*Slaughterhouse-Five*: The Systematic Manipulation Of The Masses

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses Campbell’s monograph, the motif of humans as machines, along with the symbolism of Trout’s novels to reveal the inner workings of American society, in which patriotism and capitalism allow for the growth of the system and the glorification of war, while ultimately depleting human morals. Campbell, an American traitor who allied himself with the Nazis during World War II, wrote a monograph in which he criticized American society’s faults, in which people are systematically taught to hate themselves if they do not become successful. Kilgore Trout, a science-fiction writer, wrote the novels The Money Tree and The Gutless Wonder, which symbolically depict how the capitalism and patriotism of American society allow for the act of war. As a result, the system consistently devalues human morals making people into machines to be used as tools for the system’s benefit.

Vonnegut makes use of The Money Tree as a symbol of American capitalism, which along with Campbell’s monograph reveals a system where greed and self-preservation flourish as necessary vices for the system’s growth. In a capitalist society, it is only natural for men to aspire to achieve wealth and success; however, this is not often achieved without giving up some sense of morality. Such loss of morality is represented in Trout’s The Money Tree, which “…had twenty dollar bills for leaves. Its flowers were government bonds. Its fruits were diamonds. It attracted human beings who killed each other, around the roots and made very good fertilizer.” (Vonnegut 167). People in the novel are attracted by the money tree which represents the wealth one can obtain from capitalism, out of greed they fight and go even as far as killing each other in order to obtain more money. Many metaphorically die, which represents failure and not being able to achieve said success. Capitalism lives and thrives out of the people’s success, failure, and competition, which are sustained by the human desire to accumulate more wealth and thus propagates self-preservation, greed, and the value of money above all. Campbell considers that as a systematic part of American society and in his monograph states that “their most destructive untruth is that it is very easy for any American to make money. They will not acknowledge how in fact hard money is to come by, and, therefore, those who have no money blame and blame themselves. This inward blame has been a treasure for the rich and powerful.” (Vonnegut 129). Due to America being concealed by the veil of the American dream, people inevitably believe that with enough effort anyone can become successful, and as a result once they fail at achieving success they believe it is their own fault and blame themselves. According to Campbell, this inward blame leads Americans to “mock themselves and glorify their betters.” (Vonnegut 129). Thus they view those richer and more successful than themselves as superior since they were able to become rich.

As seen by Campbell’s monograph and The Gutless Wonder, capitalism leads to the creation of patriotism as a tool to numb consciousness and allow for the act of war. Patriotism consists of people’s devotion to their country, however such devotion often leads to willful ignorance toward a country’s faults and actions. In his monograph Campbell states that “the meanest eating or drinking establishment, owned by a man who is himself poor, is very likely to have a sign on its wall asking this cruel question: ‘if you’re so smart, why ain’t you rich?’ there will also be an American flag no larger than a child’s hand — glued to a lollipop stick and flying from the cash registers.” (Vonnegut 129). The man even though he is poor as a result of the capitalist society he lives in, he still owns an American flags showing that he still loves and feels proud of being American. He did not only turn a blind eye to the faults of his nation’s system, he has willfully lowered himself and others for not being wealthy with the sign claiming that the reason they are poor is their own stupidity. In Trout’s The Gutless Wonder, a novel about a robot in future human society, there was a bombing on people; the bombing “was dropped on them from airplanes. Robots did the dropping. They had no conscience and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground” (Vonnegut 168). The Gutless Wonder symbolizes how the willful ignorance caused by patriotism allows for the act of war. Since patriotism makes people willfully ignorant, it permits people to also ignore a nation’s actions, and thus the act of going to war and glorifying war becomes acceptable to society, and even becomes patriotic to some extent. Thus, patriotism becomes a tool for capitalism to function and simultaneously permits the act and glorification of war without questioning.

Ultimately patriotism and capitalism allow for the systematic depletion of morals, and inevitably turns humans into tools of war. Capitalism motivates human vices, while patriotism allows for the justification of capitalism and war itself; these are essential tools for society. People most attached to these systems are the most vulnerable and easily manipulated or convinced into doing or believing what best benefits the system. Vonnegut claims that the reason the novel lacks so many characters is because most people “are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces" (Vonnegut 164). He describes them as sick, because they have grown in a system that is centered on manipulating them for its benefit, many of them have lived in such systems since birth and thus they are so used to being manipulated, they do not notice the manipulation in the first place. The narration then goes on to say that “One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters.” (Vonnegut 164). People are discouraged from being characters because once they go to war they have given up their humanity; they have become tools and weapons to be used by higher powers in government and society. They have given up consciousness, making them no different than machines of war which will obey and kill under the impression that what they are doing will make them heroes, and that they will be the good guys under the eyes of patriotism and those who live by it.

The systematic integration of systems such as capitalism and patriotism into society allows for the manipulation of the masses and turns them into tools for the system. Capitalism and patriotism deplete morals while simultaneously allowing and glorifying war, and even concealing war under a false sense of heroism. The people being constantly influenced to hate themselves turn to this sense of heroism as a way to justify their existence and thus become dependent on it. As a result they willingly become tools for capitalism and patriotism, fundamentally believing in them as righteous ways to live life. Once these beliefs become intergral part of an individual’s ideology, the individual is no more; he has become a machine that will live and die for the growth of these systems. Ironically, it is these systems, which are meant to grant us freedom and promote individuality, that most oppress us and often leave us in a nearly machine-like state of willful unconsciousness and ignorance.