Section 4. Literature

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TRIP WITHOUT A TIME MACHINE: HOW WORLD WAR II INFLUENCED THEMES IN AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE

Abstract. In postwar-World War II America, works by prominent science fiction creators of the time, from John W. Campbell to Kurt Vonnegut, included topics directly related to the war. Tensions from military and political events influenced the appearance of thematic depictions of negative attitudes about the war.

Keywords: Science Fiction, World War II, dystopian, Kurt Vonnegut, Fahrenheit 451.

To write science fiction is to wonder about the future of the world by standing at the edge of the present timeline and gazing across space, time, and reality. Science fiction is fantastical, full of futuristic stories set in a version of the material world built upon speculated scientific theory and technological advancements. The modern form of the genre includes subgenres such as dystopian fiction; however, it does not rely on mythical elements or paranormal elements like fantasy. Science fiction, and arts and literature in a general sense, are also reliable indicators of the ideals and circumstances during the time they were created, which is why examining such works can give researchers insights into the impact of historical events on society, from a creative standpoint. As fiction grounded in science, sci-fi is written both to offer escape from the world and to mirror it. Both of these aims were alive and well in people's thoughts during and after the Second World War. As the global conflict from 1939 to 1945 upturned the world and the dust settled in the decades that followed, violence, fear, and hostility were imprinted freshly on society as people listened to radio reports that recounted news about the dead and living, about the events happening at the fronts. Some of these impactful events inevitably held cultural significance as well, including the German aggression in Europe and beyond, the rise of Communism and extreme nationalism, and the invention and use of the atomic bomb. These events also inspired a specific group of people: the great American science fiction writers of the time, who produced works of reflection and warning. With contributions from John W. Campbell to Kurt Vonnegut, the themes one may usually think of in the context of science fiction art and literature – such as time travel – made way to include topics more directly related to the war. Tensions from military and political events in World War II and postwar America influenced the appearance of thematic depictions of negative attitudes about the war in works by prominent science fiction creators of the time.

The political and economic crises in Europe and the East following World War I sparked the emergence

of nationalism and militarism, and allowed for the rise of fascist leaders like Hitler and Mussolini. The Treaty of Versailles ended the Great War with military restrictions on Germany and harsh demands for reparations – the failure of which marked the transition from World War I to World War II. According to Article 352 of the treaty, "Germany shall be obliged to make to the European Commission of the Danube all restitutions, reparations and indemnities for damages inflicted on the Commission during the war" [1]. This sparked resentment, and extreme nationalism began to grow and spread. In 1922, Benito Mussolini became the founder of fascism by establishing a fascist state in Italy; in Germany, Adolf Hitler – expansionist, socialist, and anti-Semite – rose to power in 1933 and emphasized fascism and rapid militarization of the government; and in Japan, nationalistic militarists seized the government and launched war against China. With France and England declaring war on Germany after the Nazi invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland, World War II officially began in 1939. Multiple European economies were devastated by the war. Around the same time, the Great Depression was at its height in the United States. In addition to America's isolationism, the economic climate of the time made most Americans reluctant at first to push aside the issue and engage in war, especially after the devastating First World War. However, Hitler's continuous attacks on American ships as well as calls for aid from England led America to take defensive military action and gradually become more involved in the war [2]. Finally, in 1941, Japan sent warplanes in a bombing attack on Pearl Harbor, an American naval base in Hawaii, officially drawing the United States into the warfront [3].

At the same time, science fiction as a genre experienced its golden age, which spanned from 1939 to 1950 [4]. In the early 1900 s, Edgar Rice Burroughs created an American style of science fiction called juvenile sci fi, which merged European and American styles. With the use of pulp magazines – named for their cheap production and easy accessibility to and popularity with both creators and readers – juvenile science fiction became well-received in the 1920 s and allowed American authors to take the lead in the genre [5].

The need for calm as well as a fascination with the universe characterized many literary works of science fiction in the relatively peaceful period between the First and Second World Wars. The Great Depression and the devastating national economic crisis drew Americans into a state of misery and uncertainty, resulting in some works representing more tranquil climates. However, not all science fiction creators focused on reminiscing the calmness of the past: with new astrophysical discoveries and theories, writers, such as Edward E. Smith with *The Skylark of Space*, dedicated their creativity to imagining distant galaxies and space exploration [6]. As the nations declared war against each other one by one during World War II, many shifted their focus once more as they witnessed the events unfold; one of these was the rise of atomic weaponry [6, 132].

