

**RELIGIOUS ETHOS OF HEROES AND ANTI-HEROES IN HEMINGWAY'S AND VONNEGUT'S WORK**

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*Abstract: In an age marked by two world wars, the cultural wasteland which was announced by T.S. Eliot and then dealt with by a number of modernist and postmodernist writers has had some special links with a dimension one expects least, the religious one.*

*The hereby paper deals with aspects from Hemingway's and Vonnegut's war fiction which also imply their heroes and anti-heroes; the hero's military duty is foregrounded (as it should be to the conscientious soldier), but the religious elements that usually accompany the soldier in battle are obscured almost to invisibility. Hemingway's hero develops his code, like the existentialist subject, fully aware that he has to show his worth in a world where it seems that God has become indifferent, although the will to believe seems to persist at times.*

**Keywords:** *hero, Hemingway, Vonnegut, God, death.*

Hemingway defined in a letter to his mother the conception of being a Christian (a regular church-goer and apt representative of the era preceding that of the Hemingway protagonist) when Ernest was 18 years old (dated 16 January 1918 from Kansas City). In this letter, Carlos Baker finds an estimation of religiosity relevant to both Ernest Hemingway and his war protagonists throughout the rest of his life: "Don't worry or cry or fret about my not being a good Christian. I am just as much as ever and pray every night and believe just as hard so cheer up! Just because I'm a cheerful Christian ought not to bother you. The reason I don't go to church on Sunday is because always I have to work till 1 a.m. [. . .]. You know I don't rave about religion but am as sincere a Christian as I can be. [. . .] We [Ernest and a friend from Michigan] both believe in God and Jesus Christ and have hopes for a hereafter and creeds don't matter."<sup>1</sup>

It is highly probable he wrote this letter to reassure his mother that her boy is not that bad, but the sentiments mentioned in it will be expressed in the coordinates in which many of his characters are written.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway's main character, Lt. Henry muses, "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glory, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. [. . .] Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."<sup>2</sup> This was the sentiment of many artists considering war and its effects. War quickly loses its glamour when the reality of deadly force is revealed before a soldier's eyes, and his faith in Providence and providential intervention decreases, as it happens with Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He thinks, "I wish Grandfather were here instead of me. Well, maybe we will all be together by tomorrow night. If there should be any such damn fool business as a hereafter, and I'm sure there isn't, he thought, I would certainly like to talk to

<sup>1</sup> Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917-1961*, No. 4, London: Granada, 1972, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993, p. 185.

him.”<sup>3</sup> The afterlife is strongly questioned (not totally denied), while the entity he would like to talk to, should life after death existed, would be his grandfather, rather than God in his glory.

Certainly, all combatants, civilians, and war writers (journalists and fiction writers) did not carry very unromantic views of either World War I or the Spanish Civil War. However, many personal narratives (letters home, diaries, etc. . .) are written in a half humorous, half romantic tone, as if to show that one defies death, while at the same time appreciating the beauty of life. Leslie Buswell served with the American Ambulance Field Service in France during World War I. His journal was recorded in *With the American Ambulance Field Service: Personal Letters of a Driver at the Front*, a short collection of journal entries “printed only for private distribution.” Here is an excerpt of Buswell’s entry for June 28, 1926: I had to go to Auberge St. Pierre at about two o’clock this morning. This road is in full view of the Germans and much bombarded, and shrapnel burst close by, which reminded me that a lovely moonlight night with trees and hills and valleys dimly shaping themselves can be other than romantic.<sup>4</sup>

In a tone similar to that of the words above, William Yorke Stevenson, another American ambulance driver at the front in France, writes, for October 22, 1916, (Pingleton uhu.es) “the Boches dropped a number of shells on La Chalade Poste when I was there yesterday morning. A pane of glass above me, hit by an ‘eclat,’ fell on my head while I sat outside writing a letter. I don’t know whether it is lucky or not to have that happen. For a moment I felt as if I were in one of those kaleidoscopes of childhood’s happy days. About a bucketful of colored glass came scattering all around. It is like getting religion thrust upon one, so to speak.”<sup>5</sup>

