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Take Chances, Get Edgy

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A Dangerous Neutrality: Howard Campbell in *Mother Night*

The world has witnessed a surge of violence in recent years. In 2019, a man started a livestream video as he opened fire in a mosque. He killed fifty-one people and injured forty at Christchurch in New Zealand (There are No Lone Wolves 4). This murderer claimed he was motivated by the “great replacement” theory which is a belief that people of color are being imported to places to dilute majority white populations (4). Racially motivated acts of violence can often be traced back to the belief that white people are somehow superior to people of color. Unfortunately, the man that opened fire in the mosque in New Zealand reached his target audience. A year later, a teen named Payton Gendron went to a grocery store and killed ten Black people, claiming to possess the same motivation as the “Christchurch killer” (4). The use of livestream video is like a wildfire; the videos can spread to corners of the internet in an instant, influencing thousands of people. This kind of racially motivated violence fueled by propaganda somehow keeps occurring generations after a world war that was fought to stop the genocide of the Jewish people. World War II lives as a reminder and a warning: Mankind cannot let history repeat itself. The novelist Kurt Vonnegut wrote multiple books about WWII, but the most relevant to discrimination and political violence driven by absurd theories is his novel *Mother Night*. The novel follows a playwright during and after WWII and addresses important themes of political values and loyalty. Howard W. Campbell, Jr. is an American-born German

who is selected to be an American spy during the war. His job is to pretend to be in full support of Nazi Germany. He becomes a radio broadcaster and promotes anti-Semitism while secretly sending coded messages to help the Americans defeat the Nazis. Once the war ends, Campbell must live labeled as a Nazi; the government cannot divulge his true identity due to the top-secret nature of his mission. He looks back on his time during the war as he writes his memoir from his prison cell as he is awaiting his trial as a war criminal. Campbell describes how he became involved in both sides of the fight and gives the perspective of someone truly lost in the middle of two political ideologies— something young adults, like college students, can relate to rather easily. Young adults must eventually decide on their political stances. These stances can sometimes completely contradict what their own families believe, and students are hesitant to proclaim their true beliefs. For this reason, *Mother Night* should be required reading for all English 101 classes because it illustrates the dangers of remaining apolitical. Vonnegut takes on this weighty topic by adding comic relief and a tense plotline that will keep students turning the pages.

Unlike some Holocaust memoirs that detail the daily horrors and drudgery of life in a concentration camp, Vonnegut's narrator Howard Campbell mostly discusses the life of being a double agent during World War II. The spy plot introduces a theme of the novel: Can anyone be truly neutral in a situation as intense as WWII? As an American living in Nazi Germany, Howard tries his best to stay as neutral as possible; he claims he is not a political man, just a playwright who is interested in his art (38). When he finally accepts the FBI agent's offer to impersonate a Nazi and become a spy for America, he admits that he does so because he's a "ham," not for any political reason (39). Despite his efforts to remain apolitical, he ends up being labeled a war criminal. A prison guard is surprised by Howard's remorse for his radio broadcasts

which vilified the Jews but also carried coded information to help America and its allies. He says, “Everybody else, no matter what side he was on, no matter what he did, is sure a good man could not have acted in any other way” (15). Becoming that undercover radio personality that spread propaganda was the most contradictory extreme to neutrality that Howard could have embraced. Everyone seriously thought Howard believed the vile things he said about the Jews during his broadcasts. His job as a radio spy quickly became a larger commitment. He designed a target for shooting practice that featured a grossly anti-Semitic design. During a visit to a white supremacist hideout in New York after WWII, Howard is confronted with this terrible drawing he had made years ago. Kraft, one of the hosts, is practicing with the target. Howard says, “Watching Kraft pop away at that target, I understood its popularity for the first time” (154). The war had been over for quite some time, but Kraft continued to use the childish drawing for aiming his bullets—showing just how long bigoted people will seek out old symbols and propaganda. This continued discrimination and hatred is what makes WWII so important to teach. History has already repeated itself countless times; the least one can do is attempt to prevent it. The Nazis inspire the Christchurch killer, he inspires Payton Gendron, and the cycle of racism and violence continues. Vonnegut presents this conversation of discrimination and ignorance in a way that keeps even students invested, so they can ease into the internal reflection that is inspired by the novel.

