

Collective Eases Plight, to the Individual's Delight

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By S [REDACTED] G [REDACTED]

"Responsibility is the thing people dread most of all" (Frank H. Crane). Often in our society, taking on the responsibility we have for ourselves and the world signifies adulthood. And thus, we become functioning members of society. While this reflects America's ideals, Crane's quote illustrates America's actual attitude. Most people race to come of age and take on responsibility, however once we bear it, it becomes a burden and we seek ways to rid ourselves of it. Novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut and Vladimir Nabokov have noticed the false and inauthentic sense of responsibility in our world, and translate their opinions into literature. In the books *Slaughterhouse- Five* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, the protagonists face the existential responsibility of defining themselves by their actions. However, in both societies, they do not have to go through the struggle alone. The collective offers an easy alternative to responsibility with tantalizing social norms as excuses. The norm predefines everything and thus relieves the individual of their burden. Both Billy Pilgrim and Cincinnatus C create imaginary worlds, Cincinnatus C's trapping him in his head which allows him to flee from oppressive societal expectations and Billy's allowing him to defer responsibilities by transferring them to the collective illustrating that to the delight of the individual, social paradigms free him of responsibility.

While Cincinnatus creates an imaginary world, it allows him to embrace his anguish by being an active member of the imagined society. Sartre describes anguish as "when a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole mankind- in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (Sartre 3b). Any person who makes a choice bears the burden of

the rest of humanity on their shoulders. Hence, Cincinnatus deems his choice to live free of society's repression of the individual worthy of the rest of humanity. However, in *Invitation to a Beheading's* mainstream society, paradigms that predefine everyone's nature repress individuality. Transparency, though not set in stone, is a nature eventually taken on by everyone in this mainstream society. Despite this, Cincinnatus actively pursues his personal freedom by creating a world in which he may define himself. While all others besides him at the jail are oppressively uniform and thus threatening to the individual in their transparent nature, Cincinnatus traps himself in his own cell, in his head, where though society pressures him, he himself chooses to remain opaque and different. "Then Cincinnatus would take hold of himself, and, clutching his own self to his breast, would remove that self to a safe place" (Nabokov 24). Cincinnatus only feels safe in his jail cell. It exists amid the overbearingly easy to read society, and allows Cincinnatus C. to function but still remain himself and unphased by the transparent paradigm. Cincinnatus assures his ability to remain active in his society by making choices rather than falling victim to the passivity brought on by social paradigms. He allows himself to remain self-reliant by not defaulting his personality to transparent and falling into step with repression of the individual.

Billy disguises his anguish through the world of Tralfamadore by using their society as a justification for life on earth. Billy cannot take an active approach to his life on earth because he completely disconnects himself from regular happenings such as death and war. For everything on earth, Billy looks to Tralfamadorian philosophy to reassure himself that it will all be okay. He remains in flight from his anguish because he believes that the collective can lift his burden of responsibility. Sartre says that one

cannot escape from anguish except "by a kind of self deception" (Sartre 3b). Billy deceives himself by embracing the "so it goes" lifestyle of Tralfamadore. The Tralfamadorians symbolize the collective through which Billy alleviates his anguish. Their society runs on the idea that everything is pre-structured, and thus no one must own up to choices or actions that were structured to happen. When faced with the idea of death, Billy detaches himself by acknowledging it as a moment in time; "so it goes" because he cannot do anything about it. In order to live authentically, one must take responsibility for both life and death and must have an understanding that death will come. However, by disconnecting himself from death, Billy renders himself unable to face the responsibility that comes with accepting it. Billy resigns to the idea that moments are pre-structured and pre-defined. With this fatalistic approach, he eliminates the concept of responsibility because justifying everything through the Tralfamadorians is much easier than blaming himself. With blame comes self-empowerment because blame means that one takes complete responsibility for his actions and can be held accountable for any consequences. Billy chooses the easy way out by approaching life with the excuse of the collective. Thus, Billy approaches life with no sense of personal freedom because he dumps all of his individual power and responsibility onto the collective.

Cincinnatus' self-isolation allows him to break away from the collective in the end and accept abandonment. A person can accept abandonment once they understand that everything must be defined by their own individual choices because no a-priori, or previously defined, set of morals exists to justify everything we do. Sartre describes man as "in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith that he is without excuse" (Sartre 4b). When we

disregard any help the collective may offer, and cease to rely upon excuses, we can grasp abandonment. By being mentally separated early on, Cincinnatus isolates himself from society's definition of 'socially acceptable', and takes up the burden of living a life without aid from the collective. "Everything was coming apart. Everything was falling. A spinning wind was picking up and whirling: dust rags, chips of painted wood, butts of gilded plaster... and amidst the dust, and the falling things, and the flapping scenery, Cincinnatus made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (Nabokov 23). The dust rags and woodchips and other concrete objects symbolize the crumbling of the world in which Cincinnatus existed. Cincinnatus is responsible for the disintegration of this world. Cincinnatus finds a way to escape this world because he created it as a way to cope with and not escape the struggle against the collective. He empowers himself by believing he has the ability to create his image for himself and not depend on the collective constraint of transparency.

Billy's dependence on the collective keeps him in a satisfied state of
 oblivion where he defines himself in terms of Tralfamadorian paradigms. Billy realizes
 the support social paradigms offer him and gladly takes it. He happily embraces
 Tralfamadorian fatalism. It allows him to look at the good moments in time, deferring
 any responsibility he might have for the bad ones, and to stop the blame that could have
 potentially come with fighting a war. Billy uses Tralfamadorian ideas as a shield for him
 to avoid the suffering that comes with owning up to responsibility. When Billy faces a
 situation that invokes strong emotions, he simply runs away. "Billy was emotionally
 racked again... Billy fled upstairs in his nice white home... Billy thought hard about the
 way the quartet had effected him, and then an association with an experience he had long

ago... They were all being killed with their families. So it goes" (Vonnegut 175-177).

Billy shows that he cannot face responsibility alone. The "so it goes" washes away the sadness he initially feels when hearing the quartet. His dependence on the Tralfamadorian doctrine limits him to only being able to define himself in accordance with their way of life. He cannot abandon their doctrine and accept the responsibility of being completely alone. Billy continues to use the Tralfamadorians as an excuse, allowing him to live a deceitful but harmless life. This alleviates the burden of personal freedom and responsibility to Billy's delight.

While Cincinnatus strives to embrace his responsibility and escape social paradigms, Billy Pilgrim relies on the collective and relieves himself of all responsibilities, illustrating social paradigms offer an easy outlet for the individual to defer responsibilities onto the collective. Sartre says, "Man is condemned to be free.

Condemned because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre 4b). We all pursue freedom, but do we pursue it simply because we are meant to pursue it or because we want to pursue freedom and break boundaries? The collective offers a solution to almost anything, and if we are free than we choose not to take it. Personal freedom comes with the ability to define oneself independently from any a-priori morals, codes of conduct, or rules of nature. Nothing is new under the sun, so we say. We mold ourselves so that this statement becomes an absolute truth. All things previously defined eliminate the hard part of our journey on earth- the struggle and suffering that goes with coming to our own conclusions. When everything under this sun has already been concluded, we are left to float on the river that runs around the diameter of the earth,

stemming from the collective ocean. Thus, life becomes meaningless; we become powerless because there is nothing left for us to do. Therefore, we must embrace our personal freedom, and stop relying on the collective to create absolute truths for us. Our job is not to abandon everything considered 'socially acceptable' and denounce G-d, but to prove that each individual is a new and independent existence under the sun.