

Student

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WR 150 Kurt Vonnegut

Essay 3

Personal Identity of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., in Mother Night

In the introduction to his novel Mother Night, Kurt Vonnegut states the moral of the book: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be(v)”. The professed moral of the book is consistent with the values of existentialism, as existentialists say that “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself”(Sartre). Mother Night is the first-person confession of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a self-proclaimed double agent for the American and Allied forces. Campbell claims to have assumed the identity of a Nazi propagandist whose radio show broadcasts focused on anti-Semitism and racial prejudice during the second world war. Campbell’s “broadcasts fanned the flames of hate throughout Europe”(Tally). Looking at Mother Night from an existentialist point of view, Campbell created his own personal identity through his actions, which reveal his true intentions. Therefore, Campbell was a Nazi propagandist and not an American Spy.

The philosophy of existentialism contends that Campbell is a Nazi. Existentialism professes existence before essence, that an individual is what he makes himself to be. Existentialism emphasizes individual existence through freedom of choice. Existentialists believe that life is without meaning or purpose. They don’t believe in a divine power. Existentialist focus on

existence. Existentialists believe that individuals create their existence through the choices they make(Stanford Encyclopedia of Psychology). In the view of existentialism, Campbell freely chose his actions and should be judged by his actions and not his explanations.

Considering Mother Night from an existentialist point of view, Campbell was the Nazi he portrayed. Campbell described himself as a “Nazi radio propagandist, a shrewd and loathsome anti-Semite”(Mother Night, 12). Campbell also said: “I began to strut like Hitler’s right-hand man. And nobody saw the honest me I hid so deep inside”(Mother Night, 39). *In Existentialism is a Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre states that “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is”(Sartre). Sartre is saying that an individual is defined by what he does. From this point of view, even if Campbell was an American spy, he is nevertheless defined by his actions. His actions supported the Nazi extreme so well, that Werner Noth, Campbell’s father in law, and a chief of police in Germany told Campbell if he (North) found out he (Campbell) was a spy, he (North) would not prosecute Campbell because “[Campbell] could never have served the enemy as well as [he] served [Germany]”(Mother Night, 99). On the surface Campbell was a dedicated Nazi. He was so true to the Nazi cause that even if he were an American spy the Nazis wouldn’t execute him because of how well he performed. According to Sartre, since Campbell’s actions were the actions of a Nazi and not an American, his true identity is that of a Nazi.

Campbell's confessions also are consistent with existentialists thoughts. Campbell admitted that he "committed high treason, crimes against humanity"(Mother Night 29), but he tried to clear his conscious by saying that he committed "crimes against [his] own conscience"(Mother Night, 29). In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre says "[one] can only estimate the strength of [an] affection if [he has] performed an action by which it is defined and ratified"(Sartre). Sartre believes that one's intentions are defined when he or she acts on a decision. Campbell had the choice to profess Nazi propaganda, or to not. Even if he believed he was acting as an American spy, he did what he did. Therefore, Campbell is identified as a Nazi through his radio broadcasts and actions. His intentions mean nothing, what he does defines him. So, Campbell knowingly acted as a Nazi, even though he knew his action to be wrong, therefore he is a Nazi.

Probably many reader's don't judge Campbell's character through the views of existentialism. Critics find that at the end of his confessions, Campbell is truly sorry for his actions, proving him to be the American double agent he claims to be. Critic Leonard Mustazza says that Campbell is "painfully honest about his inner reality"(Farrell) and Lawrence Broer says that Campbell's "ultimate willingness to confront the consequences of his previous moral blindness . . . proves his salvation"(Farrell). However, according to existentialism, Campbell's emotions after-the-fact are irrelevant. Existentialist Sartre says:

" . . . man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be. Not, however, what he may wish to be. For what we usually understand by wishing or willing is a

conscious decision taken – much more often than not – after we have made ourselves what we are”(Sartre).

Sartre believes that an individual doesn't know what his true intentions are until he makes a decision, and that decision defines the individual. So, if Campbell actually was sorry for his actions, he never would have taken them in the first place and then it could be proved that he never wished to be a Nazi. However, his acting as a Nazi demonstrated his true will, regardless of his thoughts after the fact. He did what he did because of who he was, a devoted Nazi.

In the article “*A convenient Reality*”: *Kurt Vonnegut's Mother Night and the Falsification of Memory*, author Susan Farrell suggests that:

“we can still hold that Campbell never felt that he himself was a real Nazi, that he never was a true believer or a deep anti-Semite, that he went along with the Nazis mostly to retain his social position, to make his life easier, and to please Helga. So, in his deepest heart he was only ‘pretending’ to be a Nazi all along”(Farrell).

Yet as Vonnegut says “We are what we pretend to be”, so even if Campbell was just “pretending” to be a Nazi, the author himself would consider Campbell a Nazi. Sartre says, “There is no reality except in action . . . [Man] is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life”(Sartre). According to Sartre, even if Campbell is only pretending, reality is not

defined by what one's thoughts or emotions or reasons to act, only by what one does, and Campbell acted as a Nazi.

