

NOTES—Historical Background for *Mother Night*

When critics discuss *Mother Night*, they tend to focus on questions about constructed identity—especially the novel’s famous moral: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.” They explore as well the limits of nationalism, and whether the ends justify the means as they ask whether Campbell did more harm as an anti-Semitic Nazi propagandist than good as an Allied double agent.

Critics also tend to see Vonnegut’s presentation of the American Nazis in his novel as absurd or ludicrous caricatures.

[Look at critical quotes]

Even more, Vonnegut’s supposedly “whimsical” attitude toward the Nazis prevented the Polish version of the novel from appearing until 1984, even though all of his other fiction had already been published there (Jamosky and Klinkowitz 218).

My own recent research, though focuses on the neglected historical underpinnings of the novel.

I argue that, in *Mother Night*, Vonnegut is not simply inventing whimsical but extraordinary and fantastical figures in the person of Howard W. Campbell, Jr. and the American Nazis he associates with. I argue that Vonnegut is exploring the very real, historical phenomenon of the rise of American fascism in the 1930s and 40s.

Vonnegut returned to a U.S. in 1945 that was jubilant over its recent victory in the war and its defeat of Fascism.

But he also witnessed a frightening tide of political and racial intolerance during the late 1940s and through the 50s— the McCarthy hearings, violent white responses to school desegregation, and the establishment of the far-right John Birch Society in 1958, just to name a few.

Mother Night engages deeply with this American history. The novel exposes the very real danger of a fascist and white supremacist underbelly in America that didn’t die out with the war.

So, I'd like us to look at some of the key characters in Vonnegut's novel and the real-life models behind them.

First is Howard W. Campbell, Jr.

- It's fairly well-known that Vonnegut modeled Campbell on the figure of William Joyce, known as "Lord Haw-Haw" during the war years. Joyce broadcast anti-Semitic and pro-German rants over the radio to British citizens.
 - Just a little background on Joyce:
 - William Joyce was born in the U.S. (in 1906) to an Irish Catholic father and an Anglo-Irish mother.
 - Family moved back to Ireland when he was three, where they remained loyal to Britain and staunchly anti-Republican.
 - After the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, Joyce became deeply involved in British fascist politics.
 - He moved to Berlin at the beginning of the war where he took a job working for German radio's English service.
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The "Free American Corps"

- In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, an idea dreamed up by Howard W. Campbell, Jr..
- A unit of captured American soldiers who would fight for the Nazis on the Russian Front

But there really **was** a British Free Corps, a unit that William Joyce attempted to recruit British soldiers into.

- By all accounts a very small and almost pathetically ineffective unit
 - The British Free Corps was stationed in Dresden for training in February of 1945 and, in fact, suffered its first casualties during the Allied firebombing of the city.
 - Vonnegut, himself a prisoner in Dresden at that time who marched through the city twice a day to his factory job, would almost assuredly have been aware of this unit and eager to satirize it in his later work.
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In *Mother Night* Campbell escapes to New York after the war, where he lives for thirteen years before turning himself into Israeli agents

The real-life William Joyce was not so fortunate. He was captured near the war's end and executed for treason in England in January of 1946.

--(Photo of Joyce in an ambulance shortly after his capture by British soldiers).

While several critics acknowledge the connection of Campbell to William Joyce, what is **less-known** is just how widespread the traitorous propaganda business was, just before and during the war years.

William Joyce not a solitary phenomenon.

There were numerous English-speaking Nazi broadcasters, and historians believe the Lord Haw-Haw nickname might originally have applied to someone else, possibly German journalist Wolf Mittler, who spoke flawless English, having an Irish mother (Doherty 13).

While Joyce is the figure most associated with the name today, during the early 1940s it was applied to a number of different propagandist announcers, and at times, the nickname seemed to be used generically, to designate any male, English-speaking Nazi radio broadcaster.

To confuse matters even more, there **were** actual American Lord Haw-Haws as well

Most notable is Fred Kaltenbach, known by the very similar nickname of Lord Hee-Haw.

