To dispel any confusion about the term black humor it is important to note that the term does not refer to humor written by African-Americans. These writers may use this device or style, but the term is not defined by race. Rather, it is humor which, for purposes of literary terminology, is considered antithetical to light humor. Brom Weber, in an essay entitled “The Mode of Black Humor” identified black humor as:

Humor which discovers cause for laughter in what has generally been regarded as too serious for frivolity: the death of men, the disintegration of social institutions, mental and physical disease, deforming, suffering, anguish, privation, and terror (388).

“Crude and brutal” humor some critics of black humor have dubbed it. Yet, it is the type of humor many twentieth century readers prefer. Weber claims that black humor, disturbs because it is not necessarily nor always light-hearted, funny, amusing, laughter-arousing. Furthermore, black humor seems to have little respect for values and patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that have kept Anglo-American culture stable and effective, have provided a basis of equilibrium for society and the individual (388).

It is possible then that black humor somehow appeals to a culture that is jaded with the performance of its sociocultural, political institutions. For, “black humor violates sacred and secular taboos alike without restraint or compunction” (Weber 388). Weber believes that black
humor is extremely congenial to the American now-centered culture. Black Humor, he says, helps some readers to cope with the omnipresence of potential nuclear destruction, with the feeling of hopelessness Americans have come to feel under the power of material objects and invisible forces, and with the threat of war. Laughter of this nature serves as beneficial therapy for a society existing under these pressures (396). What Weber is referring to here is the black humor movement which blossomed in American in the sixties with writers such as Bruse Jay Friedman (who coined the term in 1965), Wallace Markfield, Joseph Heller, John Barth, William H. Gass, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William Burroughs, Terry Southern, Ken Kesey, and Thomas Pynchon. But the use of black humor in American literature existed unnamed long before this conscious movement flourished among these avant garde writers, who were highly influenced by the French surrealists of the 1920’s, who use this mode as a functioning central doctrine (Weber 397).

Bruce Jay Friedman, in editing a miscellany of new fiction in 1965, described black humor as “one foot in the asylum kind of fiction (Weber 38). He refers to works which have a totality of black humor as their narrative structure. A list of practitioners of black humor from surveys of American Literature texts beyond those writers of the black humor movement listed above includes such Americans as: Benjamin Franklin, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Stephan Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Nathaniel West, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. It is impossible not to notice the sad imbalance of female authors in these lists. Except for Edith Wharton, women are invisible. Have women in our American literary history not had a voice in the place of black humor? Yes, of course they have. It is merely the same old problem of invisibility. The use of
wit, satirizing social ills, the use of paradox, irony, are not merely tools of male writers. Nor has it ever been.

My purpose in this essay is twofold: first, to look at Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, pointing out the techniques of his black humor; and second, to analyze two scenes of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* which I feel demonstrate that she was an avid practitioner of this technique, thus helping to dissipate the myth that humor is somehow a male-centered artform.

Hamlin Hill, in the essay entitled “Huckleberry Finn’s Humor Today,” addresses the basic ingredients of the contemporary novel with this quotation from James E. Miller:

> The common pattern of action which recurs is the pattern of the quest, the quest absurd in a world gone insane or turned opaque and inexplicable, or become meaningless. …The nightmare world, alienation and nausea, the quest for identity, and the comic doomsday vision—these are the four elements that characterize recent American fiction (233).

All of these elements exist in Vonnegut’s novel. The use of black humor underscores the futility of the world of the hero, Billy Pilgrim, allowing the audience a sadistic opportunity to laugh at this bizarre existence. Hill states that in fiction of this nature, the reader is the writer’s prey. The text itself becomes a battleground between author and audience, the goal of the former to strip away the latter’s idealistic delusions and replace them with a soberer nature…(243).

*Slaughterhouse-Five* certainly accomplishes this goal. Characteristic of the black humor mode, the hero of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a character who must invent his own world in order to escape the reality of his world. He, has no control over where he is going next…He is in a
constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next (Vonnegut 23).

Pilgrim is an alienated man who has had no friends since childhood. He is a man with a poet’s sensitivities who is raised by a father who believes in the philosophy of “sink or swim”, and he realizes this when his father throws him into the deep end of a pool at age five. Pilgrim almost drowns, and from that time on reacts to his reality surrounded by a cloak of fear. As an adult he is faced with becoming a soldier during the second World War. He is made a chaplain’s assistant; a position which according to the text is “customarily a figure of fun in the American Army” (30). He is a parody of what a soldier should be.