Even before the atomic bomb was developed in the United States, authors and magazine editors had imagined the use of atomic power and its dangers. The *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine – created and edited by John W. Campbell and later known as *Analog Science Fact & Fiction* – had numerous and sometimes surprisingly accurate depictions of this phenomena, years before America deployed the atomic bomb for the first time upon Hiroshima in 1945, demonstrating its horrors [6, 173]. For example, the September 1940 issue of *Astounding* featured the short story "Blowups Happen" by Robert A. Heinlein, who attended the U. S. Naval Academy and later participated in World War II as a naval engineer [7]. This short story is about the staff engineers of a nuclear powerplant, working "under the strain of tending the most dangerous machine in the world" [8]. The powerplant itself needs constant supervision and maintenance because its energy usage is unbalanced due to a miscalculation, making it extremely likely to explode and possibly disintegrate everything on the planet. Despite these

dangers, because the military has started to control the production of oil – an energy source – this powerplant is greatly needed. Facing such a dilemma, fictional character Dr. Lentz considers everything: the demand for the energy generated, the extreme mental stress its management brings to the engineers, and the social implications. In the story, the engineers finally come to a solution and decide to shut down the powerplant, move it to space, and allow it to generate energy there [8]. Published in the early years of World War II, "Blowups Happen" shined light on the unquestionable danger of atomic power or an actual bomb, as well as the immense responsibility carried by those who handle similar weapons or machines. Like the powerplant engineers, workers in such positions must be aware at all times that countless numbers of people depend on their expertise and vigilance. Through his short story, Heinlein hypothesized and warned about the danger of atomic power.

Heinlein also published another short story, "Solution Unsatisfactory," in a 1941 issue of the magazine; it addressed the decision of the United States to engage in World War II and develop a nuclear radioactive weapon. The weapon he imagined was made of radioactive dust instead of traditional bomb materials, and this had devastating impacts on the world. He used this story and its title to speculate about the usage of nuclear weapons and the consequences of not handling them carefully. In fact, after America launched the nuclear bomb on Japan at the end of World War II, "John Campbell pointed out in a 1946 anthology that the official solution of the United States, secrecy, was even more unsatisfactory and suggested that if those in position to make political decisions about atomic weapons had begun thinking about the matter in 1940 [people] might have come up with a better answer" [6, 173]. Hence, Robert Heinlein's literary work acted as a form of debate and expression of people's concern around the responsibility of the U.S. in managing the devastating aftermaths of using atomic weapons.

News of the atomic bombing affected critics in similar ways. For example, it was the first subject that American Science Fiction writer Donald A. Wollheim reflected upon in the opening of *The Universe Makers*, which analyzed the genre itself. Directly connecting the bombing and science fiction, he exclaimed in the very first sentence of the book, "Ever since that day that I first heard that an atomic bomb had been exploded over Japan I have had the disturbing conviction that we are all living a science fiction story" [9, 1]. Atomic weaponry had appeared in authors' minds before the bombing of Japan, but the real event brought the anticipation and uncertainty vividly to life. Such a disturbance on the world scene opened "possibilities [that] [loomed] menacingly and chaotically," making Wollheim – and countless others like him – "too uneasy about this misuse of atomic power, too unresolved in [their] feelings that the world had taken one step too many over the edge of the old realism and into the world of the fantastic future." Wollheim described the situation as "menacing" and "chaotic," richly expressing the overwhelming effect of the existence of such a dangerous power, along with the fear and apprehension it brings. Perceiving the inescapable and irreversible nature of the development of atomic power, he calls it stepping "over the edge," which incorporates a tone of dread and warning [9, 1].

The Second World War was one of exceptional weapons and violence, but it also gave birth to a smaller, different kind of conflict – one against certain types of individual thinking and intellectual perceptions. Examining the war from another angle, *Fahrenheit 451* captured and took inspiration from acts of government censorship in Germany as well as McCarthyism. The famed instance of book burning during World War II happened on May 10th of 1933, when tens of thousands of German students, led by Nazis all across the country, set bonfires and incinerated countless books they considered misaligned with German principles and educative efforts. Like the flames it started, the news of this German censorship of ideas and literature spread rapidly to other

parts of the world, including the United States, triggering protests [10]. Twenty years later, in 1953, Ray Bradbury wrote and published *Fahrenheit 451*, a dystopian novel set in the 24th century after two atomic wars, featuring a backward society that harshly banns and destroys literature as a means to incinerate intellectual freedom, which brings the progress and advancement of mankind into stasis. In this absurd environment, the main character – Montag – becomes increasingly troubled about his purpose as a fireman whose job is not to quell fires and protect civilians but to wield the flames and turn them upon illegal books. Captain Beatty explains:

- "And so when houses were finally fireproofed completely, all over the world (you were correct in your assumption the other night) there was no longer need of firemen for the old purposes. They were given the new job, as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior; official censors, judges, and executors. That's you, Montag, and that's me" [11, 56].