The predominant conception of war, however, made more straightforward reference to loss and death. Robert Graves’ excellent autobiography *Good-Bye to All That* (1930) exemplifies much of the general feelings about The Great War. Death was a reality: “Once when I came home on leave from the war, I spent about a week of my ten days walking about on these hills to restore my sanity. I tried to do the same after I was wounded, but by that time the immediate horror of death was too strong for the indifference of the hills to relieve it.”<sup>6</sup>

Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, notes the stark distinction, similar to that between Edenic innocence and the world after the Fall, between the placid pre-war sentiment and the sharp terrors felt when war became a reality. “The contrast between before and after here will remind us of the relation between, say, the golden summer of 1914 and the appalling December of that year.”<sup>7</sup>

Philip Larkin, when considering the same Edenic innocence of the pre-war days in relation to time after that December, writes in his poem “XCMXIV,” “Never such innocence, / Never before or since, / As changed itself to past / Without a word – the men / Leaving the

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bells Tolls*, New York: Scribner’s, 1940, p. 338.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Buswell, *With the American Ambulance Field Service: Personal Letters of a Driver at the Front*, <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/memoir/Buswell/AAFS1.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Tim Pingleton, “Hemingway’s War Fiction,” <http://www.uhu.es/hum676/revista/pingleton.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Robert Graves, *Good-Bye To All That*, USA: Anchor Books Editions, 1998, p.47.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 5.

gardens tidy, / The thousands of marriages / Lasting a little while longer: / Never such innocence again.<sup>8</sup>

Philip Larkin, although an agnostic, longs for the certitude that belonging to a religious community brings, as illustrated in another poem of his, “Church Going.” That poem struck a sensitive chord in many British people, at a time when the country was beginning to experience a massive loss of faith in the wake of World War II, the destroyer of the grand narrative of progress.

A loss of faith in established values, especially religious ones, was experienced a decade later (the poem “Church Going” had been published in the 1950s) by large numbers of young people in America and elsewhere, although the religious ethos usually enhanced by multitudes was transformed into a revolutionary state of mind. The American counterculture’s radical modification of the qualities that constitute the heroism of the Christ-like figure serves as a criticism of the conservative ideal found within traditional Puritan depictions of Jesus Christ. If the ‘hero’ had been an archetype thought to embody a level of perfection humanly impossible – an impossible ideal created, or encouraged, by the state in order to maintain a structure of respected hierarchy – many in the counterculture thought that Christ should no longer be classified as a ‘hero’ in the established definition of the term. Indeed, in his essay “The Antihero in Modern British and American Fiction” (1959), Hassan proposes that the concept of Christ as a hero is incompatible with post-war ideology: “The term Antichrist, meaningful and precise in another age, is succeeded by coinages multiplying out of denial – antimatter, antiplay, anti-utopia, anti-Americanism, and finally antihero, a concept, as it happens, far closer to Christ than to his enemy.”<sup>9</sup>

The move away from a belief in the notion of transcendence during the twentieth century means that any miraculous basis for Christ’s heroism immediately becomes problematic. Indeed, by the post-war period the idea that Christ’s heroism as founded primarily upon his ability to perform acts that mortal men could not was increasingly subject to the same deconstructionist processes applied to the wider heroic archetype in the American consciousness. More specifically, the positioning of Christ at the top of a hierarchy was in opposition to the ideology of the counterculture, which proposed there should be no societal barriers based on elements of an individual’s background, wealth, colour, or creed.<sup>10</sup> David Simmons fails to mention one very good illustration of the new ethos concerning the nature and status of Jesus in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s rock opera, *Jesus Christ, Superstar*. Judas is shown there as a hero rather than a villain, who loves Jesus, does not know that his teacher is divine, and disapproves of his master’s allowing his followers to turn him into a ... mythic superstar.

