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What's in the Potato Barn: A Discourse of Redemption in Three of Kurt Vonnegut's Novels

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The Bluebeard folktale has been recorded since the seventeenth century with historical roots even further back in history. What is most commonly referred to as Bluebeard, however, started as a Mother Goose tale transcribed by Charles Perrault in 1697. The story is about a man with a blue beard who had many wives and told them not to go into a certain room of his castle (Hermansson ix). Inevitably when each wife was given the golden key to the room and a chance alone in the house, she would always open the door and find the dead bodies of past wives. She would then meet her own death at the hands of her husband. According to Casie Hermansson, the tale was very popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which spurred many literary figures to adapt it, including James Boswell, Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, and Thomas Carlyle (x). However, these writers did not have to define the character or their reference, as the reading populace understood the meaning of the tale as one they grew up with.

By the late twentieth century, the idea of the classic Bluebeard was no longer recognized. Other fairy tales, such as Cinderella and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, had taken the place of more gruesome ones, thanks to Disney's family-friendly films. However, the fairy tale Bluebeard was not completely forgotten by all. Many modern and post-modern writers have chosen to revisit it. Sylvia Townsend Warner in 1940, Eudora Welty in 1942, Kurt Vonnegut in 1987, Margaret Atwood in 1992, Bill Willingham in the *Fable* comics in 2002, and various movies over the last few decades, including *Silence of the Lambs*, have incorporated aspects of Bluebeard (xi, 134).

Kurt Vonnegut's adaptation of the tale, *Bluebeard: The Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916-1988)*, directly addresses the issue of children no longer knowing the story. Rabo Karabekian, Vonnegut's narrator of the "hoax autobiography," asks his housekeeper's 15-year-old daughter and her friends if he "had to explain, for the sake of young readers, who

Bluebeard was” (45). He does have to explain Bluebeard, as he has to explain many things about his life story because the story is not just about a king with a blue beard that “made one shudder” with a hidden room filled with the rotting bodies of his past wives he had killed (“Bluebeard” 660). Instead, it is the fictional autobiography of a twentieth century painter with his own secret hidden in a potato barn that he demands no one discover: “I am Bluebeard, and my studio is my forbidden chamber” (*Bluebeard* 46). Vonnegut chose the Bluebeard fairy tale as the basis for a character with his own hidden secret – a potato barn that holds his best painting. This painting brings redemption to Billy Pilgrim (*Slaughterhouse-Five*), Kurt Vonnegut as both character (*Breakfast of Champions*) and author, and Rabo Karabekian himself. The novels work as one long discourse with *Bluebeard* being the pivotal novel to understanding Vonnegut’s view of redemption, as it is the novel where redemption happens. Redemption used here is the ability to forgive oneself for past sins (or trauma experienced) and being able to give back to society (or return to a community).

Vonnegut’s 1987 book was a shock to many who expected another science fiction novel like *Galápagos*, published only two years before *Bluebeard*, or his two more well-known novels *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). In these previously published novels, Vonnegut uses a strong science fiction aspect that helps him further his point. He does this by adding aliens as exaggerated parts of humanity to show extreme situations only possible through mankind’s manipulation of nature. Vonnegut discusses Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in various novels, though it is seen most prominently in the renowned *Slaughterhouse-Five*, while also using the aliens from Tralfamadore and their concept of time as a way to escape from reality. In *Cat’s Cradle*, the water supply of the entire Earth is turned into a substance called Ice-9 which essentially destroys all of humanity. This introduces another theme similar to that of one

in *Galapagos*, where the human race has devolved into aquatic, dolphinesque creatures. These themes and ideas are common to all of Vonnegut's writings as he tried to get across where the world was heading if changes were not made. He struggled personally with mental illnesses, the trauma from his own life, and war experiences. These issues made a major impact on his writing as seen perpetually in his literature. Consequently, *Bluebeard* came as a shock because of its optimistic ending that offers a chance of recovering from battling mental illness and war trauma.

Although *Bluebeard* deals with many of the same serious issues as *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is rarely given such credit. Many critics<sup>1</sup> applaud Vonnegut's discussion of the bombing of Dresden and the use of time travel as a way to deal with PTSD, as primarily seen in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Other novels are not as acclaimed as many critics failed to see as much literary merit in Vonnegut's novels written after *Slaughterhouse-Five*. For example, when *Bluebeard* was first published, the reviews did not give much credit to either author or work. *The New York Times* review by Julian Moynahan calls it a "minor achievement" and argues that Vonnegut as an author "isn't stalling at this stage of his career, but he isn't moving ahead either." Aram Saroyan for *The Los Angeles Times* reviewed it in terms of its abstract art and concluded that "Vonnegut's purported insider's look at the founding of the first native American art movement only really wakes up on the morning of May 8, 1945, on the rim of a valley in Germany 3,000 miles from the Cedar Tavern." Saroyan felt that the novel was masquerading as a book about the art movement, when in reality it was a book about World War II. Only *The Guardian* critic, Jonathan Cape, had positive feedback, as he claimed it to be a "wry and infinitely good-humored novel." Many critics<sup>2</sup> find that after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, Lawrence Broer, Suzanna Veas-Gulani, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Freese's article "The Critical Reception of Kurt Vonnegut"

was no longer as artistically, culturally, or literarily relevant as he had been with his Dresden novel.

