

ABSTRACT

The Death of Heroism: Revenge and Fate in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut and Jonathan Safran Foer

Ashtyn Gillie

Director: Dr. Elizabeth J. Dell

The concept of heroism is a pervasive idea in literature. Figures such as Odysseus, Oedipus and Hamlet have shaped our perception of what it means to be a hero in the midst of hardship and tragedy; namely, these characters seek revenge in reaction to the overwhelming power of divine fate in the lives of humanity. However, in the postmodern age, brought on by the unprecedented widescale destruction of 20th century warfare, many writers have expressed the idea that traditional heroism is incompatible with the problems faced by a postmodern society. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which the theme of heroism is portrayed in three postmodern novels; *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, as well as *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, which are all connected by their exploration of the most influential and destructive events of the 20th and 21st centuries-the Holocaust, the bombing of Dresden, and the terrorist attacks of September 11. I seek to illustrate that with these novels, the authors utilize traditional characteristics of heroism in order to demonstrate the ways in which they fail to provide meaning and validation for these intense acts of violence and devastation.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Elizabeth J. Dell, Department of English

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Andrew Wisely, Director

DATE: _____

THE DEATH OF HEROISM: REVENGE AND FATE IN THE NOVELS OF
KURT VONNEGUT AND JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

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By
Ashtyn Gillie

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The concept of heroism has been a huge influence on culture and society for centuries. Heroes have often been depicted as set apart from the rest of humanity, whether through their ability or their social status, and these qualities enable them to cope with difficult situations. Here I will discuss the concept of heroism as it is developed first in the context of classical Greek heroes such as Odysseus and Oedipus, and later in the revenge tragedies (specifically *Hamlet*) popular during the Renaissance, as well as other perspectives on the components of heroism. Finally, I will discuss ways in which postmodernism interacts with these ideas about heroism, in order to establish a context for the explorations of heroism in the novels that will take place in the following chapters--*Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, and *Everything is Illuminated*, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer.

The character of Odysseus is one of the most well-known heroes in Greek mythology. He is most famously depicted in the epics of Homer, even starring in his own epic, the *Odyssey*. Odysseus' main skill, which sets him apart from other men, is his mental capabilities. This can be seen from the very beginning of the *Odyssey*, where the speaker establishes Odysseus as the "cunning hero" (Homer 1). Odysseus demonstrates his "cunning" throughout his journey, as he overcomes various foes by outsmarting them. For example, in Book 9 he defeats the Cyclops Polyphemus through trickery and violence, using the Cyclops' own sheep to escape the cave. After returning to Ithaca, Odysseus outsmarts the treacherous suitors by disguising himself as a beggar in order to

infiltrate their circle, and plots with his loyal servants to destroy the suitors once and for all. Odysseus is also known for his physical prowess, for at the end of Book 21 he reveals himself to the suitors by stringing his own bow and hitting the target, illustrating that he “still [has his] strength” (335) and surpassing the skill of the suitors, who were unable to do so. Finally, Odysseus is a noble and powerful man, as he is the king of Ithaca, the head of his household, and an influential figure in the world of the Achaeans (as seen from his involvement in the Trojan War, detailed in the *Iliad*). From this one can see that Odysseus is superior to common men in almost every way; although his hubris, or pride, is a flaw, in the end he is still able to defeat those who stand in his way and restore his position as the head of his household.

The importance of home and family are prominent themes in the *Odyssey*. As many critics have pointed out, Odysseus’ story is centered on the idea of “nostos”, or homecoming, as Odysseus struggles to return to Ithaca after the Trojan War (Kohen, Nagy). Gregory Nagy argues that this focus on nostos is metaphorically significant, as it mirrors humanity’s “eschatological” journey towards immortality (275), while Ari Kohen asserts that this emphasis on nostos is what differentiates him from other classical heroes who pursue “kleos” (glory) above all else, for his story is one of “endurance” of suffering in order to return home as opposed to doing great deeds (Kohen 37-38). Odysseus’ journey throughout the *Odyssey* is fueled by his desire for homecoming, and his great struggle is to fight against the barriers placed before him so that he can return home and restore the natural order of his household.

Odysseus’ home falls into disarray during his absence, with the invasion of the suitors and the corruption of some of his servants, and this emphasizes the necessity of

his presence, while highlighting the change that Odysseus' son Telemachus must undergo throughout the *Odyssey*. When we meet Telemachus at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, he is imagining Odysseus returning to Ithaca and purging the suitors from his home with Telemachus by his side, where Telemachus would be "respected at last" (Homer 4). Telemachus longs to be reunited with his father, and to become more like him, so he goes on a journey of his own to find news of Odysseus. In the end, Telemachus and his father are reunited, and while at the beginning of the story Telemachus could not command any respect from the suitors, after his return Telemachus orders the suitors not to fight, and they listen to him, admitting that it was a "bold speech" that he gave and indicating their newfound respect for him (317). Telemachus' journey is significant, for as a result of it he becomes a more heroic character. Telemachus also illustrates the importance of ancestry and filial piety to the hero. Telemachus aspires to live up to his father's reputation, and any faith placed in him, such as by Athena, comes from the fact that he is Odysseus' son (23). Odysseus, also, is linked to his father Laertes, for he is referred to several times as "Laertes' son". This emphasis on the paternal line, and the importance of and establishment of ancestry, is important because it shapes who these characters become, and is a part of their identity.

The hero Oedipus, who is most popularly depicted in the plays *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, by Sophocles, embodies many of the same qualities as Odysseus; however, his status as a tragic hero, as opposed to an epic hero, means that there are some important differences in his story. The main difference is, of course, that the story of Oedipus begins in triumph and ends in suffering, while the story of Odysseus, the epic hero, begins in suffering and ends in triumph. Therefore, though both heroes

suffer, the life of the tragic hero is defined by his suffering. Although Oedipus is just as powerful as Odysseus, and also suffers from pride, at the end of *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus is stripped of his power instead of regaining it. And although Oedipus also takes a journey in *Oedipus at Colonus*, this journey is in response to his tragic circumstances, and does not end in unity and restoration of things lost, but in death.

Divine influence is a defining characteristic for these Greek heroes. The gods take an active role in these characters' lives, cursing and aiding them as they see fit. The lives of Odysseus and Oedipus are drastically altered by divine intervention; Odysseus is kept from his home for many years after angering Poseidon, and only returns home with the help of Athena. Oedipus, meanwhile, is cursed by a divine prophecy that leads him to commit patricide and incest despite his efforts to avoid his fate. These heroes are both at the mercy of the gods, and everything that happens to them has an explanation, a cause rooted in immortal action or actions of their own. The presence of these immortal figures creates tension in terms of mortality. As Nagy says, the gods are "exempt from the ultimate pain of death," while humans, even the heroic ones, are still susceptible to it. Therefore, "mortality is the burning question for the heroes," and "the human condition of mortality, with all its ordeals, defines heroic life itself" (10). This idea is also put forth by Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, when he tells Theseus that "only the gods can never age, the gods can never die [, while] all else in the world Time obliterates, crushes all to nothing" (Sophocles 322). The gods have all of the power in this world, power over humanity and over their own fates, while even the most powerful humans are helpless in the face of death.

Vengeance is also an integral part of these heroic tales, as humans and gods alike seek retribution and revenge on those who have wronged them. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is stranded from his home by Poseidon in retaliation for injuring Poseidon's son Polyphemus, and in the end Odysseus himself seeks violent revenge on the suitors who invaded his home. While the acts of revenge in the *Odyssey* are overt, in Oedipus' story the portrayal of revenge is more ironic. The act of murdering Laius was fated to occur, but it can also be read as a vengeful act, for when recollecting the incident in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus states that he "paid [Laius] back with interest" for trying to run him off of the road (Sophocles 206). However, because it was fated to occur, revenge does not seem to be the defining element in this scenario. A more subtle, though significant, act of revenge is Oedipus' blinding of himself after the truth about his past and the suicide of Jocasta has been revealed. This may not seem like revenge on the surface, but it could be considered a form of self-revenge through self-mutilation. Earlier in the play, when the murderer of Laius is still unknown, Oedipus pledges to hunt for the killer, to "fight for [Laius] as if he was my own father" and "stop at nothing" to find the culprit and "lay [his] hands on him" (173). Therefore, given that Oedipus is in fact the man whom he unknowingly pledged to fight in Laius' name, the act of blinding himself can be read as an act of self-revenge, a self-inflicted punishment that manifests the pain and guilt that tortures him from within. Whether explicit or not, revenge is a major part of these heroes' stories and reveals just how central vengeance is in classical views of morality.

As discussed, revenge plays a large part in the *Odyssey*, as well as the stories of Oedipus, but "revenge tragedy" as a genre became very popular during the English Renaissance; these revenge tragedies feature a character who is "called to write a wrong

done to him . . . or member of his family”, and also contain “ghosts”, “madness”, and “corruption” (“Revenge Tragedy”). Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a prime example of this type of drama, as Hamlet seeks revenge upon his uncle in response to the murder of his father. Hamlet functions as a heroic figure as well, for he is a noble figure who must use cunning, and eventually violence, in order to attain his revenge. The story of Hamlet in some ways unifies the stories of Odysseus and Oedipus, while also contradicting both stories. While Hamlet does triumph in killing Claudius and avenging his father, in the end he also dies a violent death. Thus revenge is not depicted as a source of victory for Hamlet, as it is for Odysseus. Hamlet is also much more ambivalent about seeking revenge. When he first receives the call to avenge from the Ghost, Hamlet is not pleased, for he says, “O cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right” (I.v. p. 28). Hamlet resents the fact that he has been given this responsibility to avenge his father’s death, and this creates a great deal of inner conflict for him. This can be seen after the players perform the speeches to Dido and Hecuba, where Hamlet laments his own lack of vengeful action in comparison to the characters in the play. Although he is “the son of a dear father murder’d, prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell,” Hamlet does not act on this in the early parts of the play, instead choosing to “like a whore, unpack [his] heart with words” (II. ii. p. 50). However, Hamlet finally resolves to follow through with revenge after learning that Fortinbras and his army are marching towards Poland, deciding that “from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth” (IV. iv. p. 86). In the end, Hamlet does achieve this revenge for his father, so in that way he does gain a kind of victory. However, Hamlet also dies, as do many other characters, thereby fulfilling the tragic element of the story. Revenge is not portrayed as fully triumphant in

this play; although Hamlet accepts his role as avenger as necessary in order to honor his father, and this revenge does seem to cause some good through Claudius' death, which removes the corruption that poisoned the Danish kingdom, in the end it leaves death and destruction for the avenger as well. Thus the picture of revenge in *Hamlet* is more complex than in the *Odyssey* or *Oedipus the King*, and in the end the reader is left with an ambiguous feeling in regards to the play's vengeful conclusion.

