the adjectives *the* and *a*: Is reality single and ultimately knowable? Is truth therefore verifiable and constant; or is it multiple and timebound? And finally, the question as central to interpretation in life as in art, can we make do as best we can with *a* meaning? (Ruland 372)

Ultimately, humans must accept the fact that not everything has a definite answer and we all must think for ourselves in order to interpret reality, even if this means giving up everything we have learned through media outlets and other social institutions. Humans interact with one another (especially partners) to complete each other's dream. They have scripted roles, and when one partner can't help, they find another. The roles build on each other to form a very dependent society:

Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden. From this void—ourselves—it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us—“from the evil that is in the world.” With the same motion, at the same time, it is this

toward which we endlessly struggle and from which, endlessly, we struggle to escape. (Baldwin 32)

We need to go beyond the illusion, beyond the veil to see true individual desires, allowing the individual to stand in for the social, universal desires that appear to be an American requirement:

The gulf between our dream and the realities that we live with is something that we do not understand and do not wish to admit. It is almost as though we were asking that others look at what we want and turn their eyes, as we do, away from what we are.... This rigid refusal to look at ourselves may well destroy us; particularly now since if we cannot understand ourselves we will not be able to understand anything. (Baldwin 17-18)

Baldwin argues that “Americans passionately believe in their avowed ideals, amorphous as they are, and are terrified of waking from a radiant dream” (16). In addition, he argues that this “illusion certainly prevents us from making America what we say we want it to be” (184). Sleeping is certainly easier than waking, especially when it involves keeping a dream alive. However, to live a dream and to dream a dream are two different approaches—and to live your OWN dream is in a whole category of its own, but an attainable one if we put away fear and take on responsibility for our own identity:

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew;

to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free—he has set himself free—for higher dreams, for greater privileges. (Baldwin 147)

**Bedtime Story 12: How Do I Live?**

*Girl: I ordered 125 invitations today. That's going to be enough, right?*

*Boy: About that...I'm not ready to get married. In fact, I don't think this is working out.*

*Girl: What?*

*Boy: I want to see other people.*

*Girl: What about our future? What about our life together and the promises you made?*

*You're the only person I connect with, the only one who understands me. We were made for each other. What about US? What about our dreams?*

*Boy: This isn't my dream, it's yours.*

*Girl: How am I supposed to live without you? I've built my entire life around you.*

*Boy: I don't know what to tell you. It's just not what I want. I want freedom. I want to be myself.*

*Girl: Why are you doing this?*

*Boy: I don't know. I just know that I have to.*

*Girl: You gave me hope for the future. And now you want to take away everything we've built? I...I can't breathe. Will you...get me a drink of water?*

*Boy exits.*

*Girl (whispering): Baby...I'm pregnant.*

“[E]verything that is or was began with a dream.”

– *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl*

The American Dream destroys the individual dream and creates a false hope for mankind. However, this false hope is still HOPE. Without a fabricated dream to hold on to, Americans feel hopeless and out of control. With modernism and postmodernism dropping the wrecking ball on life as Americans have known it for so long, what is left? Can we blame a change in the course of literature for the desperation of modern times and the self-destruction that has come with it? Or do we blame Americans for putting too much trust in bleak literature? Or do we blame history for seeing so much truth in a fragmented illusion? Post-postmodernism is left with a heavy task—cleaning up the wreckage and reviving a spiritual balance of social humanitarianism based on individual altruism and love—without the materialism and unattainable stipulations the American dream has tacked on to happiness. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison gives readers great advice concerning life and how to approach the standards that are set for us: “[P]lay the game, but don’t believe in it” (151). Perhaps this advice is the only way to survive, deconstruct, and rebuild a necessary illusion.

So it goes.

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