- Son of German immigrants
- Born and raised in Iowa.
- Became a Nazi sympathizer while studying for his doctorate at the University of Berlin in the early 1930's.
- Returned to Iowa to work as a high school teacher in 1935
- Established a club for boys called **The Militant Order of Spartan Knights**, which was based on the Hitler Youth movement.
- Fired from his teaching job
- Returned to Germany, where, like the fictional Howard W. Campbell, Jr., he married a German national and worked as a radio propaganda broadcaster for the Nazis in the early 1940s.
- British media dubbed Kaltenbach with the nickname of Lord Hee-Haw, most likely because he adopted a homey persona, offering advice and beginning each episode of his program with the phrase, "Greetings to my old friend, Harry in Iowa."

But the most compelling and neglected historical parallels in the novel concern the quartet of bumbling, aging American Nazis who attach themselves to Campbell after he has escaped capture and been living in New York City for over a decade.

- Reverend Doctor Lionel J.D. Jones
- August Krapptauer
- Father Keeley
- Robert Stirling Wilson

We'll take a look at these 4 key figures and their real-life models

Reverend Doctor Lionel J.D. Jones

- Real-life model seems to be William Dudley Pelley
 - An American fascist who admired Hitler
 - Founded the Silver Legion—also known as the Silver Shirts—a white supremacist group modeled after Hitler’s Brownshirts
 - Ran for President on the Christian Party ticket in 1936.
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- Like Dr. Jones in the novel, Pelley was born to a Methodist family in Massachusetts.
 - Also mixed hate politics with religious education
 - Pelley founded Galahad College outside of Asheville, North Carolina in 1930
 - Students were supposed to “learn a superior form of Christianity”
 - Studied topics such as “Spiritual Eugenics . . . and Cosmic Mathematics,” mostly through correspondence courses (Ledeboer 128).
 - Pelley, again like Jones in the novel, published several racist and anti-Semitic newspapers and magazines, including, in the 1930s, the Silver Legion’s weekly magazine, *Liberation*, and a weekly newspaper called *The Silver Ranger*.
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Silver Legion

- The young men adopted silver, Nazi-like uniforms
 - Scarlet capital letter L, emblazoned on the chest
 - Ties to ridiculous, self-designed uniform Howard Campbell wears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*?
 - At its peak, Pelley’s Silver Shirts did not seem so silly: approximately 15,000 young men from around the nation joined the group.
 - *Mother Night* satirizes the Silver Shirts through its depiction of The Iron Guard of the White Sons of the American Constitution, a fascist youth group that meets in Dr. Jones’ basement.
 - Described as “ranging in age from sixteen to twenty . . . all blond . . . all over six feet tall,” the young men have been encouraged to join the Iron Guard by their parents who want “to keep the American bloodstream pure.”
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- A magazine that Pelley began publishing in the early 1940’s, *Roll Call*, eventually proved his undoing.
- Aimed at criticizing the government and President Roosevelt especially, the magazine drew the attention of the FBI when it claimed that the Pearl Harbor attacks were much more devastating than the government had admitted.
- Pelley was arrested for sedition and insurrection in 1942, just like Lionel J.D. Jones is in the novel.
- By that time, Pelley had moved his base of operations to Noblesville, Indiana, and his trial took place in the summer of 1942 in Indianapolis, Vonnegut’s hometown. Vonnegut was a student at Cornell University at the time, but he was home in Indianapolis that summer, and must have followed the trial closely.
- In *Mother Night*, the long paragraph that Vonnegut includes from the fictional Lionel Jones’s indictment is lifted word-for-word from Pelley’s 1942 real-life Indiana indictment.

- Lionel Jones in the novel is convicted and sentenced to fourteen years of prison, but is released after serving eight. Pelley, similarly, was convicted on 11 of 12 charges, sentenced to fifteen years in prison, and also served eight years before being paroled and released.
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Vonnegut clearly had more than a passing acquaintance with the Silver Shirts, the charges against Pelley, and his ensuing trial. While, as we have seen, he models Lionel Jones in the novel after Pelley, Vonnegut also distributes some of the historical figure's odder quirks to Howard W. Campbell, Jr.