Hamlet also seems to differ in its depiction of divine influence in the lives of its characters. Although King Hamlet appears at the beginning as a ghost to call his son to action, he is absent throughout the rest of the play. The nature of his identity is in fact questioned by Hamlet, for at the end of Act II when Hamlet forms a plan to confirm the allegations made by the ghost against Claudius, he expresses doubt by saying that "the spirit that I have seen may be the devil . . . [who] abuses me to damn me" (II. ii. p. 50). Although the ghost is shown to be telling the truth, the doubt that Hamlet expresses and the mystery surrounding the ghost (we never learn who has sent him), contributes to a lack of certainty about divine power that is not seen in Greek heroes. There is a sense of fate within the play, as Hamlet makes repeated references to fortune; when going to meet the ghost, Hamlet states that his "fate cries out" to him to do so, though Marcellus tries to dissuade him (I. iv. p. 22). Later, in Act V, Hamlet tells Horatio that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will" (V. ii. p.110). There is always a sense that Hamlet is fulfilling some sort of divine plan by avenging his father's death, that it is somehow fated for him to do so. The ultimate agent of this fate, however, is not really discussed or revealed. Thus the godly presence in this tale is less defined, less concrete than it is in the *Odyssey*, where the gods themselves are actual characters in the

story. Although Hamlet does not deny the existence of divine influence in the world-- indeed, he supports it--the presence of doubt in regards to the nature of this influence and its purpose lends to a different depiction of divinity than in the classical view. The supernatural forces in the lives of Odysseus, Oedipus, and Hamlet legitimize or condemn their actions, including their acts of revenge, but as the divine presence recedes in Hamlet, so does the legitimacy of Hamlet's vengeance.

So far we have discussed the presence of fate and divinity, as well as the importance of revenge in the life of traditional heroes. However, there is a very important element not yet mentioned--the heroic quest on which a hero always embarks. The mythologist Joseph Campbell discusses the heroic quest in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where he lays out a common pattern for all heroes in myth and literature. Campbell states that all heroes follow a similar path in life--they leave the real world and enter a "region of supernatural wonder," and after claiming some sort of victory, return to the real world with the ability to benefit humanity in some way (30). Campbell emphasizes the necessity of a quest in a hero's story, and it is important to note that the hero's quest is not merely figurative; it is an actual physical journey. In describing Campbell's theory, Robert Segal states:

. . . A quest means a literal journey from home to a new world and then back. Literally, the journey is outward, from one place to another. Symbolically, the journey is inward, from one part of the mind (ordinary consciousness) to another part (the unconscious) and then back. Campbell presents a common plot, or pattern, for all hero myths that depict heroism as a journey. The outward pattern is meant to track a symbolic, psychological journey. ("On The Hero's Quest")

Here we see that Campbell draws a connection between the physical act of making a journey, and the metaphysical journey that accompanies it. Odysseus, of course, takes a

long, treacherous journey back to his home in Ithaca, while his son Telemachus also journeys to find news of his father, and returns home a stronger, more formidable man. Oedipus journeys away from Corinth in order to escape his fate, but in the end his journey shows him that this is impossible. Hamlet also takes a journey when he is banished by Claudius, but his return to Elsinore reinforces his destiny to enact revenge upon his uncle. The journeys that these characters take are significant in that they either result in or represent some great understanding or realization for these heroes throughout the course of their stories (the anagnorisis, as Aristotle calls it).

In the following chapters, I will cover novels that fall under the classification of postmodern. The term “postmodern” in literature is typically assigned to works written after the Second World War, but what characterizes postmodern literature is, as Brian McHale says in his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, its focus on ontology, or the nature of reality. He claims that postmodern fiction focuses on “the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects” (10). Thus, postmodern texts deal with metafictional questions, and often cause the characters and/or the reader to question the reality depicted within the text. As the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard states in the introduction to his work *The Postmodern Condition*, postmodernism is marked by the lack of faith in any sort of “metanarrative,” where a metanarrative can be defined as any story or ideology that seeks to explain the way the world functions, or provides an explanation of reality. The unfathomable destruction of warfare in the 20th century shatters these metanarratives, rendering them powerless to explain or justify these atrocities. This lack of faith leads postmodernist writers to break down these metanarratives, to question the ideals that have been viewed as fundamental to our

society. Heroism could be considered a metanarrative; as Lyotard says, “the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal, [and] is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements” (xxiv). There is no place for a hero in the postmodern world, where there is no justice, no sense of morality, and no god to aid us. The postmodern novels we will be discussing play with these heroic ideals as a way to view and understand reality, and in the end they deconstruct these ideals and show them to be incompatible and inadequate in understanding and surviving a postmodern world.

As I have said, the characteristics of heroism have a profound influence on the postmodern novels that I will discuss in coming chapters. The first novel is *Slaughterhouse-Five*, published by Kurt Vonnegut in 1969, which tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a man who is drafted into service during World War II and is present during the bombing of Dresden. I will then discuss two novels written by Jonathan Safran Foer; Foer, a Jewish-American writer, published his first novel *Everything Is Illuminated* in 2003, followed by *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* in 2005. Both of these novels feature young men who are searching for answers in the face of large-scale tragedy, namely the Holocaust, the attacks of September 11, and the bombing of Dresden. In this thesis, I will attempt to analyze these three novels in the context of heroism, discussing the ways in which these authors interact with heroic conventions such as revenge and fate in their depictions of the postmodern world, twisting and deconstructing them in order to illustrate their futility in the midst of unspeakable tragedy and warfare.

CHAPTER TWO

Slaughterhouse-Five

Kurt Vonnegut published *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, two decades after his own experience fighting in World War II and witnessing the bombing of Dresden. These experiences, which are shared by the narrator of this novel (also named Vonnegut), help to shape the narrative of Billy Pilgrim. A man who has become “unstuck in time,” Billy travels between the past, present, and future, as well as to the alien planet of Tralfamadore, showing his life before and after the war and chronicling his attempts to cope with the trauma of his wartime experience in Dresden (Vonnegut 22). Billy witnesses unspeakable destruction and violence during his time as a soldier, and he is never able to truly recover. In this novel, the author Vonnegut interacts with the ideas of fate and heroism in order to reveal the ways in which they contribute to the destruction caused by the bombing of Dresden, as well as war in general.

Billy Pilgrim is, of course, not the traditional hero. He does not command much respect in society as he is often scolded by his daughter, Barbara, and is viewed as a lunatic by people due to his fanatic devotion to the philosophy of Tralfamadore. Billy is described in his younger years as “a funny-looking youth--tall and weak,” who does fairly well in school; however, there does not seem to be anything particularly extraordinary about him, for as the son of a barber he has no notable ancestry or elevated social position (Vonnegut 23). During his time in the war, he is shown to be a dismal soldier, as he does not carry a weapon and often dresses in odd outfits, such as the blue toga he wears on the trek to Dresden; as Thomas Marvin points out, Billy is presented as

“a ridiculous parody of a soldier” (121). After the war, Billy’s numerous mental breakdowns are reminiscent of Hamlet in the later acts of the play; however, unlike Hamlet, Billy Pilgrim does not seem to harbor any impulse towards revenge, and is a much more passive character, except when it comes to his commitment to Tralfamadorism. Billy lacks the strength or status of the Greek heroes Odysseus and Oedipus, and the filial piety and vengeful purpose that drives these heroes and Hamlet in their stories. Because of this, Billy can be considered an anti-hero; David Simmons classifies Billy this way in his book *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel*, because Billy is a “pitiable [victim] whom the reader is able to empathize with, but not admire” (2). Billy is not a character one aspires to be; instead, his struggles and faults are points of connection between him and the reader. Marvin also makes an interesting point: “The tales of heroes give readers the impression that they can take charge of their own destiny [, while] stories about anti-heroes teach us about our limitations” (124). Vonnegut makes the “hero” of his story unremarkable and pathetic in order to emphasize his humanity, connect him to his audience through his suffering and the hopelessness of his situation.

As discussed in the introduction, a divine presence is a cornerstone of traditional heroism. Christianity appears to be the main source of transcendent presence in the novel, but Vonnegut does not seem to present it as infallible truth; instead, he questions the ways in which belief can be destructive. This novel attacks the divinity of Jesus, presenting it as problematic, for in Chapter Five, when Eliot Rosewater is describing *The Gospel from Outer Space*, he says:

The flaw in the Christ stories . . . 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 . . . *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. (Vonnegut 109)

As Simmons says, this view of Jesus as divine reinforces the idea of “justifiable violence” by “[constructing] Jesus’ innocence based on a system of hierarchy” and by ignoring “the seditiousness of the humanitarian Christ figure” who healed lepers and befriended prostitutes (124-125). To contrast this view of God, the “visitor from outer space” offers a new version of Christianity, in which Jesus “really was a nobody” and only became the divine Son of God after He was crucified; this, of course, would place more focus on Jesus’ humble origins and His attention to those whom the world considers “bums” with “no connections” (Vonnegut 109-110). Here Vonnegut depicts divinity in a negative light; although he refers to God as “The Most Powerful Being in the Universe,” the use of this title seems to be ironic, and he presents the idea of divinity as a pathway to corruption. This is in contrast to earlier depictions of heroes that have been discussed, where the heroes are at the mercy of the gods, or are able to be heroic with their support. Here Vonnegut seeks to redefine the story of God and Jesus, giving more power to humanity while stripping away the divinity of the Savior.