In Hemingway’s novel *A Farewell to Arms*, one could notice the fact that there are several indications that Frederic Henry wants to believe in a superior force, but fails to do so. This failure at having a religious experience is partially due to the futility and unjustness he has experienced, but it is also because he does not know how to believe, or, like his interlocutor Count Greffi in the scene below, he has only expected to become a believer by

<sup>8</sup> Philip Larkin, *XCMXIV*, [http://www.poetryconnection.net/poets/Philip\\_Larkin/4789](http://www.poetryconnection.net/poets/Philip_Larkin/4789)

<sup>9</sup> Ihab Hassan, *Rumors of Change*, 1959; repr., Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> David Simmons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel. From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 114.

the mere passage of time, which, for tough guys like the two of them, is obviously impossible to happen: While playing billiards with the Count, Henry says, "I don't know about the soul." "Poor boy. We none of us know about the soul. Are you Croyant?" [asks the Count] "At night." Count Greffi smiled and turned the glass with his fingers. "I had expected to become more devout as I grow older but somehow I haven't," he said. "It is a great pity."<sup>11</sup>

A little bit later, before the Count and Henry part, the idea is further developed, although the expectations are not great, as far as true faith is concerned: "[. . .] And I hope you will live forever." [says Henry] "Thank you. I have. And if you ever become devout pray for me if I am dead. I am asking several of my friends to do that. I had expected to become devout myself but it has not come." [says Count Greffi] I thought he smiled sadly but I could not tell. He was so old and his face was very wrinkled, so that a smile used so many lines that all gradations were lost. "I might become very devout," I said. "Anyway, I will pray for you." "I had always expected to become devout. All my family died very devout. But somehow it does not come."<sup>12</sup>

Henry's appreciation of Count Greffi is high; his narrative voice praises his "beautiful manners,"<sup>13</sup> a trait regarded highly throughout Hemingway's fiction, but the idea is that, in certain ways, including their attitude to religion, the two, despite the considerable generation gap, share a great deal.

A completely different attitude seems to become apparent in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. At the end of it, the injured Robert Jordan thinks it odd that his broken leg does not hurt. "It truly doesn't hurt at all."<sup>14</sup> He is not afraid of the death he will soon be facing. This is part of Jordan's integration in faith; his apparent paganism is really an enactment of the Christian ideals of charity and love. Jordan's feeling of integration makes his suffering more bearable because, following the trajectory as set forth in scripture, he knows his spiritual strength has changed him and moved him to victory through Jesus Christ. His death is something he shares with the rest of humankind, a message reminiscent of John Donne's statement in his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*.

The desire for religion to inform a more radical direction for society became a recurring theme in the work of many 1960s writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, a prominent leader of the American Humanist Association. Vonnegut's work explores the disparity that many perceived between the ideological and ethical teachings of Judaeo-Christianity and the practices of organized religious bodies. As Peter Scholl notes, "Vonnegut has lost the Faith, has repudiated Christianity, its creeds and assorted institutions, but he has retained all the ethical reflexes which sometimes embellish that religion [...] He retains belief in the worth of man as an article of faith, though it is a faith he cannot justify intellectually, and which he sometimes only half-heartedly maintains."<sup>15</sup>

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* recounts the story of a humble optometrist by the name of Billy Pilgrim. Billy, who "resembled [...] Christ" and has "a meek faith in a loving

<sup>11</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993, p. 261.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 254.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bells Tolls*, New York: Scribner's, 1940, p. 468.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Scholl, "Vonnegut's Attack Upon Christendom," *Newsletter of the Conference on Christianity and Literature*, 22, Fall, 1972, p. 11.

Jesus which most soldiers found putrid,”<sup>16</sup> is presented as a potential saviour figure following his contact with the alien Tralfamadorians during the World War II, as Marguerite Alexander notes, “[Billy] is, as his name suggests, representative of suffering humanity.”<sup>17</sup>