- Pelley not only a fascist, but he was also a fiction writer and playwright who lived in Hollywood for seven years, where he wrote screenplays.
 - One of his stories, "White Faith," was turned into a 1922 silent film, called *The Light in the Dark*, directed by Clarence Brown and starring Lon Chaney.
 - Film tells the story of a callous New York playboy who, on a trip to England, finds a sacred chalice associated with the last supper and uses it to cure his former fiancé, whom he had callously jilted.
 - A medieval sort of Christian purity is emphasized in a strange dream sequence that depicts a Grail Maiden and Grail Knight who use the chalice to heal the faithful.
 - The plays that Campbell writes in Germany before the outbreak of war remarkably similar to Pelley's Hollywood efforts?
 - Described as "medieval romances" (33), Campbell's plays also revolve around Grail mythology and redemptive love.
 - Campbell's plays, with their simple faith that love conquers all, signify his attempt to escape the rumblings of war in Germany as well as to evade responsibility for his own association with the Nazis.
 - Campbell, in the novel, convinces himself that he is simply an apolitical artist.
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Although Campbell calls his own plays "about as political as chocolate *éclairs*" (33), Vonnegut shows the naivety of the view that art can remain unattached from politics and larger social issues. In the novel, Campbell can't be as untouched by war and politics as he initially thinks he can.

- Art, in Vonnegut's view, is already and inherently political and the plays that Campbell writes clearly cater to Nazi artistic sensibilities.
- Well-known that the Third Reich denounced modernist and abstract art in literary, visual, and musical forms, even going so far as to hold mass burnings of books and paintings.
- The Nazis, in fact, funded a traveling exhibit of crowded, poorly-hung, so-called "degenerate" works of art in 1937, meant to demonstrate the depravity of modernism and the avant-garde.
- Nazis preferred to look to classical Greece and the Middle Ages as sources for art, believing these periods to be free of Jewish and Bolshevik influences.
- The medieval romances Campbell writes in the novel, like the Hollywood concoctions of the real-life William Dudley Pelley, align with and support Nazi ideology.

Let's turn to a couple of other characters in the novel that seem like cartoon fascists as well:

- August Krapptauer, the aged bodyguard of white supremacist dentist Dr. Lionel Jones, and
- Father Keeley, the anti-Semitic defrocked Catholic priest, who serves as Jones' secretary,

Krapptauer

- In the novel, Howard W. Campbell, Jr. tells readers that Krapptauer was "former *Vice-Bundesfuhrer* of the German-American *Bund*."
- Krapptauer's greatest lifetime achievement is said to have been arranging a joint meeting between the Bund and the Ku Lux Klan in New Jersey in 1940 (73).
- Fictional Krapptauer is based largely on a real-life man with a name similar to the Vonnegut character—August Klapprott, a naturalized American citizen born in Germany.

Real-life Klapprott, like Krapptauer in the novel, was associated with the German-American Bund.

- Organization of ethnic Germans living in the U.S. who openly supported Hitler
- Bund activity reached its peak in February of 1939 when the group organized a rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City that drew a crowd of 20,000 people.

After moving to the U.S. in 1927 and becoming a U.S. citizen in 1934, the real-life August Klapprott worked as a bricklayer for ten years, ran a restaurant for a while, and became involved in Bund activities. In January of 1940, he became a full-time salaried employee of the Bund.

Klapprott was essential in the operation of Bund Camp Nordland in Andover, New Jersey, the largest of a series of recreational camps owned by the Bund. These facilities encouraged German and Nazi loyalty, often holding large rallies replete with swastikas, imitation Nazi uniforms, and giant portraits of Hitler.

Like Krapptauer in the novel, Klapprott was one of the main organizers of a joint meeting between the Klan and the Bund at Camp Nordland on August 18, 1940.

He was a defendant, as well, in the Great Sedition Trial of 1944, in which 33 U.S. citizens were indicted for supposedly advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government, though charges were later dismissed.

Vonnegut would have been very aware of these activities.