This principle can be seen in Vonnegut’s treatment of war in the novel, which serves to critique the idea that war is justifiable, whether through the concept of revenge or divine sanction. This novel is subtitled *The Children’s Crusade: A Duty Dance With Death*, and in the first chapter the narrator Vonnegut researches the Crusades, discussing how in history crusaders are either depicted as “ignorant and savage men” or are remembered for “the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered Christianity” (Vonnegut 15-16). In this view, all crusaders are either right or wrong; they are either justified in their faith or they are evil. Vonnegut

rejects the idea of “justifiable violence,” for he follows this account with a passage extolling the high cost of the Crusades, and the comparatively insignificant gain (Simmons 124). He then shares the true story of the Children’s Crusades, in which 30,000 children were tricked into joining the Crusades; instead of going to fight in Palestine as they believed they were, most were either killed in shipwrecks or sold into slavery in North Africa. Although Vonnegut’s friend Mackay seems to offer some justification for this, saying that the children were likely “idle and deserted” and “nurtured on vice and daring,” in the end the overwhelming picture of the plight of these children seems to be one of pity (Vonnegut 16). The children crusaders cannot really be categorized as good or evil; although they volunteer to fight in the war, presumably for idealistic reasons, they are misled by those above them, and are forced to enter into a dangerous situation for which they are unprepared, and which leads to their ruin. The fact that Vonnegut subtitles the book in this way indicates that we are supposed to relate the story of the children crusaders to the characters in the novel. Billy and his fellow American soldiers are all children’s crusaders in the Second World War, sucked into a war in which they are unprepared to fight and which destroys them, either through literal death, or through a sort of living death. Billy Pilgrim seems to suffer from this living death, for as Charles Harris points out in his article “Time, Uncertainty, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.: A Reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*,” the words “blue and ivory” are used several times in the novel, both to describe the feet of corpses and the feet of Billy Pilgrim, tying him to the idea of death despite the fact that he survives the war. Vonnegut’s focus on the suffering of the soldiers in war complicates this black-and-white view of war presented in history, for it redefines the way we look at war; instead of

making generalizations about which side was more justified in their actions, he focuses in on the suffering of the menial soldiers and the actual destruction that occurs as a result of this violence, drawing on texts written about World War I, such as Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*.

The bombing of Dresden is presented in a similar light in this novel. In Chapter 8, Billy remembers his experience witnessing the bombing, and describes the massive amount of death and destruction caused by it, saying that when he and his fellow soldiers surfaced the morning after the bombing, "Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals [, and] everybody else in the neighborhood was dead" (Vonnegut 178). In the next chapter, we meet Bertram Rumfoord, Billy's hospital mate after his plane crash, who is a history professor at Harvard. Rumfoord is writing a book about the US Army during World War II; in researching this book, he reads a passage from a book about Dresden, which presents the bombing as justified due to the air raids ravaged on Britain (187). However, when Billy tells Rumfoord that he was present at the bombing, Rumfoord refuses to believe him, accusing him of having a mental disease and refusing to discuss the bombing (192-193). This is then followed by a description of Billy's experience in the wake of the bombing, traveling through the ruined city and seeing injured horses which pass unnoticed by the American soldiers (196). The juxtaposition of these scenes seems to cast aspersions on the vision of Dresden espoused by Rumfoord; he believes that the destruction is justified. However, Billy's horrifying depiction of the bombing and Rumfoord's refusal to listen to Billy's firsthand account seems to invalidate Rumfoord's historical opinion on the matter. As Marvin says in his discussion of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, "the scenes are so artfully arranged that readers must question whether revenge for

even the most terrible atrocities could justify the slaughter of so many human beings” (115). Rumfoord seems to view the world through the lens of “an eye for an eye”, but his refusal to acknowledge the human element of the bombing by denying Billy’s story shows how cruel and inhumane this vision of the world is.

The theme of vengeance is also explored through the characters of Roland Weary and Paul Lazarro. Like Billy Pilgrim, Roland Weary is a young soldier, but unlike Billy, he has a romantic view of war in which he and his chosen fellows are The Three Musketeers, who “would be damned if they surrendered” (Vonnegut 42). Weary is fascinated by the idea of the Three Musketeers because of their “piety and heroism”, and he describes them in the same way the history book described crusaders in the first chapter of the novel, as men of “honor” who performed “great services” for Christianity (50-51). From this we can see that Weary views war and conflict through the lens of good and evil, honorable and dishonorable. Weary is also obsessed with violence and torture, and as we see throughout the novel, thoroughly preoccupied with revenge. He is shown to dominate over Billy from the very beginning, as the narrator tells us, because Weary has been ostracized by his peers. This feeling of inadequacy causes him to lash out at those who are “even more unpopular than himself”--in this case, Billy Pilgrim (35). This is not depicted as a just or honorable way to behave, and Weary is shown to be petty in his desire for revenge--this desire is intensified after the scouts abandon Weary and Pilgrim in a ditch. Weary blames Billy for this, and even when he is dying, Weary wants “to be avenged”, so he tells everyone around him that Billy is responsible for his death, and makes Paul Lazarro “give his word of honor” to “make Billy pay for Weary’s death” (79-80, 84). Although we are led to pity Weary for his suffering and his tragic death, this

obsession with condemning Billy for his death is obviously misplaced, and seems pointless and cruel in the midst of all of the suffering these men undergo. Billy is not really responsible for what happened to Weary; in reality, the real culprit is the government, which has sent these young men to suffer and die with little to no concern for their safety. Although Lazarro succeeds in killing Billy, this event does not seem that momentous. It takes place in the middle of the novel instead of the end, and is somewhat anticlimactic, for as a result of his ability to time travel, Billy only “experiences death for a little while”, and he is not even really present in his death (143). Thus, this vengeance carried out by Lazarro is petty and foolish, and does not have any real impact on the events of the novel. The fact that this blatant act of vengeance is shown to be ridiculous, misguided, and ineffective reinforces the idea that warfare as retaliation is ridiculous, misguided, and ineffective.

In the novel Billy relies heavily on the Tralfamadorians and their fatalistic view of the world in order to understand and process the trauma he faced during his time as a soldier. In a letter to his local newspaper, Billy explains the philosophy of time on Tralfamadore, which is that “all moments, past, present, and future, have always existed” and therefore there is nothing anyone can do to change the course of events; because of this, death should be viewed as a “bad condition” that is not permanent. Billy, of course, finds this to be comforting, and therefore reacts to all deaths with the Tralfamadorian detachment by saying “so it goes” (27). The phrase “so it goes” is repeated after almost every death that occurs throughout the novel as a constant reminder of the Tralfamadorian detachment in response to death. However, as Marvin says, “so it goes” should not be read as an “endorsement” of the Tralfamadorian philosophy; instead, the

contrast between the horrific deaths and suffering in the novel and the lack of compassion demonstrated by “so it goes” serve to illustrate the “ridiculous” nature of this reaction to suffering (128). This philosophy is meant to be criticized, for as Martin Coleman points out, by adopting this attitude towards suffering Billy “aligns himself with a traditional privileging of knowledge, wrongly understood, over concrete human experience” (689). This, Coleman states, is a “loss of human connection” which is almost akin to “inhumanity” (694). “So it goes,” Darwinian in its response to human suffering, reveals a lack of empathy, a detachment from our fellow man, and Vonnegut seems to suggest that the Tralfamadorian belief in fate or determinism is an inadequate response to the large-scale tragedy and loss of wartime. It is also important to note that, as David Vanderwecken mentions, this view of fate is “without design”, and therefore “chance rules,” as opposed to deity or nature. This absence of divinity is important, as it again separates Billy from the more traditional heroes, who base their purpose and worldview on some form of divine or supernatural presence. There are no gods in Billy’s understanding of the world, for the godly worldview of Christianity, in this case, has been found lacking in the face of intense suffering caused by the violence of the war.

The unorthodox treatment of time in the novel serves to illustrate the senselessness of the violence and disillusionment Billy faces as a result of his wartime experience. In the novel, the narrator jumps between past, present, and future, from 1940’s Germany to 1970’s New York to the planet of Tralfamadore as it chronicles Billy’s life before, during, and after the war and his struggle to come to terms with the trauma of his time as a soldier. Billy is unable to feel settled in a linear time structure, and therefore he has become “unstuck in time” (Vonnegut 23). Coleman suggests that Billy

cannot operate within the normal boundaries of time because “he does not feel the connections between his experiences; instead, he feels disconnection and disorder absolutely,” and therefore cannot use time in order to “make sense” of what has happened to him (688). However, Coleman also points out that Billy’s movement between different points of his life may not actually be physical (685). For instance, after the scouts leave Billy and Roland Weary in the ditch, Billy has a “hallucination” that he is ice-skating, but this quickly “[gives] way to time travel.” Billy “[finds] himself” in New York after the war, giving a speech after being elected to the Lions Club. The narrator then returns to Billy “back in the bed of the frozen creek” with the threat of Weary hanging over him, and Weary seems to make no reference to Billy disappearing or reappearing after a journey through time (Vonnegut 49-50). This episode seems to suggest that Billy does not physically travel to these different moments in time, but visits them in his mind. The fact that Billy cannot fully escape the difficulties of his life, even through time travel, illustrates his inability to escape the traumatic experiences in his life; although he tries to go to a happier moment while trapped in a hopeless situation, he is unable to remove himself from the pain and suffering of his life. This can also be seen in Chapter Four, when Billy watches the documentary about American bombers in World War II backwards, therefore viewing the “unbombing” of Dresden instead of its destruction (74). This is clearly a delusion on Billy’s part, illustrating yet again his manipulation of the structure of time in order to cope with the trauma of the bombing of Dresden. But, of course, the bombing of Dresden is irreversible, and therefore Billy’s attempt to manipulate time in order to undo what was done shows how powerless he is to control

what happens (or happened) to him, and how inadequate his theories about time are in terms of coping with this tragedy.