Some contend that Campbell really was an American double agent, and the horrible things he did were merely following orders: his Nazi behavior had to be impeccable to avoid suspicion; therefore, his acts were to protect himself. However, Sartre refutes this argument in his article, as does Tally: "For instance, if I say, I had to behave this way because it was expected of me, I am making an excuse for my freely chosen actions by suggesting that I was not free. Sartre does not accept the Nazi excuse, 'I was only following orders,' for this reason"(Tally). Sartre and Tally contend that Campbell is free to choose his actions, regardless of commands or expectations, therefore the actions Campbell chose revealed his true intentions, Nazi loyalty.

Aside from existentialists conclusions, other evidence points to Campbell's state of mind. Campbell's disassociation from the United States is consistent with Nazi, not American, loyalty. Campbell subtly showed his Nazi allegiance by how he described himself in the second sentence of the novel: "... an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation and a nationless person by inclination" (Mother Night, 1). In "*We are what we pretend to be*": *Existentialists Angst in Vonnegut's Mother Night*, Robert E Tally thinks that "Campbell clearly has no heartfelt sense of homeland, either for the United State or Germany or elsewhere"(Tally). How others perceive an individual can influence his allegiances. As people discovered that Campbell was THE Howard Campbell, the Nazi propagandist, they despised him and called for his punishment. Because people treated him with disdain, Campbell didn't find the United States welcoming. At the same

time nothing prevented Campbell from considering Germany home. He lived there for most of his adult life and was a well-respected member of society. Campbell said that he and Helga “were a very popular couple, gay and patriotic, People used to tell us that we cheered them up, made them want to go on”(Mother Night, 41). For Campbell, Germany was a much more inviting country, hence it would be more reasonable for Campbell to identify with Germany.

It is also conceivable that Campbell fabricated the entire story of being an American agent.

Mother Night is identified as The Confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., written by Campbell himself, an autobiography of sort. Campbell wrote these confessions well after the second world war was over, while confined in a Jerusalem prison, awaiting trial for his alleged war crimes as a Nazi propagandist. Vonnegut declared himself to be only the editor of this text, serving to “enhance the reality of the fictive narrative by introducing the editor's ‘objective’ voice and to distance Vonnegut from the role as author”(Tally). In his editor’s note, Vonnegut says “To say that [Campbell] was a writer is to say that the demands of art alone were enough to make him lie, and to lie without seeing any harm in it”(Mother Night, ix). Vonnegut further questions Campbell’s confessions when he says: “To say that [Campbell] was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader, for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage”(Mother Night, ix). Questioning the truthfulness of Campbell’s narrative raises question about his entire story, most importantly if Campbell actually was an American double agent or if he just pretended to be to clear his conscious and salvage his reputation. That the author goes out of his way to tell the reader to

question what is written challenges Campbell's integrity and his trustworthiness as a narrator.

Aside for Campbell's questionable veracity, even his best arguments lack persuasion. Robert E Tally, in *"We are what we pretend to be": Existentialist Angst in Vonnegut's Mother Night*, puts it best when he says that Campbell's radio broadcasts only "possibly contained hidden information valuable to the American and Allied forces"(Tally). Campbell describes the hidden messages in his radio broadcasts as "a matter of mannerisms, pauses, emphases, coughs, seeming stumbles in certain key sentences" (29). He tells the reader that it was people he never saw who told him what to say in his broadcasts that contained the secret messages. What doesn't add up in his story is that Wirtanen, the American agent who recruited Campbell to be a spy, said that only three people knew Campbell for what he "really" was, and they were Wirtanen himself, General Donovan, and the President of the United States at the time, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It's unlikely that Campbell's code could be useful if only three people understood what it meant. Also, it's unlikely the people who Campbell never saw, and told him what to do, didn't know that he was a spy: an American supporter had to tell Campbell, they had to suspect that Campbell was an American agent, why else would he follow their instructions? Further, the United States government refused to recognize Campbell as an American Spy and Wirtanen as a person, and Wirtanen is only seen by Campbell and there is no other proof he exists. The irregularities in Campbell's story demonstrate that it's possible he fabricated the story and was a Nazi propagandist all along.

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel Mother Night Howard W Campbell Jr. claims to be a double agent for the American and allied forces. Despite his claims that his radio broadcasts assisted the American cause, it's more likely he truly identifies as a Nazi. Existentialists say that an individual defines himself by his actions, therefore, since Campbell blatantly performed the acts of a Nazi, he should be considered such. The existentialists' position is also supported by the undisputed circumstances: Campbell's claimed homeland rejecting him and his inability to prove any of the assertions that demonstrate he is an American spy. It is clear Campbell truly identifies as a Nazi, and he should be regarded as so.

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