He is met by disgust and laughter from all of his fellow soldiers. Pilgrim is a man “powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends (Vonnegut 30). When captured he soon dresses in a blue toga, silver shoes, and a muff (all discards from dead war victims). He is the picture of buffoonery, a caricature of a fool from a Shakespearean drama. But it is impossible to laugh at this figure of a gentle man who is trapped in the nightmare of war, who wishes only to be left alone—to die. He soon escapes to the world of his imagination—the world of another planet—Tralfamadore, a surrealistic world which becomes more real than the earthly world, so much so that Pilgrim wishes to tell everyone of his visits. The portrayal of such a hero is characteristic of black humor, making the reader solemn and contemplative rather than leaving them laughing. Pilgrim is a man on a quest, a quest for escape; and he finds it in a glass dome with the beautiful starlet, Montana Wildback, as they live naked in full, blissful view of the Tralfamadorians.
The element of irony is a poignant facet of this novel. When Billy is training to become a solder, his father is shot to death by a friend while deer hunting back home. When Billy is in the hospital recuperating from a plane crash, his wife rushes to the hospital in the Cadillac El Dorado de Ville (Billy has become a wealthy optometrist with little effort on his part after the war), she has an accident, tears off the exhaust system, rushes on, arrives at the hospital and dies from carbon monoxide poisoning as she turns off the key. After the Dresden fire-bombing, a fellow war captive, Edgar Derby, is tried and executed in Dresden by the same Allies who firebombed and killed 135,000 innocent people in one night for attempting to steal a teapot. All of these sardonic ironies are punctuated by one phrase, “So it goes”. This simple epigrammatical phrase serves as the trigger for opportunities for the audience to laugh at the ironies of life. For these types of occurrences do happen in real life all too often. Laughter can at least bring the reader relief. It’s certainly more socially acceptable than crying. Vonnegut’s vision is a characteristically comic doomsday vision. The hero can bring about no change in his earthy world. For, “Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future” (Vonnegut 60). His happiness or success in his quest can only exist in the world of his imagination. The novel ends with the destruction and searching for bodies in Dresden, with Billy being released from a prisoner of war status, with juxtaposed images of life and death. A bird speaks to Billy. The bird has more grip on reality than he does, for the reader knows that the hero had finally given up. The humor in this novel is a disturbing humor about destruction, the atrocities of war, death—it is black humor.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe is a work which was immediately successful, which fictionalized the significant issue of the day, slavery, and helped to ignite a nation into action with her vivid portrayal of the horrors and suffering of African-Americans.
Abraham Lincoln praised Stowe as the woman who helped to start the Civil War, an ironic occurrence itself considering it was justice and freedom for an oppressed people Stowe’s social conscience novel advocated, not death and destruction through way. The novel was printed in serial form in the “National Era” in 1851. Male and female writers and critics worldwide have praised this long masterpiece. The novel follows the quest of several characters to escape to freedom from the oppression and suffering of slavery. By the nature of their enslavement the characters are alienated and living in a world that, without their clinging to the faith in God, would become meaningless. Their reality is to be owned, to be flogged, raped, separated from their families, used and treated like animals. Their world is a hellish one indeed.

I will focus upon only two humorous scenes to prove my argument that Stowe was a quality practitioner of the use of black humor. The first involved the character Haley, a cruel slave trader who has come to buy Uncle Tom (a black Christ figure) and the son of Eliza, a slave woman, from their owners, the Shelby’s. Eliza, upon hearing that her young child has been sold to help pay off a debt and will be taken from her the next day, has run away from the plantation with him. Mrs. Shelby has been indignant over the sale by her husband, and Haley, who is anxious to track down his property, is delayed—thus allowing Eliza a chance to escape. The scene which follows has the potential to be uproariously funny as the witty slave Sam spooks Haley’s horse and chases him, thus delaying the scene. The scene is straight out of a Laurel and Hardy movie:

Haley’s horse which was a white one, and very fleet and spirited, appeared to enter into the spirit of the scene with great gusto; and having for his coursing ground a lawn of nearly half a mile in extent…he appeared to take infinite delight in seeing how near he could allow his pursuers to approach him and then when within a hand’s breath, whisk
off with a start and a snort, like a mischievous beast as he was and careen far down into some alley of the wood-lot (Stowe 100-01).