Interestingly, Billy's devotion to Tralfamadorism does not completely divorce him from association with Christianity in the novel. As many critics have pointed out, Billy Pilgrim is the representation of the human Jesus discussed in the novel. This can be seen through his pacifism in war by refusing to carry a gun, as well as his relationship with the porn star Montana Wildhack, which Simmons points out is similar to Christ's relationship with Mary Magdalene (124). Billy also views himself as a savior to humanity; as Simmons points out, this can be seen in Chapter Two, where Billy is introduced to the Tralfamadorian philosophy of time, and decides to write letters to local newspapers sharing this knowledge about time (121-122). Billy believes that by doing this, he is "going to comfort so many people" by "prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls" (Vonnegut 28-29). However, as Simmons says, Billy is not very effective in this regard, for he "is unable to persuade even his own daughter of the truth . . ." (124).

Although Billy has this desire to ease human suffering, he is unable to affect any sort of change, thus exposing his limitations as a savior; unlike the traditional divine Jesus, Billy is not all-powerful. Billy's death again associates him with Christ, for he is also able to predict his death; this can be seen in Billy's death scene in 1976, where Billy is giving a speech on aliens. Billy announces his impending death to the audience, and releases the guards from duty when they offer to protect him, saying "it is time for me to be dead for a little while--and then live again" (Vonnegut 142-143) This scene is very reminiscent of Christ's crucifixion. Billy knows he is going to die, while also knowing

that this is not the end; however, his knowledge is based, not on the omniscience and omnipresence of a divine God, but on the knowledge given to him by the

Tralfamadorians. Vanderwerken emphasizes this difference, for he says:

Vonnegut has created a parody Christ whose gospel is Tralfamadorian, who redeems no one, who “cried very little although he often saw things worth crying about, and in that respect, at least, he resembled the Christ of the carol.” Indeed, Pilgrim's dilemma is that he is a double Savior with two gospels—a weeping and loving Jesus and a Tralfamadorian determinist. His opposed gospels drive him mad, render him impotent, and result in his crackpot letters to newspapers and in his silent weeping for human suffering. (“Pilgrim’s Dilemma”)

Here Vanderwerken suggests that Billy is ineffective as a “human Jesus” because he is torn between two ideologies, neither of which provides true relief; Christianity is often used as justification for wide-scale violence and warfare, while Tralfamadorian determinism perpetuates detachment from the human experience of suffering in the face of these violent acts. Thus Billy is left with no legitimate sense of relief and understanding in the aftermath of his tragic experiences in war. However, there may be some hope to be found in Billy’s story. Coleman puts forth the idea that by emphasizing the lack of empathy and humanity in the novel, “Vonnegut [is] moving away from frozen relations, isolationism, and fatalism toward human connection and the possibility of richer experience” (695). By illustrating what is lacking in various viewpoints about war and humanity, Vonnegut reveals that it is not ideology that will save humanity, but empathy.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut seeks to deconstruct traditional views of time and war in order to illustrate their destructive impact on the world through the unspeakable violence committed during World War II. Religious justification, a fatalistic approach to time and human history, and a propensity for revenge have caused humans to

commit atrocious acts of violence against each other and perpetuate suffering while detaching themselves from the gravity of the destruction they have committed. The only hope for redemption in humanity is through empathy, or engaging with the human side of these events (as opposed to the historical) in order to fully understand the consequences of these devastating modes of thinking. What has been done already cannot be undone, but by focusing on connecting with our fellow humans, we may avoid perpetuating this destruction in the future.

In coming chapters I will discuss similar themes in regards to the novels of Jonathan Safran Foer. Although his novels were written many years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Foer seems to interact with similar conventions of heroism, revenge, and fate in order to understand and cope with intense trauma. Foer also utilizes similar techniques to do so. For instance, in *Everything is Illuminated*, the narrators seek to find understanding and meaning in his family's history with the Holocaust; in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the bombing of Dresden is explored as a national tragedy alongside the terrorist attacks of September 11. By examining these three novels in the context of their treatment of heroism, I aim to show how these postmodern writers interpret the influence of these ideals on some of the most destructive events of the 20th and 21st centuries.

CHAPTER THREE

Everything is Illuminated

Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* is a semi-autobiographical novel about an American man (also named Jonathan Safran Foer) who travels to Ukraine, searching for the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis during World War II. He is joined by Alexander and his grandfather, who serve as Jonathan's tour guides, and who become unexpectedly entangled in Jonathan's search for Trachimbrod, the city from which his ancestors came. Alexander and Jonathan later work in collaboration to write about their experiences, with Jonathan creating a mythical account of his ancestors in Trachimbrod and Alexander relating his and Jonathan's journey in the present day. Jonathan and Alexander also exchange letters, and through these letters the reader is given insight into the process of writing about tragic events. As with his later novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer explores the ways that people cope with traumatic events. These characters all have to grapple with the Holocaust and its ramifications on their lives. Foer plays with ancient ideas of heroism, morality, and response to tragedy throughout the novel, eventually revealing their incompatibility with such a monumental and horrific event as the Holocaust.

The idea of heroism is brought up fairly early in the novel, as in the first chapter Alexander refers to the character of Jonathan Safran Foer as the "hero of this story" (*Illuminated* 1). This, combined with the fact that he shares the name of the author, creates anticipation for his appearance in the story, for surely the character named after (and most likely representing) the author, the "hero" of the story, would be a monumental

figure. However, this proves not to be the case; Alexander is underwhelmed upon his first meeting with Jonathan, for Jonathan does not measure up to Alexander's expectation of what an American should be. Alexander notes that Jonathan "was severely short [,] wore spectacles and had diminutive hairs . . . he did not appear like either the Americans I had witnessed in magazines . . . in truth, he did not look like anyone special at all [, and] I was underwhelmed to the maximum" (32). From this description, it is clear that Jonathan does not measure up to Alexander's idealized picture of what an American should be. The American stereotype he holds may represent the more traditional idea of a hero, at least to Alexander, and Jonathan, does not measure up to this ideal. As a physical presence, Jonathan is underwhelming, and this also seems to apply to his narrative presence. While he is the author of the sections concerning Trachimbrod, is present during Alexander's retelling of their journey, and is echoed into the letters Alexander writes to him, Jonathan's point of view is never provided from his own voice. For as a character seems removed from the action of the novel, which is interesting and unexpected coming from the "hero" of the tale. Nevertheless, Alexander continues to call Jonathan the hero throughout the novel, forcing the reader to question whether or not Jonathan is in fact the hero of this story.

While Alexander considers Jonathan to be the hero of their story, it seems that Alexander is the real protagonist. Much of the story is told from his point of view, and his life is the one the reader is given the most access to. Alexander is keen to cultivate an image of himself as a rich and promiscuous man in order to impress his father and Jonathan. However, in a letter to Jonathan, Alexander reveals that the stories about the women he had been with were false, that Alexander "manufactured these not-truths

because they make [him] feel like a premium person” and because he wants to be a model of masculinity for his younger brother (144). The image of a rich, powerful womanizer has long been held up as an ideal, from Odysseus to modern celebrities such as George Clooney, but Alexander’s attempt to portray himself in such a way seems pathetic and unnecessary. It does not impress Jonathan, and from the story one can see that Alexander’s father is neither an admirable character in the story nor worthy of the effort to impress. Thus, Alexander, just like Jonathan, deconstructs the superficial idea of heroism.

At the end of the story, one must return to the question of who is the “hero” of this novel. While Jonathan was referred to as the hero throughout the novel, he does not accomplish anything heroic in the end; instead, Alexander triumphs, as he overcomes his father and assumes the role of head of the household. Before his journey with Jonathan, Alexander was abused by his father, and pressured into lying about who he is in order to please him. Alexander describes his father as “a first-rate puncher” (*Illuminated* 6). For Alexander, his father is his greatest antagonist, and in the end Alexander defeats him, forcing him to leave and assuming the role of leader in his family. Jonathan does contribute to this, for during their journey to Trachimbrod he shares a piece of his writing with Alexander, which depicts Alex standing up to his father and fighting against his tyranny within the family (160). In Grandfather’s letter to Jonathan at the end of the novel, Grandfather tells Jonathan about Alexander’s fight with his father, and the language used to describe it is nearly identical to what Jonathan had written earlier in the novel, showing Jonathan’s effect on Alexander as a sort of mentor figure (274). Jonathan himself does nothing heroic; instead he takes a backseat role in Alexander’s victory.

However, it is questionable whether Alexander would have stood up to his father if Jonathan had not suggested it. Thus, one might conclude that true heroism is not the result of individual merit and achievement, but of connection and collaboration. Alexander relies on Jonathan for insight into what needs to be done, but without Alexander acting on Jonathan's advice, Jonathan's words would mean nothing. It also important to note that Alexander's triumph does not bring him everything he desires. Although he has removed the threat of his father, Alexander is now forced to assume responsibility for his family's welfare, and must relinquish his own dreams of moving to America, so his victory is somewhat incomplete. Through these characters, Foer continues his contradiction of traditional heroism, depicting a new brand of heroism that relies on connection instead of individualism, yet lacks the power to resolve fully the issues that these characters face.