Unfortunately, college students adopt the habit of skimming rather than reading an assigned book. This proposes the difficult challenge for professors to find reading material that will catch the students’ attention and keep them close enough to be able to take something away from it. *Mother Night* is written in an easy-to-read fashion which exposes the mind to political commentary with a gentle approach. Vonnegut helps cut the tension of weighty topics with his

use of humor. The comedic effect in the novel points out absurdity and heightens the ridiculous aspects of characters or actions. For example, Howard is a playwright and tried his hand at multiple different ways of writing. Other than plays, Howard attempted poetry and wrote books. One of the books is an account of a night spent between Howard and his wife. According to Howard, the book is risqué and requires heavy editing before it can be included in his memoir. Howard prefaces the choppy passage by saying, “I leave it to an editor of taste and delicacy to abridge with innocent polka dots whatever might offend,” to warn the original readers about his memoir’s first draft (128). This passage is very out of place in the confessions of a man being tried for war crimes. It is ridiculous how much the passage is edited; it is mostly ellipses. A reader can’t help but smirk at the number of steamy passages that have been deleted. Vonnegut draws in readers with humor to help them become invested in the characters. This approach makes sneaking in an intense theme of good and evil like putting a bone in front of a dog – it is going to sink its teeth into it eventually. Now that Vonnegut has the reader, he introduces the dilemmas in a conversation between characters. He uses dialogue between people to discuss politics instead of giving the reader a history lecture. In the first four chapters of *Mother Night*, Howard gets to know the men that are guarding his prison cell. He converses with them about different things, usually coming around to discussing WWII and what Howard had to do with it. Howard mentions his old boss Joseph Goebbels to one of the Jewish guards, but the guard “looked at [him] blankly. “Who?” he said to Howard (5). It’s ironic that a Jewish prison guard would not know the name of a villainous propaganda minister like Goebbels, but Vonnegut sneaks in this point during a short conversation. Historical villains are quickly forgotten which is why Vonnegut writes this darkly comic satire about Nazis and their enduring appeal to white supremacists. However, long paragraphs of historical names are not what catch a college

student's attention; dialogue does. Attention grabbed, Vonnegut can put down the bone and wait for the reader to find the political ideas.

Because the novel *Mother Night* is entertaining, students will stay focused on the novel and learn about social and psychological issues. For example, *Mother Night* advocates against the bystander effect. This is the concept that if someone were in danger in a public setting, no one would call the authorities because of the "he thought someone else was calling" mindset. In effect, the people around the danger are paralyzed to act by the belief that someone else will help. Howard shows signs of this kind of mindset through his reluctance to become a spy. He is confident that he can make it through the war without having to lift a finger. He is deep in the bystander effect. What takes down his walls is the sales pitch from the government official who invited Howard to be a spy. He says, "America's gonna be on one side and Germany's gonna be on the other. So this American, who hasn't been anything but polite to the Nazis up to then, decided to pretend he's a Nazi himself" (39). The man uses logic and convinces Howard to think about how "in the middle" he can stay while two countries are at war, the two countries he at least once called home. Howard resisted the offer at first. He and his wife valued their relationship over any other kind of relation. They had no nation in the geographical sense. Their love was their loyalty, and they never gave it to anything else but to each other. A Nation of Two, they called it (42). As young adults read this book, they form opinions and evaluate their beliefs about Howard's actions of staying aloof and indifferent during WWII. Some of these actions are reflected in his attempt at poetry. Howard writes:

I saw a huge steam roller,
It blotted out the sun,
The people all lay down, lay down;

They did not try to run
 My love and I, we looked amazed
 Upon the gory mystery.
 “Lie down, lie down!” the people cried.
 “The great machine is history!”
 My love and I, we ran away
 The engine did not find us.
 We ran up to a mountain top,
 Left history far behind us.
 Perhaps we should have stayed and died,
 But somehow we don’t think so.
 We went to see where history’d been,
 And my, the dead did stink so (122).

This poem tells the story of Howard and Helga running away from the war, instead of embracing the historical significance of their surroundings. People laid down their lives for history, but Howard and his wife stayed away. They held onto their “someone else will do it” mindset. This poem stirs up ideas. How would a bystander handle the situation? The machine has no specificity. Howard is writing about the war in general, and the goal is to avoid it completely. With a mindset of avoid, avoid, avoid, what would a bystander do in the case of Payton Gendron killing ten Black people right out in public? What did the people watching the livestream do when the armed man entered the mosque in New Zealand? Did they wait for *someone else* to call 911? Vonnegut faces these questions with Howard’s character. *Mother Night*’s layer after layer attacks Howard’s indifference head on and lets the reader contemplate the morality of not getting

involved. The novel could potentially lead to deep discussion and debate in college English courses.