Sam, also portrayed as a classic comic fool, chases after the horse with a palm leaf on his head, with no intention of catching him. The chance of laughter is undercut, of course, by the brevity and nightmarish reality of the circumstances. This is black humor at its finest.

The second scene is one involving Topsy, an abused slave child bought and brought home by St. Clare, the relatively sensitive and indulgent slave owner of a plantation. She is given as a gift to his cousin, Miss Ophelia. Miss Ophelia has been brought from the north to help with the raising of his young child, Eva, and to assist with the running of a household which is too complex for his sickly wife. Miss Ophelia is a Christian hypocrite who hates the concept of slavery, would never own a slave, but at the same time cannot bring herself to touch one and is repelled by her young white ward, Eva’s, physical show of affection for her slaves. St. Clare takes delight in giving his cousin the girl as a test of her abilities as a slave owner. Miss Ophelia, a reluctant recipient of the gift, takes the girl with the intention to educate hr both in reading and writing and the ways of Christianity—then eventually to free her. But she cannot touch her. Topsy is soon aware of this contradiction. The paradoxical nature of this situation is established through the satirical portrayal of this dogmatically correct, but humanly cold female. Miss Ophelia is a darkly comical human being—laughable by her own ambiguous set of false standards. St. Clare has recognized her weakness since her arrival. His role is to help her see the gravity of the problems of slave owners. He has become a slave owner not by choice. He inherited his slaves from his wife’s family. Her
plantation could not run without them. To have slaves is an economic necessity. Society accepts the sad fact, but St. Clare’s conscience does not. He wants none but feels freeing them would be cruel. They cannot read or write. How could they survive? He sees himself as trapped. His solution is to indulge them. Miss Ophelia disapproves of St. Clare’s treatment of his slaves. She believes they should be set free, but she can’t touch them. St Clare houses, feeds, does not whip, hugs, but—yes—owns them. He watches his experiment with sardonic amusement.

This next blackly humorous scene I shall focus on entails a day when Miss Ophelia is acting as teacher to the girl, Topsy, in the art of bed-making. All American readers are aware how important it is for all good Christian women to have this art under their belts. Miss Ophelia demonstrates. Topsy watches and, unbeknown to her owner, in perfect comic Huck Finn fashion, snatches a pair of gloves and a ribbon and slips them into her sleeve. Later, as she attempts to make the bed to Miss Ophelia’s liking, the ribbon becomes visible. Miss Ophelia is outraged and accuses. Topsy lies. Ironically, this fiercely New England Christian, who hates slavery and all of its horrors, threatens whipping unless complete confessions are forthcoming. Topsy, again, a female Huck, lies by confessing to other misdemeanors. It is soon realized that she has confessed to stealing things she has not stolen. She wishes not to be whipped. “Why Missus said I must ‘fess; and I couldn’t think of nothing’ else to ‘fess,” she says to the totally indignant Christian woman (Stowe 361). The mulatto girl, Rosa, speaks within hearing of this new slave owner who is trying to stand behind her Biblical learning. “Thou shall not lie”-“Lasakes!” she says to the little white Eva who has come into the room. “Miss Eva, you’s so good, you don’t know nothing how to get along with niggers. There’s no way but to cut
‘em well up, I tell ye” (Stowe 361). The scene ends with Miss Ophelia left thinking about her dogma. Eva and Topsy remain standing looking at each other:

There stood the two children representative of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brown, and prince-like movement; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. Born of ages of cultivation, common education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil and vice (Stowe 361-362).

Here is a case, again, where the device of humor is disturbing and by definition must be classified as black humor. For, who or what does one laugh at? The black child trying desperately to save herself from pain? The mulatto for accepting the white’s idea of how to treat a slave? The northern woman for being confused because her religious teachings don’t fit comfortably to the reality of life? To laugh at this scene is to laugh at the horrible ambiguities of a culture based upon Christianity which among other things preached the concept of being good to one’s fellow man while at the same time either openly participating in this tragedy of enslavement or turning its head in silence as men and women sold and tortured other human beings. Stowe, in 1851, a woman, is sardonically making fun of one of the fundamental institutions of American society—dogmatically based, hypocritical Christianity. This is the material of serio-comic writers. This is the material of black humorists. This is the material of this amazing nineteenth century woman writer who stood up for her beliefs, wrote a book, and made a difference. She holds a firm place in our American literary canon as a socially conscientious writer and as a black humorist of the first degree.
Works Cited