At the time that he produced this book, the McCarthy era had just begun in America, after the war had stirred up fears of Communism. Senator Joseph Mc Carthy intensified internal suspicion and dread in the federal government and the rest of the United States when he started to make accusations – often aimed at governmental figures – regarding support for Communism in the early 1950 s. "Any man who has been named by a either a senator or a committee or a congressman as dangerous to the welfare of this nation, his name should be submitted to the various intelligence units, and they should conduct a complete check upon him. It's not too much to ask," Mc Carthy proclaimed in 1953 [12]. Many were disinclined to disagree with him outwardly, fearing the repercussions of his accusations, and chose to stay quiet [12]. Similarly, in *Fahrenheit 451*, the reason almost all books are forbidden is because the societal mindset wants to avoid any conflicts among its people, by silencing all voices and keeping minds in ignorant darkness. Beatty, Montag's supervisor in the fire department and a strong advocate for outlawing literature, explains the philosophy of their occupation: "Let [man] forget there is such thing as war. If the government is inefficient, top-heavy, and tax-mad, better it be all those than that people worry over it" [11, 58]. Frightened of conflict, society as a whole chooses to allow injustice and governmental corruption. People reject individual thought and voices because "the world got full of eyes and elbows and mouths" [11, 51]. Conveying a sense of mistrust and hostility, Beatty's words harken back to the German desire to abolish non-German values, as well as to similar moods of Americans in the Mc Carthy era. As an antagonist, he negatively represented the societal obsession with fanning the flames of control and censorship.

At the climax of the novel, when Montag questions the righteousness of his profession and decides to leave behind the beliefs he had been indoctrinated into, the authorities send a technologically advanced mechanical hound to hunt him down, for trying to preserve literature. In self-defense, Montag turns his flame gun against the beast, "[catching] it in a bloom of fire, a single wonderous blossom that curled in petals of yellow and blue and orange about the metal dog" [11, 114]. Throughout the novel, fire is purposefully used for destroying houses, books, and even people; however, in this passage, Bradbury beautified the image of the deadly light. He compared the fire to a flourishing flower, giving it life in the rainbow of colors it produced, subtly showing his support for Montag by contrasting its vibrance to something that aids in the burning of books.

Alternatively, Ray Bradbury noted that one of his original intentions for *Fahrenheit 451* was to show his concern about the possibility of people becoming addicted to television and losing their ability to think critically. However, according to the authorized biographer who closely interacted with him for over a decade, Bradbury was a "mass of contradictions;" the biographer suggested that "Bradbury's 2007 com-

ments, that *Fahrenheit 451* is not about censorship, are off base [and are] another example of his contradictory nature" [13]. Bradbury himself wrote in *The Nation*, a political and cultural magazine, noting, "Whether or not … ideas on censorship via the fire department [in an early version of *Fahrenheit 451*] will be old hat this time next week … when the wind is right, a faint odor of kerosene is exhaled from Senator McCarthy" [13]. "Kerosene" references the fuel the firemen in the novel used, hinting at McCarthy's parallel acts of silencing many others. Additionally, reflecting upon the shocking destructive event, Bradbury stated, "When Hitler burned a book, I felt it as keenly, please forgive me, as burning a human, for in the long sum of history they are one and the same flesh" [14]. Equivalating books with humans suggests once more that the widespread book burning in Germany did deeply influence Bradbury's ideas.

Assuming another kind of critical perspective, anti-war publications took the approach of condemning general conflict and violence in intriguingly produced literature, notably in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Written by American author Kurt Vonnegut in 1969, the novel is known for its anti-war themes and depiction of the life of a war prisoner. Vonnegut himself was a soldier imprisoned in Dresden, Germany at the end of World War II [15, 1]. The main character is Billy Pilgrim, a low-ranking soldier who serves in World War II, gets captured by the Germans, and is brought to Dresden. During this period, he mysteriously and unwillingly begins to travel throughout his lifetime, while periodically switching back into the age of war – his original timeline. The story starts with the author himself speaking about writing a book after his experiences in the war: He "[thought] of how useless the Dresden part of [his] memory [had] been, and yet how tempting Dresden [had] been to write about" [15, 2]. He perceives an illusion of importance, thinking that a work detailing the events at Dresden would be easy to complete and generate success for him. However, he also deems the memories themselves worthless, which shows that even as a former soldier, despite having survived the bombing of Dresden, he could make no meaning of it. Considering everything that had happened, what would be the point?