- Discusses in essays being a German-American himself, whose family self-consciously tried to distance themselves from German culture and history after World War One

- Was particularly sensitive to Bund activities and would have followed accounts of Bund rallies and the arrests and trials of Bund leaders, which were covered extensively in *The New York Times* and other leading newspapers of the day.
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Father Keeley

- In the novel, the anti-Semitic priest who serves as Dr. Lionel Jones' secretary
 - Very likely inspired by the real-life figure of Father Charles Coughlin
 - An extremely popular Catholic priest whose anti-Semitic radio broadcasts reached up to 40 million people at their height, and who, at one point, received more mail than anyone in the world (Jeansonne 362).
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- Coughlin initiated contact with both Mussolini and Hitler in 1933
 - Became rabidly anti-Semitic by the late 30's.
 - His weekly magazine, *Social Justice*, even began serializing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1938 (Jeansonne 368).
 - In the novel, Father Keeley, like Coughlin himself, is from the Detroit area.
 - The fictional priest is described as the chaplain of a Detroit gun club secretly organized by agents of Nazi Germany, whose dream is to "shoot the Jews" (73).
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- Some Catholic organizations inspired by Coughlin, including the Christian Front and the Christian Mobilizers, were present at the 1940 Camp Nordland rally
 - This, despite the fact that Father Coughlin's Catholicism was roundly despised by the Klan
 - Also despite Coughlin's early myth-making, in which he portrayed himself as heroically opposing Klan activity, although, according to Coughlin biographer Donald Warren, evidence for such opposition does not exist (Jenkins 197; Warren 17).
 - Although most American Nazi sympathizers at the time believed that "the Roman Church should be driven out of political life and out of state affairs," fascists make strange bedfellows, and the various groups put aside their differences temporarily for the racist and fascist cause (Jenkins 197).
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But perhaps the most fascinating of the real-life counterparts is the historical figure behind the African American chauffeur in *Mother Night*, Robert Sterling Wilson

- Wilson based on Sufi Abdul Hamid, a Harlem-based activist and street preacher
- Numerous parallels between the real-life Hamid and the fictional Wilson in *Mother Night*.
- In the novel, Wilson is known as "The Black Fuehrer of Harlem" (88) while Hamid was called Harlem's Black Hitler.
- Both men dressed in flashy and eccentric costumes
- Both were unapologetically "race men," even though each expressed complex and contradictory positions.

Sufi Abdul Hamid

- The real-life Hamid began his career during the Depression years, as a labor organizer and religious mystic with a fondness for the occult, first in Chicago and later in New York.
 - A colorful character, Hamid was “often seen on top of a step-ladder platform on 125th Street, the heart of Harlem's commercial district. . . resplendent in his black and crimson-lined cape, green velvet blouse, black riding boots, and a white turban wrapped around his head” (McDowell 138).
 - Hamid cautioned his black listeners not to spend their money at white-run Harlem department stores that refused to hire them as clerks.
 - Through his labor organization, the National Industrial and Clerical Alliance (NICA), he began to organize pickets and boycotts of these stores, most of which were Jewish-owned.
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Due at least partly to his denunciation of these stores, Hamid was soon accused of anti-Semitism and became known as the “Black Hitler of Harlem.”

- Sources disagree about the extent of Hamid’s anti-Semitism.
 - Claude McKay, in his influential 1940 study, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, devotes a full chapter to Hamid and his labor movement.
 - McKay argues that charges of anti-Semitism against Hamid were largely trumped up in the Jewish press.
 - He insists that white Jewish activists were more concerned about converting Harlemites to embrace international communism than with improving their everyday conditions in a practical way, although such improvements were much needed during the Depression years when unemployment was painfully high in Harlem.
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Hamid’s critics, on the other hand, claim that he invented the title for himself.

- The *Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)* reported in 1935 that Hamid was “self-styled” as a “black Hitler,” and that he had spent months trying to “stir up hatred of the Jews among Harlem’s Negro Population” (“Hamid Held” 53).
 - The year before, the *JTA* had accused “Herr Hamid” and his “stormtroopers” of purging three black workers from a local grocery store because they had refused to join Hamid’s labor union (“Hamid Issues” 16).
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Hamid’s critics were not only Jewish activists, newspapers, and storeowners.