One trait that Jonathan and Alexander share in regards to heroism is the quest for knowledge and understanding, which manifests itself through the journey to find Trachimbrod. Jonathan travels to Ukraine because he wants to find Augustine, the woman who saved his grandfather Safran from persecution during World War II, and to see the village, or *shtetl*, from which his ancestors came. They eventually find a woman who at first is assumed to be Augustine because she is familiar with Trachimbrod and knew Safran. However, although this woman is related to Safran's past (she is Lista, one of the women he had relations with in the novel), she is not Augustine, and they learn that Trachimbrod was completely destroyed during the invasion of Ukraine in World War II. While Jonathan does not really find the answers he was looking for, Alexander gains important knowledge about Grandfather's past, and his experience during the Holocaust.

Like the quest Oskar undertakes in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, their journey does not bring them the answers they seek. Jonathan, the instigator of his quest, does not accomplish what he set out to do, making the literal quest, the more traditional one, somewhat of a failure. However, as I will discuss later, it has a great effect on Grandfather.

The fictional recreations of Jonathan's family history in his sections on Trachimbrod are interesting in that they are mythological in nature and style. Jonathan seems to be creating a lineage for himself, establishing himself as a character in relation to his ancestors, much like Odysseus is known as the son of Laertes, and Telemachus as the son of Odysseus. This mythical history contains many characteristics of the stories of the Greek heroes through their depiction of violence, revenge, and sexuality. There are conflicting factions in the community (the Uprighters versus the Slouchers), tragic heroes and heroines in Yankel, Brod, the Kolker, and Safran, and the influence (or at least the belief of their influence) in divine beings (both the Hebrew God and the Dial statue). People in the village are often referred to by epithets, such as "the mad squire Sofiowka" and "The Well Regarded Rabbi." However, the story differs from classical myths in that Jonathan does not utilize linear narrative when telling his story. The story of Yankel, Brod, and the Kolker is intermixed with the story of Jonathan's grandfather, Safran, who is a couple of generations removed from the other characters. Brod and Safran both experience misfortune and seem incapable of finding true happiness-Brod is plagued by wave after wave of abuse, while Safran is unable to be with the gypsy girl whom he loves because of racial and cultural prejudice. The intermingling of these stories seems to point

to the inevitability of suffering; none of his ancestors are able to escape or overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of their joy.

As Elaine Safer discusses in her article “Illuminating the Ineffable: Jonathan Safran Foer’s Novels,” Foer contributes to this bleak view through multiple references to destruction of the village of Trachimbrod during the Holocaust, “foreshadowing” its demise (Safer 117). As Safer mentions, during the search in the river for Trachim’s body, Jonathan discusses the tradition that arises from it, saying that “for the next 150 years, the shtetl would host an annual contest to “find” Trachim” (Foer 8). As the original date of the search was in 1791, that would put the end of the 150-year-period at 1941, the year in which the Nazis invaded Ukraine. This is again referenced when discussing Safran’s various dalliances with older women. As Jonathan describes Safran’s relations with the first widow, he mentions her fascination with his dead arm and states that she remembered it “seven years later, on June 18, 1941, as the first German war blasts shook her wooden house to its foundations . . .” (168). These references to the destruction of Trachimbrod bring an element of fate to these sections of the novel, tying in with the mythological aspect. For the reader, the fact that Trachimbrod will soon be destroyed, that its story will soon end is completely established; therefore, the repeated references to its destruction seem to emphasize the inevitability of this event. Although the residents of Trachimbrod do not know it, the reader of the novel does, allowing them to experience the novel in the same way that ancient audiences would have experienced dramatic reproductions of classical myths, such as the story of Oedipus.

Interestingly, the idea of fate also plays a part in Alexander’s sections of the novel. Although the reader is unaware of what is to come, and the characters at the time

are ignorant of future events, in some places Alexander inserts his own reflections on these events during his narration. For instance, when Alexander discusses the process of going through the box from “Augustine”, he implores Jonathan to “save Grandfather” from what is to come in the next few paragraphs, where he finds the photograph of his wife, child, and Herschel. While the reader is not privy to this information, or its significance (as they would have been with an ancient tragedy) until later in the novel, Alexander’s foreknowledge seems to add an element of inevitability to the event, as both in present and future he is unable to prevent these terrible things from happening. These interjections by Alexander in the text create an atmosphere of helplessness for the characters, in which the pain they face is inevitable because they can only recognize the danger in hindsight.

The idea of fate in the novel is complicated by the fact that there seems to be no discernible divine presence. Although referenced by many of the characters, both in Trachimbrod (where the majority of the characters are Jewish) and in the present day, God seems not to be an active presence in the novel. The question of theodicy does come into play when discussing traumatic events; for instance, when “Augustine” is relating the story of the Nazi raid at Trachimbrod and Kolki, detailing all of the violent and horrific acts committed, Grandfather states that the Messiah did not come to save them because “it was not the end of the world.” “Augustine” replies that it was, but the Messiah did not come, because “there is no God . . . I could not believe in a God that would challenge faith like this . . . I could not believe in a God that could not stop what happened” (189). This view of God in the wake of the Holocaust is shared by many Jewish Holocaust writers, such as Elie Wiesel in his novel *Night*, and seems to be the

dominant attitude towards God in Foer's novel. The novel seems to reject any sort of divinity in the world, and therefore God himself is not a presence in the novel. This differs greatly from classical mythology, where gods and goddesses are very much present and take an active role in shaping the fates of the characters in the stories.

So if there is no divine element to this idea of fate, what is its purpose in the novel? One may conclude that it seeks to highlight the lack of divine presence, as it contrasts greatly with traditional ideas about fate, religion, and morality. Menachem Feuer takes note of this contrast, saying:

Although this section begins as many fables do, it is merely a means of deceiving the reader who believes he or she will find a moral and optimistic lesson. The real lesson is, in fact, both pessimistic and tragic. For one thing, it does not seem to provide the materials necessary to cope with trauma; and in this sense, it differs from the fable. (36)

The use of fatalism in this novel does not seem to carry any moral or divine implications-- while Oedipus is cursed because of his father Laius' sins against the gods, there is no being who creates fate for the characters of the novel; horrible events happen without reason or justification, but the characters are unable to work against this fate. Even in the retelling of it, Alexander and Jonathan seem unable to alter the events, even if they really want to do so. Thus the idea of fate contributes to the idea that suffering is inevitable, and emphasizes the powerlessness of humanity to work against this. Foer seems to create a deterministic view of fate similar to the philosophy of Tralfamadore in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Like with Vonnegut, this idea is invalidated by the ending, although to a lesser extent here. Alexander overcomes his father and is able to escape his abuse and protect his family; however, the conflict between Alexander and his father is a fairly minor one in the context of the novel, and while that conflict is resolved, the larger conflicts--

Grandfather's guilt, the truth about Augustine, the horrors of the Holocaust--are left unanswered. It is also important to consider that the novel is not completely devoid of free will, for as Francisco Collado-Rodriguez discusses, Alexander's grief about his grandfather's past, as well as Grandfather's decision to commit suicide, is "a reminder of free will, [and] of the place of free will in historical reality" (64), for these characters still have the ability to choose at the present moment despite their inability to understand the ramifications of their actions. It may seem difficult to reconcile these different views, but it is through them that Foer attempts to navigate the struggle of coping with traumatic events, by illustrating that "a capacity to tolerate such multiple and contradictory registers might constitute a healing component of response to trauma" (Collado-Rodriguez 64). Until the characters (and the reader) are able to accept the coexistence of these different approaches to time and human involvement in suffering, they cannot begin to sort through or understand the traumatic events that occur throughout the novel.

In this novel, Foer plays with the idea of heroic revenge. The most overt example of this is the revenge that Brod takes out upon Sofiowka after he rapes her. On her way back from the Trachimday festival, she is attacked by Sofiowka. Upon returning to her house, she finds Yankel dead, and the Kolker waiting for her, wanting to be with her. She resists, but finally agrees to go with him if he will do something for her, and the next morning, "Sofiowka was found . . . swinging by the neck from the wooden bridge [;] his severed hands were hanging from strings tied to his feet, and across his chest was written, in Brod's red lipstick: ANIMAL" (Foer 205). This gruesome scene appears to be the result of Brod's revenge against Sofiowka for his attack the previous night, aided by the Kolker. This violent act of vengeance is reminiscent of those in the *Odyssey*, where

Odysseus slaughters the suitors who have invaded his home and the servants that turned against him, as well as punishments outlined in the Torah for breaking God's laws. However, despite the validity of Brod's anger, and the reader's sympathy with her position, this vengeful act does not accomplish much. Although Sofiwka is dead, his reputation does not seem to change, for the novel says that even after his death, "[the] shtetl still uses [his name] for maps and Mormon census records" (89) Sofiwka may not be an admirable character, but he is still a part of the community, still a defining force in the village. His death cannot erase him completely, cannot undo the things he has done. It cannot even end Brod's suffering, as one attacker is exchanged for another when the Kolker suffers a head injury at work, and develops an alternate, more aggressive and violent personality.

While Sofiwka was a more clear-cut example of evil, the Kolker is not himself a bad character, complicating a traditional view of morality where there is good and evil, and the distinctions between the two are clearly defined. Revenge may seem like a solution to evil, but in the end it does not keep Brod safe, and in an ambiguous case, such as with the Kolker, revenge does not even seem like an option. Brod accepts Kolker's abusive treatment of her (this may have to do with her guilt and shame over her past); however, this approach, while possibly more admirable, also does not keep Brod from suffering, as the Kolker dies, leaving her alone. After his death, Brod puts a bead on her necklace to remember him, and muses that "the hole . . . is not the exception in life, but the rule, [and that] the hole was no void; the void exists around it" (139). Brod seems to view death and suffering as inevitable. Loss and pain are the only concrete things in life, and everything that surrounds it—such as ideas of morality, revenge, and faith—are hollow,

between victim and perpetrator that traditionally limits fiction . . . [and setting] forth an ethics of complicity that forgoes [this] distinction . . .” (250). Although one might be tempted to judge Grandfather for what he has done, Foer seems to encourage a more nuanced view of guilt and judgment. By suggesting that all of the characters share in Grandfather’s guilt, Foer lessens the judgment leveled towards him and instead invites the reader to question traditional views of morality. It is difficult to say whether or not Grandfather should be judged for what he has done—as Alexander says, “he would have been a fool to do anything else” (252). There seems to be limitations on his choices, and either choice leaves Grandfather with the loss of someone he cares about. The tragic situation he finds himself in as the result of 20th century warfare is hopeless, illustrating the way in which the problems presented by technology and destruction of the postmodern world are incapable of being interpreted through traditional modes of thinking. Conventional morals seem only to contribute to the complexity of this situation, instead of alleviating it, and thus it is deconstructed throughout the course of this novel.