Vonnegut keeps the questions flowing. There are breaks for humor, but the themes and the turmoil stay constant. Another developed theme is the concept of evil and how it played out in Nazi Germany. Some argue that evil originated in the extreme nationalists that supported Nazi Germany. Evil resonated in Nazis and was executed through discriminatory behaviors which led to genocide. Howard describes some of the vile actions of his broadcasts' supporters. He mentions a specific meeting one of these supporters arranged as "the greatest achievement of his life" (73). The meeting in 1940 was between the KKK and the Bund (73). The man who had arranged this kind of meeting could be blamed for being a cause of evil in the world. Although Howard did not organize any racist meetings, he is not completely exonerated from the hellish realities that unfolded during WW II. Is being a bystander as immoral as committing the act? Most would suggest that it is not. But the Christchurch killer launching his livestream may not be very different from someone watching along. It was just a matter of time until Payton Gendron took the same course of action (There Are No Lone Wolves 4). In Howard Campbell's case, he defends his decision to remain neutral in Nazi Germany—a bystander—because he is a playwright, and his wife is an actress. As successful artists, Helga and Howard had connections to popular Germans. The couple became very well-known and well-liked by the extreme nationalists in support of Nazi Germany. They were friends with the enemy. He says it himself, "We were a very popular couple, gay and patriotic...She entertained the troops, often within the sound of enemy guns" (Vonnegut 41). Howard goes on to say that while they were not crazy about the Nazis that supported their theatrical productions, they did not hate them either; the Nazis were a "big enthusiastic part of [their] audience" (36). Howard implicitly condones the

kind of behavior exhibited by the German soldiers that attended his plays. In his constant efforts to maintain his neutral profile, he does more harm than good. The act of staying silent can be much more dangerous than taking a side.

Some might accuse Vonnegut of inadvertently spreading harmful messages through his tendency to assign racist people humorous characteristics. He makes a habit of writing evil people with comedic dialogue or making their backstories somewhat of a laughingstock.

Vonnegut gives a backstory to Dr. Jones, a supporter of Howard's broadcasts. He writes:

When Jones began to detect proof of degeneracy in the teeth of Catholics and Unitarians, and when five loaded pistols and a bayonet were found under his mattress, Jones was finally given the old heave-ho [from dental school] (64).

The reader now sees Dr. Jones as a funny character. The sense that he is a dangerous, evil man goes away and what is left is a kooky, ridiculous man who never properly received his title of Doctor. Vonnegut does not use humor as a distraction; he uses it to bring attention to the absurdity of the characters. It is absurd that someone would call the Boy Scouts of America their "real name" the "Boogies and Semites of America" (175). This nickname for the organization is completely out of hand and shows more of the ridiculousness of Vonnegut's characters. The absurdity then helps the reader make the connection to lose trust in the character. Another way Vonnegut successfully uses humor through evil people is the use of irony in situations. For example, Howard has brought his boss Goebbels the Gettysburg Address by Abraham Lincoln to be used for writing inspiration. Goebbels shows it to Hitler and receives this response: "Some parts of this...almost made me weep. All northern peoples are one in their deep feelings for soldiers. It is perhaps our greatest bond" (21). This is ironic because the Gettysburg address is from the Civil War between the north and south of America to abolish slavery. Adolf Hitler, the

dictator, crying over a speech about independence and freedom shocks the audience.

Expectations are completely reversed. Since Vonnegut writes the unexpected, the evil people become comical. His use of comedy is in no way meant to lessen the consequences or lighten their stories, but to show the absurdity in their beliefs. Showing this absurdity to young adults will help prevent the same beliefs from spreading. History almost tries to repeat itself, but with the right education students can learn how to avoid the pattern.

Mother Night by Kurt Vonnegut explores a political example of the roots of good and evil in an easy-to-read fashion. Howard Campbell maneuvers a shocking life in the novel that is relatable to young adults. His lack of political belonging and neutrality toward most things makes the character understandable and lets the reader form opinions and evaluate those opinions as they read. College students sometimes struggle taking a stand on a claim in papers because of their neutrality on controversial topics. *Mother Night* discusses the danger of staying in the middle. The bystander effect is extremely common and can lead to things like the tragedy of the Christchurch killer. English 101 classes can take numerous themes and ideas away from the novel, relatable things that lead to internal reflection. Howard shows how dangerous a lack of opinion can be to a life. He writes his confession and commits suicide in his prison cell because there is little chance he could ever prove his innocence to the public, even with evidence from the government. The dark humor and spy plot of the novel also successfully grab readers, hold them close, and cause them to flip through the pages. That is the goal of an assigned book, to be an enjoyable read with the ability to make readers question their place in a world of difficult decisions and perceptions. Kurt Vonnegut achieves this goal and then some.

Works Cited

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