As the story develops, Billy recounts his abduction by the alien Tralfamadorians who have the capacity to view any moment in time whenever they choose: “they can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains.”<sup>18</sup> The Tralfamadorians take Billy back to their planet and force him to mate with a former Earthling movie star named Montana Wildhack. Billy is then returned to earth, and with the knowledge he has gained sets out on a personal crusade to comfort the rest of humanity. Following the path of departure, initiation (on Tralfamadore) and return described by Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Billy Pilgrim strongly believes in his prophetic mission: “The cockles of Billy’s heart, at any rate, were glowing coals. What made them so hot was Billy’s belief that he was going to comfort so many people with the truth about time.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the Christ figure is imbued with a sense of pathos, as the crucifix Billy has on the wall of his childhood bedroom illustrates, “Billy had an extremely gruesome crucifix hanging on the wall of his little bedroom in Illium. A military surgeon would have admired the clinical fidelity of the artist’s rendition of all Christ’s wounds – the spear wound, the thorn wounds, the holes that were made by the iron spikes. Billy’s Christ died horribly. He was pitiful.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the key ideas related to perceptions and functions of religion in the novel is the suggestion that Christ’s suffering to save humankind has been made meaningless by a world in which people perform, or are accomplices of those who commit atrocities, such as the bombing of Dresden. *Slaughterhouse-Five* shows a situation in which, as Peter J. Reed’s suggests, “people [are] doubting their own worth because of a denigration of the worth of people generally.”<sup>21</sup> The bombing of Dresden – a city that Billy initially describes as “like a Sunday school picture of Heaven”<sup>22</sup> – exemplifies the senseless violence of the war. If the city in its state before bombing represents a ‘picture of Heaven’ then its destruction can be read as an attempt to question a Christian belief in the laws of cause and effect, specifically “the futility and absurdity of traditional Christian views of death and free will.”<sup>23</sup>

The novel also criticizes the Christian image of war as heroic, as Conrad Festa suggests, “*Slaughterhouse-Five* attacks the notion of war as glorious, noble, or just.”<sup>24</sup> Vonnegut condemns the idea of war as righteous through the character of Roland Weary, a jingoistic and unlikeable soldier, who violently attacks Billy. Weary talks of the inherently Christian service he and his band of comrades, nicknamed “The Three Musketeers,” are

<sup>16</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1988), rev. ed., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction*, London: Edward Arnold, 1990, p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1988), rev. ed., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> Peter J. Reed, “The Later Vonnegut,” in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler, New York: Delacorte Press, 1977, p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1988), rev. ed., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, JR.*, Farmington Hills: Bobbs – Merrill Educational Publishing, 1976, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Conrad Festa, “Vonnegut’s Satire,” in *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald L. Lawler, New York: Delacorte Press, 1977, pp. 145-146.

performing by killing Germans in the war. He tells Billy that “[The] Piety and heroism of “The Three Musketeers,” portrayed, in the most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity.”<sup>25</sup>

Weary’s heroic rhetoric is undermined by his sadistic behaviour, and, like Billy, the reader cannot help laughing at the grotesque of the anti-heroic character. Weary’s comments show an ironic incongruity between the positive spirit of religion, and the numerous ways in which it has been used to support, or justify, awful acts of violence, as the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five* notes when reading an evangelical copy of the Bible: “I looked through the Gideon Bible in my motel room for tales of great destruction. The sun was risen upon the Earth when Lot entered into Zo-ar, I read. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground.”<sup>26</sup>

Though he is conscripted into the army, and sent to fight in Germany, Billy remains a pacifist. Billy resolutely avoids getting involved in the military conflict in any way, even going so far as to refuse to carry a weapon throughout the entire course of the war. Billy is shown to be incapable of causing harm to anyone, be they friend or foe. In this respect, he bears a resemblance to the figure of Christ, who is willing to turn the other cheek to those who persecute him: “Then said Jesus unto him, put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”<sup>27</sup>

Although Christ-like, Billy, the pathetic chaplain’s assistant in his military unit, is a very good illustration, not of the hero with a thousand faces, but of the anti-hero in an anti-heroic age. In the character of Billy one may see the anti-heroic figure refusing the rules of an unjust society, in this case refusing to fight just because society orders him to. That would be a nobler interpretation of the anti-hero as the reluctant hero, to use Joseph Campbell’s terminology in his book on the one thousand faces of the mythical hero. In this interpretation, Billy’s would not be a superficial rebellion, or a coward’s evasive action, but a conscious and compassionate position against the war. Indeed, the novel suggests that it is Billy’s innocence, in a time of otherwise widespread violence, which enables him to retain his sanity, and such an interpretation would see him as a prophet “enlightened” by his “Tralfamadorian experience,” in addition to the raw facts of his war experience.