Although conventional morality seems to be a point of contention in the novel, it has a profound effect upon Grandfather and his view of past events. Grandfather feels guilty about revealing Herschel as a Jew, leading to his death. After the journey to Trachimbrod and the revelation of his dark past, Grandfather is visibly more melancholy, and Alexander even catches him crying alone several times. As mentioned previously, Grandfather certainly condemns himself, for he says that he “murdered Herschel” through what he has done (*Illuminated* 228). Grandfather also becomes obsessed with finding Augustine, and Alexander connects this desire to his grandfather’s guilt, for he says that “she is not Herschel, as Grandfather wanted her to be, and she is not my

grandmother, as he wanted her to be, and he is not Father, as he wanted her to be” (242). Here Foer suggests that Grandfather’s need to find Augustine is tied to his need to find closure and resolution about his guilt through the people who were present at the time. However, Alexander says that the search is pointless, that the real Augustine cannot be found and is not a substitute for those other people; even if it was possible, finding Augustine would not bring Grandfather what he seeks. In the end, Grandfather seems to realize the futility of trying to make sense or atone for his crime, and instead commits suicide. This would be a fairly typical response in a classical tragedy, where a hero would sacrifice himself in the wake of his dishonorable or horrific action as a way of expressing despair and restoring honor. However, in this novel Grandfather’s suicide does not follow this pattern, for he is triumphant in his decision to kill himself as opposed to despairing or being ashamed. In his letter to Jonathan, he says, “I am complete with happiness . . . it is what I must do, and I will do it” (276). Grandfather views his death as his duty to his grandchildren, for he wants so much for them to “live without violence . . . [and therefore] they must cut all of the strings . . .” (275). Grandfather (and his son, Alexander’s father) are vehicles of violence and pain in Alexander and Iggy’s lives, and Grandfather realizes that in order for them to be happy, they must be free of these burdens. Grandfather knows that he will never recover from the guilt of what he has done, and therefore the only course of action is to remove himself from their lives. His death is the resolution, and even that leaves pain in its wake for his family. This ending illustrates the perpetuity of suffering; there seems to be no perfect solution to this predicament, no course of action that will alleviate the pain that these characters experience. Although Grandfather is giving his grandsons the chance to move forward

with their lives, Alexander is left to grieve his grandfather, assume responsibility for running the household, and relinquish his dream of moving to America. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be a better solution to their problems, and thus at the end of the novel the reader is left conflicted over whether to rejoice for the characters or pity them.

In this novel, the characters we encounter struggle to understand themselves, their families, and the world around them in the wake of unimaginable pain and tragedy. The ancestors in Trachimbrod suffer personal loss and pain, as well as the eventual destruction of their village and their people in the attacks of World War II. The two families in this novel have been affected deeply by the Holocaust, and the later generations (Jonathan and Alexander) struggle to learn about their families' pasts in order to gain an understanding of their own identity. In chronicling this journey, Foer borrows from ancient models of heroism and mythology, combining them in interesting ways in order to illustrate the failings of traditional morality in a postmodern world, ravaged by violence and destruction. Morality is not viewed as deplorable, but it is shown to be incompatible, a source of complexity and confusion in the postmodern age instead of a source of wisdom. The only way to understand and cope with suffering in this novel is to accept its inevitability, and look to others for refuge, companionship and motivation. At the end of the novel, none of these characters find the answers they are seeking, and the only hope available comes from the connections they forged with each other throughout the story. Not every character's story ends hopefully, however, and thus this novel stresses the omnipresence of pain in human existence. Reconciling oneself to this fact, and seeking refuge in fellow human beings, seems to be the only real chance at finding some measure of happiness.

CHAPTER FOUR

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

As seen in his previous novel, Foer seems to play with the idea of the traditional hero, in order to present new ideas of how to cope with tragedy in a postmodern world, full of extreme and unprecedented warfare and violence. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, the world of young protagonist Oskar Schell is torn apart by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The ways in which Oskar attempts to sort through this trauma play into this idea of a classic hero. In the end, however, Oskar's more "heroic" actions are shown to be inadequate, and reveal these traditional ideals of heroism to be meaningless in the face of postmodern trauma; instead, it is through human connection and reconciliation that one can find begin to heal.

On the surface, Oskar does not embody many of the qualities attributed to traditional heroes. He is not of noble or divine origin; instead, he is middle-class, the son of a jeweler. Although it is clear that Oskar is highly intelligent and creative, he is in no way special or notable in society. Oskar also does not seem to embody many of the qualities characteristic of a traditional hero, such as bravery. Indeed, Oskar is afraid of nearly everything, from wearing colored clothing to riding the subway, as he has developed paranoia in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Overall, Oscar is certainly not the archetypal hero, and this is significant because it signals the breakdown of these ancient heroic ideals embodied by figures such as Odysseus and Achilles. Oskar is, more or less, a fairly average person; therefore, when he uses more "heroic" methods to solve

his problems, they do not work, for they are not compatible with the world Oskar lives in and the problems he faces.

One of Oskar's "heroic" tendencies is his inclination for revenge, which can be seen by the reader through his often-vengeful imagination. At many points in the novel, Oskar envisions enacting vengeance upon those who have wronged him in petty or immature ways. For instance, during a therapy session with Dr. Fein, Oskar is angered by his therapist's suggestion that there could be some good to arise from his father's death. In the text, it appears that Oskar responds violently, kicking over a chair and screaming profanities at him. However, it is immediately revealed that he did not actually do this, for he says, "That was what I wanted to do [, but] instead I just shrugged my shoulders" (*Extremely Loud* 203). Here Oskar wants to retaliate against Dr. Fein for the pain that he has inflicted upon him emotionally, but instead of fighting back, he reacts by shrugging, therefore signaling defeat. Oskar is angry at this doctor (maybe rightfully so), but in the end he decides to passively accept this treatment instead of retaliating, which is a good decision as acting out violently would likely make Oskar's situation worse. Oskar also faces bullying from children at his school, in particular at the hands of a boy named Jimmy Snyder, and he copes with this situation in a similar way to his interaction with Dr. Fein. At a performance of *Hamlet*, Jimmy impersonates Oskar's grandma, mocking her odd behavior at the theatre. Oskar feels protective of her, saying that he "wished the two of [them] could go somewhere far away . . ." (144). During the play, Oskar imagines taking over the scene, verbally confronting Jimmy for his "crimes", beating him violently with a skull, and receiving admiration from the crowd. This vision is probably the most overt representation of traditional heroic revenge, reminiscent in some ways of Odysseus'

return to Ithaca and slaughtering of the suitors at the end of *The Odyssey*. However, Oskar yet again does not actually follow through with this fantasy, instead saying “it would have been great” (147). Oskar seems to lack the courage to follow through with his visions of revenge, but again, this decision seems to be for the better. Oskar attempts to push back against Jimmy Snyder’s bullying later in the novel when Jimmy tries to force Oskar to call his mother a “whore”, but Oskar uses grammar to turn the trick around on him. However, when Jimmy threatens to turn this verbal confrontation into a physical one by saying, “prepare to die,” Oskar backs down when he sees that there is no teacher or adult around to intervene (192). Here, Oskar shows that intellectually he has the skill to defeat his so-called nemesis, but he is not willing to use violence (or not capable of doing so). These episodes, though they seem trivial, are significant because they show how truly incompatible revenge is in the postmodern world. As Matthew Mullins says in his article “Boroughs and Neighbors: Traumatic Solidarity in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *‘Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close’*”, by sharing Oskar’s “inner monologue with the reader, but [withholding] it from the other characters . . . the need to react violently and emotionally against people who do not truly affect him . . . is removed as a viable option” (310). Oskar is unable, or unwilling, to follow through with his ideas of revenge because he seems to recognize (even subconsciously) that it will not actually solve his problems; as Ilka Saal states, they “cannot be placed ‘within the schemes of prior knowledge’” (460), and may actually make his situation worse. Thus, even in these more shallow conflicts, the validity of revenge begins to deteriorate.

The use of *Hamlet* in this novel is significant, as it helps to reinforce these ideas about traditional heroism and revenge in postmodern society. *Hamlet* plays a fairly

significant role in this novel, as Oskar's class performs the play. *Hamlet* is a play that reveals the destruction caused by the ruthless pursuit of revenge. Hamlet is driven to avenge his father's death by a supernatural mandate, but in the end he is destroyed by it, thus illustrating the futility of revenge as a reaction to traumatic events. As Oskar says at the beginning of the novel, "if everyone wanted to play Hamlet at once, they couldn't, because there aren't enough skulls!" (*Extremely Loud* 3). This quote serves to reestablish the path of vengefulness and retaliation as incompatible with the world we live in. It is also interesting to note that Oskar is cast, not as Hamlet, which would be expected, but as Yorick, in the school play. The significance of this is not completely clear; it is possible it represents the loss of childhood innocence Oskar has faced due to his traumatic experiences. However, one may also consider that Yorick is a more passive character in the play (in fact, he may be the most passive, as he is dead, and therefore silent). This passivity may reinforce the separation between Oskar and these heroic ideals; instead of being cast as the vengeful prince, he is cast as a dead servant. The use of Yorick also may emphasize the conflict Oskar faces throughout the novel over how to view his father's death. In *Hamlet*, Yorick appears as nothing but a skull; in contrast, Thomas Schell Jr.'s body was never found. Oskar does not have a body to mourn, and therefore he has no tangible evidence of what happened to his father, and the mystery surrounding what happened to his father plagues Oskar and makes it difficult for him to cope with his father's death.