An acquaintance of Vonnegut's once called anti-war literature "anti-glacier" books, and agreeing, he elaborated on this comment: "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers" [15, 3]. The choice to use "of course" conveys that this idea should appear obvious to the audience, as if starting wars was human nature. The parallel and abrupt structure of the last two phrases emphasizes each of them, bringing a hollow or even hopeless tone as one is forced to accept this as reality. By equivalating wars with such a large natural phenomenon, Vonnegut also illustrated the inevitability of people getting caught up in human violence, whether willingly or not, and he condemned the truthfulness of it. Bringing in a mother's perspective as well, Vonnegut recounts a conversation with a female friend about how soldiers "pretended [they] were men instead of babies" [15, 14]. By comparing the soldiers to infants, she expresses her anger at the effect of participation in war; it snatches young men away, barely at the age of adulthood, only for them to lose their lives in a pointless struggle they never asked for. He then directly addresses his editor by observing, "There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" [15, 19]. With a cold and bitter tone, Vonnegut once again brought out the irrationality and futility of these conflicts through his writing.

Moreover, Vonnegut artistically displayed that war does not discriminate between opposing sides – both must suffer through the mental and even spiritual exhaustion. Readers learn that the Americans are not the only ones exhausted from the fighting: Billy runs into a German soldier who was "about to quit, about to find somebody to surrender to" [15, 53]. Even though the German has the upper hand in facing a defeated Billy, he does not escape Vonnegut's tactful depiction of how battles wear one down. The words "find somebody" suggest an eagerness in the German, an almost desperate need to seek an

end to his duties as a solider, enough so that he is ready to surrender and trade away his victory. The story presents Billy traveling through time but always circles back to the main storyline, so he continuously "[finds] himself back in the war," as if he is bound to that point in time [15, 90]. The fact that he has no control over which period of his life he returns to adds to the sense that there is no escape from warfare, an eerie reminder of the real threat posed by the World War. Interestingly, the characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* also come to enjoy science fiction – as a means to numb their experiences fighting in the war. After "[finding] life meaningless," Billy and another veteran "were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe… and science fiction was a big help" [15, 101]. Mirroring stories of similar crises of soldiers who had experienced the real battles and seeming to refer to himself, Vonnegut hinted at yet another way science fiction was used and interpreted – to cope with war trauma and sinister memories.

The full title of the book is *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*, which suggests another layer to Vonnegut's story [15, 101]. On the surface, "slaughterhouse" references the point in the book where the characters are locked in a butchery in Dresden called slaughterhouse-five, but this longer title incorporates aspects of the complete novel, which includes the main character's entire life as well as Vonnegut's own autobiographical narration at the beginning and end. As if imprisoning the entire world in a fictional slaughterhouse, the title connects to the inescapability of violence and the frustration that is communicated in the novel. The author called a soldier's fate "a duty-dance," again highlighting the human obligation to perform in warfare, for human nature does not allow otherwise, and even the innocent must bear this duty.

Examining certain pivotal works of American science fiction in the context of World War II reveals the impact of the global conflict on the social climate of the United States: raising people's vigilance, the war became the backdrop for more social issues to appear in science fiction and set the stage for inspired authors to raise their voices. The development of the atomic bomb caused many to question its political and social implications; the suppression of individual thought and similar civil liberties in World War II Germany and during the McCarthy Era in the U.S. led to outrage and criticism; and finally, traumatic experience and suffering during the war gave way to condemnation and reflection on human nature. Thus, this previously heavily technology-based genre of literature gravitated toward broader and sometimes deeper topics. Science fiction literature emerged as a platform not just for creativity but also for expression and discussion. Reading these stories, and others like them, simulates travelling back in time to intellectually relive that era – without the need of a time machine. Fear, stigma, suspicion, anger, and weariness all incentivized authors like Heinlein, Wollheim, Bradbury, and Vonnegut to feature topics such as the dangers of nuclear power, the consequences of censorship, and the meaninglessness of war. As Bradbury wrote in his famed book, "The magic is only in what books say, how they stitched the patches of the universe together into one garment for us" [11, 16].

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