In this light, Billy’s strong humanitarian stance causes him to respect life rather than to try to destroy it. Billy’s spiritual beliefs will not allow him to kill others even if many think that the church would approve of such actions. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Stanley Schatt believes, “point[s] toward a new Christianity in which Christ is far more human.”<sup>28</sup>

Whether one agrees with Schatt’s interpretation or not, it looks plausible and coherent within a framework provided by the set of values that religion, rather than established churches of all denominations, provide. Biblical depictions of Christ often present him as having a democratic ability to deal with all people, from the privileged and the wealthy, to the sick, the outcast and the poor. This is evident in Christ’s friendship with the very ordinary, far

<sup>25</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1988), rev. ed., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 26:52

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Schatt, *Kurt Vonnegut, JR.*, Farmington Hills: Bobbs – Merrill Educational Publishing, 1976, p. 92.

from saintly Mary Magdalene. In a similar manifestation of tolerance, Billy is also shown to embrace those considered undesirable through his acceptance of the porn star, Montana Wildhack, with whom he shares the cage in the Tralfamadorian Zoo. Some postmodern, cynical readers may see this as an expression of Billy's sexual fantasies, which would go hand in hand with a realistic interpretation of his Tralfamadorian enlightenment, caused not by getting in touch with the extraterrestrials' superior wisdom, but by the war trauma and the plane crash that seriously affected his mental condition. However, in the religious interpretation, if we are to follow it, Montana Wildhack's conversion from promiscuous actress to Tralfamadorian believer, with Billy's help, seems to parallel Mary Magdalene's conversion, in a far from ironical parody of the New Testament story.

Billy experiences war as a sort of tormented, harmless Christ figure. However, after World War II is over, he seems to assume a prophetic role: "a calling much higher than mere business."<sup>29</sup> Billy, the anti-hero with more than one face (the optometrist turned visionary, the peaceful, harmless soldier, the American citizen, the Tralfamadorian) decides to try and save everyone on earth from their own 'short-sightedness' by telling them what he has discovered in the Tralfamadorian Zoo about the relative insignificance of the human race: "He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls. So many of those souls were lost and wretched."<sup>30</sup>

However, Billy finds that communicating this reassuring message is harder than it might first appear. Human pessimism is so great that Billy is unable to persuade even his own daughter of the truth of the Tralfamadorian's philosophy. A very sensible young woman, she believes that her father has gone crazy and attempts to get him to accept medical assistance in an institution.

If seen as the message of an author who acted for a while as the president of the American Humanist Association, *Slaughterhouse-Five* urges the reader to reconsider the behaviour of organized Christian churches in connection with the ideals, values and principles religion supports. More specifically, the text appears to critically examine the ways in which important, influential religious leaders refer to the supposed commandments of Providence in order to legitimate war and its accompanying atrocities. *Slaughterhouse-Five* also criticizes, through the conversation Vonnegut has with Mary O'Hare in the autobiographical Chapter One, the use of war fiction as a means of glorifying and glamorizing war: "History in her solemn page informs us that the crusaders were but ignorant and savage men, that their motives were those of bigotry unmitigated, and that their pathway was one of blood and tears. Romance, on the other hand, dilates upon their piety and heroism, and portrays, in her most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honour they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity."<sup>31</sup>

David Simmons, in his book on the anti-hero, makes connections between Billy Pilgrim, seen as a Christ-like figure, and other characters having a tendency toward a non-violent form of behavior: "This pacifist leaning is ideologically concurrent with Camusian notions of the rebel, configuring the anti-hero as a figure who acts in order to improve the situation of all men, even those who might initially oppose him. The anti-hero's rebellion

<sup>29</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1988), rev. ed., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

therefore supports the notion that everyone is of an equal worth, and rejects the concept of ‘justifiable violence’ as this would intrinsically assert the type of hierarchal framework that those within the counterculture hoped to replace.<sup>32</sup>