In the book, one can see Oskar imagine taking revenge on those who wrong him, though he does not act upon it. The revenge Oskar seeks against his mother, however, serves as the clearest illustration of the destructive and futile nature of seeking

vengeance. It is very clear throughout the novel that Oskar holds a large amount of resentment towards his mother, mostly in regards to her friendship with Ron. Oskar says that he is angry with her for “spending so much time laughing with Ron when she should have been adding to the Reservoir of Tears” (*Extremely Loud* 52). He is upset, ostensibly, because he feels that his mother is betraying his father, and himself, by trying to find happiness after his death instead of holding on to him and her grief, and (in Oskar’s eyes) replacing his father with this other male figure. During a heated argument, this resentment rises to the surface, and Oskar lashes out (apparently involuntarily) by telling her that “If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you [to be the one who had died]” (171). His mother is hurt by this, and has to leave the room. Oskar realizes how cruel his words were, and apologizes; however, he still does not seem to forgive her, as he says (in regards to his bruises): “I don’t put them there for her, but still I want her to ask me how I got them (even though she probably knows) and to feel sorry for me (because she should realize how hard things are for me), and to feel terrible (because at least some of it is her fault)” (173). It is in this scene that Oskar perhaps is least likeable, for he is most aggressive in his vengefulness. Although he does not seem to be completely aware of it, Oskar is actively trying to cause his mother pain. While there is sympathy to be found in Oskar’s position, it is clear that his anger is unjustified. Therefore, his attempts to inflict emotional pain on his mother in response to his own pain are shown to be particularly immature and unfair, and extremely detrimental to their relationship. It is hard to completely fault Oskar for this, as he is only a child, but from this situation one can see that vengefulness in response to pain leaves nothing but more pain in its wake.

In the wake of his father's death, Oskar is filled with complex emotions that he must struggle with throughout the novel. In addition to the feelings of loss and anger, Oskar also seems to struggle with guilt. This guilt stems from his inability to answer his father's last phone call, which as Todd Atchison points out, is to Oskar is a "betrayal of silence that continually wracks him with remorse" (361). Oskar reveals the pain that this secret has caused him when he says that it "was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into," and he carries this secret with him throughout the course of the novel (*Extremely Loud* 71); although the reader knows about the phone messages from the beginning, Oskar does not make his confession until the very end of the book. When Oskar finds William Black, and tells him the truth, he asks for forgiveness "for not being able to tell anyone" about what he had done (302). This guilt is a burden to Oskar; he is weighed down by it, for he refers to feeling upset as "wearing heavy boots" (2), and throughout the novel he seeks to lighten this load. One of the ways in which he does so is through self-harm, in which he "gives himself bruises" whenever he starts to feel upset or angry about his father's death. This habit is a twisted form of revenge, "self-revenge," in which Oskar releases the pain and guilt that he is feeling upon himself. This is one of the most disturbing elements of the book, for it is certainly shocking and heartbreaking to see a child hurting himself this way. But this self-harm is meant to reveal the depth of Oskar's suffering, and in a way connects him again to tragic heroes who have taken their own shame and suffering out upon themselves, most notably Oedipus. There are, however, clearly differences in how this behavior is portrayed in the different stories. In *Oedipus the King*, this behavior seems to be a somewhat justifiable action, the inevitable result of the suffering and shame to which Oedipus is a victim; indeed, there is a kind of

nobility to it. In Oskar's case, however, this behavior is nothing short of horrifying. Although one feels sympathy for Oskar's pain, this behavior is very obviously not in any way justifiable, and Oskar is in no way deserving of it. The difference is important, because it usurps the idea that this kind of behavior in response to pain is in any way heroic. Although Oskar feels guilty for what he has done, he has in no way violated a code of honor or committed a heinous act; indeed, there seems to be no code to speak of, no strict set of regulations for how to react to the struggles that Oskar is facing. This is the postmodern world, a world where there is no established set of ethics to follow. The world is more complex than this, our problems are more complex, and therefore the solutions must be more complex as well, if there are any solutions at all. Suffering is not glorified here, self-punishment is not seen as noble or constructive, and so Oskar (and the reader) are left to explore other ways of working through their trauma.

The main way in which Oskar attempts to atone for his guilt and overcome his feelings of loss is through his search for the lock. This search is the main source of action in the novel, but it brings very mixed results. Oskar's quest begins when he discovers an envelope marked "Black" inside of a vase in the closet, an envelope which contains a mysterious key. As his father used to create scavenger hunts for him before his death, Oskar believes that this is one last quest, a chance to discover the truth behind the vase, and he says that "in a year and a half I would know everything [,] or at least know that I had to come up with a new plan" (*Extremely Loud* 51). He proceeds to spend the next several months visiting every person listed under the last name Black, and along the way he meets many interesting people, from an old man (referred to as Mr. Black) who has "lived through every day of the 20th century" (152), to a woman named Ruth who lives at

the top of the Empire State Building. In the end, he discovers that the key belongs to William Black, the husband of Abby Black, who Oskar meets at the beginning of his search. Abby lies to him about the key at their first meeting, telling him that she knew nothing about it, and therefore the subsequent events of his quest appear to be (at least practically) a waste of time. Oskar also learns that his mother knew about his search for the key the whole time, and that she had been organizing it and watching over him the whole time without him knowing. Therefore, Oskar's quest seems to be characterized by falsehood and secrets, and in the end it feels a bit like a sham. In the end, Oskar learns nothing about his father's death, for the key and its lock has little to do with his father. After meeting William Black, and coming to the end of his journey, Oskar feels disappointed, wishing he had never found the key, for the search for its lock offered him no clear resolution- during the search, he has hope for answers, and feels close to his father, but in the end, the answer does not fulfill him. Oskar's quest harkens back, yet again, to traditional heroes and the epic journey. Oskar places a large amount of hope in his search for the key, but in the end he is left unsatisfied. While he solves the mystery of the key, his emotional state is still left unresolved. This shows that in the postmodern world, quests are not a realistic solution, for the problems are too complex and do not produce concrete answers. This reinforces the idea that ancient heroic ideals cannot hold up against the issues faced by a postmodern society, and therefore one must look to other things to help them cope with modern trauma.

The conflict Oskar experiences over the nature of his father's death serve as an exploration of divinity throughout the novel. Thomas Schell Jr. was a staunch atheist in life, and at the beginning of the novel Oskar adheres strictly to his father's viewpoint. In

contrast, Oskar's mother has a more spiritual view of death; while the concept of a god is not really mentioned, she believes that there is some sort of spiritual presence that remains in the wake of her husband's physical death. This conflict over ideology comes to a head in Oskar's confrontation of his mother explored earlier in the discussion of revenge. In the absence of a body, Oskar's mother buries an empty coffin at her husband's funeral. During their argument, Oskar tells his mother that his father's coffin is "just an empty box" devoid of his father's presence, and when his mother argues that the coffin contains the father's "spirit" and "memory", Oskar denies it, arguing that his mother is being "illogical" with her belief in spirituality (201). Oskar's anger at the lack of logic in his mother's belief system reveals his desire for concrete answers, which as we have learned, are not possible in the world Oskar lives in. However, Oskar is not completely without hope, for he believes that his father is in some way responsible for the quest for the key, despite the fact that his father is dead. Oskar believes his father has left this key as some sort of final scavenger hunt for him after he visits the stationary store, where he sees his father's name written everywhere. Oskar also notices that the writing on the envelope is done in red pen, similar to the pen his father used when circling mistakes in the New York Times, and the pen that he used to give Oskar clues for the scavenger hunt at the beginning of the novel (44). This cause Oskar to believe that his father is somehow behind this hunt for the key; although Oskar does not believe that his father is present in spirit, shaping the course of Oskar's life, he does believe that his father might have left this key as a final scavenger hunt for Oskar to solve. Because of this, it is clear that Oskar believes in some sort of intelligent design behind his quest, with his father as a godlike figure who sets his journey into motion, similar to the ghost that

visits Hamlet and spurs him to seek revenge. While in the end we learn that Oskar's father did not in fact leave the key for Oskar to find, the revelation that his mother knew about Oskar's quest, and spoke to all of the people he visited beforehand, does give the feeling that Oskar's journey was in some way manufactured, that there was in fact some sort of design behind it. However, his mother only organizes this once Oskar has already begun looking for the key, so her involvement in Oskar's quest is more like facilitation than design, for her humanity precludes her from foreknowledge of events. The revelation of his father's lack of involvement in the quest is disappointing to Oskar and the reader, for it removes the chance that there are any spiritual remains of his father after his death. Yet at the end of the novel, Oskar seems more open to the possibility of spirituality as he moves from a strong atheist viewpoint to a sort of agnosticism, for he says that "I don't believe in God, but I believe that things are extremely complicated" (324). While Oskar does not undergo any major conversion at the end of his journey, he does become more willing to accept ambiguity into his worldview. Therefore, though the novel does not portray any definite divine presence in the world, it also defies the idea of atheism as an infallible worldview; there is no concrete way to explain the happenings of the world, not even atheism.