- Many prominent African American residents of Harlem tended to view Hamid as a charlatan as well
 - Partly because of his mystic leanings
 - Partly because they believed his labor union was something of a racket that charged excessive membership dues.
 - Ted Poston, a well-respected Harlem-based journalist, for example, responded to a *New Republic* review of Claude McKay’s *Negro Metropolis*, writing that he had interviewed Hamid at least six times over a five-year period, during which Hamid defended his anti-Semitic position.
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While a flamboyant 1930s Harlem street preacher and activist might seem distant from a young man born and raised in Indianapolis, there is compelling evidence to suggest that Vonnegut would have been aware of Hamid and his activities even as a young man in the 1930s.

It's important to remember that Vonnegut, as a high school student, served as writer and editor for *The Shortridge Echo*, one of only two daily newspapers operating in U.S. high schools at the time.

Sufi Abdul Hamid's activities, including his labor organizing, as well as his various trials—for things like public speaking without a permit; distributing pamphlets without a license; and disorderly conduct in maligning Jews—were covered frequently in the *New York Times* in the mid-1930s.

When Hamid died in a plane crash in 1938, the news was of national scope.

- A story carried on the front page of the *NY Times* bore a headline reading, "Plane Crash Fatal to 'Harlem Hitler'"
 - Other major newspapers made the story front page news as well
 - It seems very likely that Vonnegut, an avid newsman himself, who two years later would move to New York and serve as editor for Cornell University's *Daily Sun*, would have seen the headlines and been aware of the news of Hamid's death.
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Sufi Abdul Hamid is a fascinating figure, since he represents many of the complexities involving politics, race, ethnicity, and religion in New York during the years leading up to the war.

While I doubt Vonnegut knew about Claude McKay's defense of the Sufi, he certainly understood the contradictions inherent in an African American street preacher and labor organizer aligning himself with the Third Reich.

In *Mother Night*, the fictional Robert Sterling Wilson is a man of contradictions as well. An outspoken and adamant defender of those he refers to as "colored folk" around the world, whom he believes will "rise up in righteous wrath" against their oppressors (89), Sterling is all the while working for the obsessively racist Dr. Lionel J.D. Jones, and eagerly spreading Jones's Nazi propaganda.

Vonnegut's satire in *Mother Night* digs into history to expose continuing fascist tendencies in American culture and politics in 1962, but perhaps the novel's relevance seems even more urgent today that when it was initially published?

Looking at the actual history that enters into the novel can challenge critical diminishments of Vonnegut's work?

- Vonnegut's literary reputation, in general, has been very mixed among critics of contemporary American literature since his first novel, *Player Piano*, was published in 1952.
- While that book received good reviews, including a positive *New York Times* assessment by Granville Hicks, it did not make a large splash

- Along with his second book, *The Sirens of Titan*, earned Vonnegut the label of a “genre” writer of science fiction rather than a serious literary artist.
- Both *Sirens* and *Mother Night* were initially published as paperback originals and were not reviewed.
- *Mother Night* was re-issued in hardcover for the first time in 1966, after the cult success of 1963’s *Cat’s Cradle*, but even then, Vonnegut’s work tended to be dismissed by the literary establishment.
- Critical reputation rose significantly after *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969
- But his literary stock plummeted again after the 1976 publication of *Slapstick*.
- Several well-placed reviews and articles derided not only that novel, but in effect dismissed Vonnegut’s entire body of work, various critics charging that it was “defeatist,” overly formulaic, or that it cynically appealed to “the minimally intelligent young” (Freese 5, 6).
- Donald Morse, in his essay about the “curious” reception of Vonnegut’s work, argues that during the 1970s and 1980s, Vonnegut’s fiction was not taken seriously for three main reasons—first, for its reliance on “popular literary forms” such as science fiction and fantasy that were not considered serious art; second for his “extensive appeal to the young, often described...as the Vonnegut youth cult”; and third, for the “seeming simplicity of his ideas and language” (45).