In *Slaughterhouse-Five* an extraterrestrial interpretation claims that the New Testament story of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice is misunderstood by the Earthlings, who see the horrible execution as wrong, not because Christ was innocent, but because he was the highest ranking VIP in the universe. People on Earth got the message that, when you choose to kill someone, you have to make sure first that the person does not have very high connections: “The flaw in the Christ stories, said the visitor from outer space, was that Christ, who didn’t look like much, was actually the Son of the Most Powerful Being in the Universe. Readers understood that, so, when they came to the crucifixion, they naturally thought, and Rosewater read out loud again: Oh, boy – they sure picked the wrong guy to lynch that time! And that thought had a brother: “There are right people to lynch” Who? People not well connected.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, using an extraterrestrial perspective, *Slaughterhouse-Five* straightforwardly claims that a large number of God-fearing Christians have misinterpreted the message of Christ’s supreme sacrifice. Far from admiring and valuing the profundity and ‘humaneness’ of the Christ figure, the “humane” robots from the remote planet of Tralfamadore seem to think that Earthlings considered that Jesus was innocent just because he was the representative of supreme authority in the universe, his story thus serving to confirm, rather than challenge, the practice of executing and torturing human beings. Once again, Earthlings think the crucifixion was wrong, not particularly because Christ was innocent, but because he was well-connected, the son of the most important entity in the universe.

The above-mentioned extraterrestrial interpretation is supported by another scene in the novel, featuring Billy staying in a wartime hospital. While being there, Billy comes across a book written by Kilgore Trout, the science-fiction writer, sometimes seen as Vonnegut’s ironic alter ego in some of his novels, including this one. Trout’s novel is entitled *The Gospel from Outer Space*. It recounts the story of an extraterrestrial who initiates “a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel.”<sup>34</sup> Once his research is complete, the alien comes up with his own reinterpretation of the Christ narrative. This revision attempts to diminish the possibility for anyone to misunderstand it, by assigning to the Messiah the role of an ordinary person, a human being eventually adopted by God as His Son because of “the lovely and puzzling things he said”: “In it, Jesus really was a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels. So the people amused themselves one day by nailing him to a cross and planting the cross in the ground. There couldn’t possibly be any repercussions, the lynchers thought [...] And then, just before the nobody died, the heavens opened up, and there was thunder and lightning. The voice of God came crashing down. He told the people he was adopting the bum as his son [...] God said

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<sup>32</sup> David Simmons, *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel. From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 124.

<sup>33</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1988), rev. ed., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

this: From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, a bum who has no connections, a nobody, apparently an anti-hero in terms of his professed peacefulness and harmlessness, turns into the most important hero of the Western world. Some of the anti-heroic figures to be examined in this article may be considered in connection with a definite pattern – one in which, according to David Simmons’s theory, the aim of rebellion is to reassert the importance of a community that has the capacity to support the individual on both an ideological and a spiritual level. In this context, the reinterpretation of Christ’s story from a humanist, rather than a religious perspective, is one of the component parts of a reinterpretation of the world’s grand narratives in the postmodern age, where ordinary people have their role to play, and their messages may be just as important as those of the highly connected rulers of the world.

Vonnegut the humanist seems to promote, in one possible interpretation, the bum and anti-hero as a visionary pilgrim and prophet of non-violence as Billy Pilgrim the hero, a character that combines the ethos of the counterculture with the ritualistic framework provided by Joseph Campbell’s theory (in which the test, and then the call to a world of supernatural, Tralfamadorian wonder is followed by his miraculous transformation – he becomes unstuck in time – and then by the apocalyptic prophecies that he shares with the rest of the world). For the rebels of the sixties and seventies, Vonnegut’s character becomes the prophet foreshadowing and announcing the advent of the protagonist of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (the popular rock opera was staged two years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s publication).

Obviously, a postmodern reader would add to this countercultural reading of Pilgrim’s heroic journey one of incredulity toward such a grand narrative. For such a reader, Billy will also be a pathetic fool, whose ridiculous example discourages readers looking for glamorous war superheroes in dazzling war crusades.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

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