Oskar's quest could be considered a failure, for it does not bring the answers Oskar is looking for about his father. However, there is some value to be found in it. As mentioned in the introduction, Joseph Campbell emphasizes the idea that the physical journey is representative of a psychological or mental journey. The significance of Oskar's quest is found beneath the surface; as Sien Uytterschout and Kristiaan Versluys point out in their article "Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely*

Loud and Incredibly Close,” “on a symbolic level, Oskar’s quest for the lock is a tentative step towards ‘unlocking’ his trauma,” and though practically it does not deliver, its value lies in its facilitation of human connection (230). Oskar does not discover any concrete answers about his father’s death, but he eventually does find healing through his search, as he symbolically buries the guilt that has been his burden throughout the novel, and his relationship with his mother begins to repair itself. He confesses his guilt to William Black, and then, with the help of his grandfather, he is able to symbolically bury it by putting the answering machine inside of his father’s coffin. Finally, after doing this he is able to open up to his mother, and finally seems to recognize the value of their relationship, as he says, “in my only life, she was my mom and I was her son.” He also forgives her for her relationship with Ron, as he says that “it’s OK if you fall in love again . . . I want you to” (*Extremely Loud* 324-325). This is certainly a milestone for Oskar in terms of healing, for while he felt alienated from his mother, he seemed to cling more to the memory of his father, as during his “quest” he says “I became a little lighter, because I was getting closer to Dad [,] but I also became a little heavier, because I was getting farther from Mom” (52). But by reconnecting with her, and reestablishing the importance of their relationship, Oskar will hopefully be able to move away from his guilt and pain and towards happiness. His healing comes, not through gaining information and solving mysteries, but through other people, and as Elaine Safer says, “[Oskar] moves away from his melancholy, his traumatized apathy,” towards contentment (127); therefore, the value of this “quest” is not in the task itself, but in the human connections he forms throughout his journey; as Birgit Dāwes states, “answers are not given in didactic instructions . . . they are implied instead in the rewards of

communication itself-in Oskar's reunion with his grandfather, his reconciliation with his mother, and the final relief of his burden by sharing his story" (540). This novel seems to find the most value in human love and connection, and illustrates that it is only through these means that one can find healing and solace in the wake of intense trauma.

This idea is somewhat complicated by the characters of Oskar's grandparents, who do not seem to find any sort of closure by the end of the novel. They end up in a kind of liminal space, both physically and emotionally, as they decide to stay at the airport, watching as "things were happening around [them], but nothing was happening between [them]" (*Extremely Loud* 312). However, their lack of resolution can still speak to this idea of the importance of human connection. The grandparents allow their trauma to serve as a barrier between them, instead of connecting them. Although they try to find solace in a relationship, they cannot remove their boundaries in order to form a relationship with each other (hence the "Nothing" spaces). They are haunted by the traumatizing memories of their past, and by not sharing their pain with other people, they are unable to move past it. Thus the grandparents reveal the other side of this struggle; Oskar's story represents the power of human relationships in facilitating healing, and the grandparents represent what life is without the healing that these relationships bring.

As discussed in this chapter, Oskar's "heroic" attempts to cope with and overcome the guilt and trauma caused by his father's death are shown to be ineffective. His attempts at "revenge" in its various forms are depicted as petty and/or cruel, and the quest he pursues throughout the story does not produce the answers he is looking for. In the end, there is no clear resolution to Oskar's trials; although he does improve in terms of his emotional state by the end of the novel, it is clear that he has much more work

ahead of him, and the likelihood of him fully healing from the traumatic loss of his father is unlikely. The ending of the novel reinforces these ideas, for although Oskar reconnects with his mother, he ends by imagining time reversing itself, musing that if it had done so, all the way back to the night before his father's death, "we would have been safe" (326). The final pages depict a reverse flipbook, in which a man jumping from the Towers on September 11 (a figure that Oskar has repeatedly imagined was his father), flying back into the building. This ending leaves the novel ambiguous, as it suggests that the only true solution, the only real way for Oskar to overcome his trauma, is for it to never have happened at all. This solution is, of course, impossible; there is no way to undo the events of the past. This is an important theme for this novel that ties in with its exploration of heroism. Oskar is tortured by inner pain and conflict, and seeks many different ways of alleviating this turmoil. As discussed, his methods for doing so are reminiscent of the heroic tendency to rely on revenge and quests for truth and knowledge as solutions for traumatic situations. But as this book demonstrates, there is no way to undo trauma, no way to make it disappear; as Siegel suggests, its ending "underlines the impossibility of Oskar's desire and frames the flipbook as a childish and naïve attempt to make things undone", thus removing the hope for full recovery (Siegel). Oskar will likely never fully overcome his trauma despite all efforts, but the novel does offer hope in the form of human connection, painting it as the only worthy way to cope with pain and brokenness. While Oskar was secretive and alienated from his family, he was miserable, but in the end he reconnects with his mother and seems to finally find himself in a healthier place, closer to happiness and more accepting of the reality of his situation. Oskar is not a hero in the traditional sense, but in the end he is able to cope with his

traumatic experiences and find a way to live in the midst of such a horrific reality, which may be the triumph of a postmodern hero.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In these novels we can see how Vonnegut and Foer manipulate and deconstruct heroism and its values in order to demonstrate their incompatibility with the enormous amount of violence and death in the postmodern world. Heroic concepts of revenge, fate, and divine presence are rendered meaningless in the face of the intense trauma from which these characters suffer. One cannot be heroic when coping with this degree of loss and pain, and to attempt to do so will be ineffective, if not detrimental, to this goal. There is no divine explanation for why these events occur, no godly force acting in the lives of these characters, so the idea of fate becomes deterministic and breeds detachment and hopelessness in the face of suffering. Revenge, therefore, becomes petty and useless, and the only influence it has on the lives of these characters is negative. There are no heroes in a world ravaged and traumatized by violent warfare; to attempt to be a hero in this environment will fail to deliver any kind of happy ending, for in the end there are no happy endings to be found.

Many of the themes discussed in these novels are also explored in the short “Free Fruit for Young Widows” by Nathan Englander, which was published in *The New Yorker* in May 2010. Etgar’s father Shimmy is severely beaten by a man named Professor Tendler while serving in the Sinai campaign, after he attacks Tendler for needlessly shooting four Egyptian soldiers in the head. In later life, however, he treats Tendler with nothing but kindness by giving him free food from his market. Etgar is confused by this, and the rest of the story explores the tension between Etgar’s desire to cast moral

judgment on Tendler, and Shimmy's rejection of this. In attempting to explain his actions to Etgar, Shimmy reveals the intense suffering of Tendler's past, in which Tendler survives a concentration camp. Upon returning to his home after being liberated from the camp, Tendler is welcomed by his old maid and her family, who have moved into his home; however, Tendler soon learns that they plan to murder him and take his land, so in self-preservation he slaughters them all, including the baby. Although Etgar is shocked by this story, in the end he too follows in his father's footsteps, providing fruit for Tendler even after Shimmy's death.

Heroism is very prominent in this story, as the story of Professor Tendler is in many ways parallel to that of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Both men return to their home after a long journey in which they face several trials, only to find that their home has been invaded by greedy guests who they must slaughter in order to protect themselves and their home. However, the way in which the slaughter is portrayed in these two works is very different. For Odysseus, this act of vengeance on the suitors who have taken over his home is portrayed as triumphant, for he is aided by Athena and the death of the suitors restores his power over the household. Tendler's killing of his old nurse and her family is not depicted as a triumphant event. Tendler arrives back at his house after the Holocaust, in which he lost all of his family, and is grateful to see his nurse as a substitute family, for when she greets him she calls him "son" (Englander 7). However, when he hears her plot to murder him in order to retain his land, Tendler decides to kill the family as an act of self-preservation. Tendler's killing is an act of desperation, unlike Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors, which is pure vengeance, culturally accepted and sanctioned by Athena. As with the novels, gods are not an active presence in Englander's story, for the narrator says

that “God no longer raised his own fist in the fight,” unlike the “old stories” in the Old Testament (3). God may or may not exist in this story, but if He does, he is negligent in the conflicts of humanity.

There is moral ambiguity in the case of Tendler; Etgar judges Tendler for what he did, calling him a murderer, while Shimmy claims that it was Tendler’s “right” to kill them because “they killed him first” (10). In the end, Etgar comes to agree with his father, for he says, “I can see how they deserved it, the four[;] how I might, if I were him, have killed them” (11). Here the traditional limits of morality, which would prohibit killing, are overturned in the face of such a hopeless situation. Although Etgar does not completely accept Tendler’s actions as morally just, in the end he shows empathy for Tendler’s circumstances, putting himself in Tendler’s shoes and wondering if he would have made the same choice. It is interesting that in the end this story seems to justify vengeful acts in the face of trauma instead of discrediting them. However, here revenge is portrayed as a desperate attempt to survive in a hopeless situation, in which Tendler has no one whom to turn, betrayed by those who he considers family. Tendler is not exultant in his killing of the nurse’s family; it is simply the only thing he seems able to do in this situation. Shimmy and Etgar pity Tendler for his actions as opposed to celebrating them.

Englander’s story interacts with these themes of revenge and heroism in similar ways to the novels discussed, showing that the question of heroism in the postmodern world is not a niche discussion. In similar ways these authors are all trying to depict the limitations of these traditional ways of thinking when confronting hardship and tragedy. There are no heroes in a postmodern world, no god to bring aid or guidance, and no act of vengeance that can restore what has been lost. The only saving grace these authors offer

the reader is the power of human connection. Although no amount of human compassion can undo the destruction that has already been done, empathy towards our fellow man seems to be the only constructive way to cope with trauma and heal what has been broken. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim is trapped in a kind of living death; he views himself as the savior to humanity and preaches the deterministic Tralfamadorian idea of fate, detaching himself from the crushing reality of death by saying only “so it goes.” Because of this, he is unable to heal or recover from his trauma. In *Everything is Illuminated*, Jonathan and Alexander connect through through writing, chronicling their experience searching for Trachimbrod and helping each other to cope with the hopelessness of their situations. Finally, in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Oskar believes he will find closure in concrete answers about his father’s death; in the end, however, his healing comes from sharing his guilt with others and reconciling with his mother, while his grandparents are doomed to misery by their inability to truly connect through their shared trauma. These characters do not ever find full resolution or healing, but any hope they find in the midst of their pain and suffering is through sharing it with each other.

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