However, the reading populace still loved Vonnegut's writing style because of its own unique take on the world, which allows readers to see various issues such as PTSD, war, and death in a different light. Vonnegut's style is what many readers craved during the twentieth century: a straightforward matter-of-fact style that discusses sex, war, death, and life alongside aliens in a science fiction form. Jerome Klinkowitz argues this extensively throughout his many publications about the author. In "Why They Read Vonnegut," he explains that Vonnegut began to gain attention because of his discussion of pacifism and technology, yet was able to write normal stories about day to day life as well (20). People quickly started to love Vonnegut because he talked about their own lives and emotions. Vonnegut himself, when asked about his popularity among youth, answered: "I'm screamingly funny, you know, I really am in the books" ("Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.:" 12). His use of humor adds an additional layer not typically seen in his writings on "pacifism and [how he] deplored military uses of science" ("Why They Read" 19). Vonnegut used humor as a way to disguise the darker and deeper issues of his novels. He mentions in an interview how it is a normal human reaction to react to tragedy and pain with laughter:

But laughter is a response to frustration, just as tears are, and it solves nothing, just as tears solve nothing. Laughing or crying is what a human being does when there's nothing else he can do. Freud has written very soundly on humor—which is interesting, because he was essentially such a humorless man. The example he gives is of the dog who can't get through a gate to bite a person or fight another dog. So he digs dirt. It doesn't solve

anything, but he has to do something. Crying or laughing is what a human being does instead. (*Wampeters* 256)

Vonnegut explains the reason for his use of humor in his writing technique and why it works so well with his deeper subjects. Another reason his writings became so popular is explained by Jess Ritter in his essay “Teaching Kurt Vonnegut on the Firing Line:” “the structural discontinuities and radical juxtapositions of space fantasy and homely everyday existence in Vonnegut’s novels catch the imagination of a generation born and bred to the TV montage reality of contemporary life” (35). Ritter believes that the newer technology of the twentieth century helped shape the view of readers toward literature. Vonnegut was able to deliver novels in this newly desired mode by writing short stories and using a telling, not showing style. These topics set Vonnegut apart from other writers as he dealt with the real issues many World War II veterans were facing.

One of these important aspects of Vonnegut’s writing style is the incorporation of his own life experiences as seen when comparing his novels and his nonfiction, but most particularly in *Bluebeard*. One of the most important aspects that Vonnegut uses in his fiction that he pulls from his own life is the issue of PTSD. Vonnegut addresses that he struggled with this, though he never specifically calls it PTSD. It took him almost twenty years to write *Slaughterhouse-Five* because he could not find the right angle to portray exactly what he went through. Even though he admits in his introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five* that “people aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore” (28), he does look back repeatedly over the rest of his life as is seen in many of his other novels (specifically *Bluebeard*) that involve war and PTSD. His daughter, Nanette Vonnegut, writes in her introduction to his *Drawings* that “I thought recounting the death and destruction of World War II was a bit more than working out a



neurosis. What I saw growing up was a man fighting for his life” (10). His children watched him growing up struggling with the trauma he encountered in the war. It impacted his entire life.

Because PTSD was so prevalent in Vonnegut and Rabo Karabekian, *Bluebeard* is closer to Vonnegut’s own life and his nonfiction pieces such as *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (1974), *Palm Sunday* (1981), and *Fates Worse than Death* (1991). These are nonfictional collections of various speeches, letters, and essays interwoven with commentary from Kurt Vonnegut. These nonfictional works are similar to his fictional autobiography as they tell stories about his life, relationships, and jobs. Jerome Klinkowitz also argues that Vonnegut’s nonfiction is an “integral part of his expression” (*The Vonnegut Statement* 23). In addition, these collections have a similar style and tone to that of Rabo Karabekian’s autobiography as they easily switch between past and present to discuss either the writing of the book in the present or important events in the past. Both Vonnegut and Karabekian take a laid back, yet serious tone as they discuss important life events of their time in World War II, or their marriages and their children. Karabekian’s persona is mostly akin to Vonnegut’s own, and the comparison is seen most in regards to both the nonfictional collections and the fictional autobiography.

Because Vonnegut often derived his material from his own experience, particularly a good part of *Bluebeard*, it is important to understand his personal experiences that helped shape him as they relate author to character more explicitly. Vonnegut was a soldier in World War II and became a prisoner of war: “And I have to say again that I was an American soldier, a prisoner of war there, when the city was simultaneously burned up and down” (*Palm Sunday* 300). Vonnegut goes on to discuss the relevance of the event to his life, as he says “being present at the destruction of Dresden has affected my character far less than the death of my mother, the adopting of my sister’s children, the sudden realization that those children and my own were no

longer dependent on me, the breakup of my marriage, and on and on. And I have not been encouraged to go on mourning Dresden” (301). Vonnegut explains that Dresden was not as impactful to his life or worldview as other events, but his fiction says otherwise as he perpetually writes on war more so than family issues. Because of his experience as a soldier in the war, Vonnegut perpetually wrote novels and short stories about soldiers and war with a reality that only someone who experienced it could.

In many cases, Vonnegut points out where he himself was during World War II scenes. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut points out what he said upon first seeing Dresden: “‘Oz.’ That was I. That was me. The only other city I’d seen was Indianapolis, Indiana” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 189). Vonnegut used his own life as a basis for his fiction and acknowledged his place in his own stories. When he discusses the pain of being a soldier in his novels, he writes with a realism that can only come from personal exposure, as seen in *Mother Night* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. However, war is not the only subject he pulls from his own life experiences. In *Player Piano* and *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut addresses the issues he witnessed while working for General Electric and his brother Bernard’s research regarding the way in which technology and science are taking over the ability for humans to think for themselves. While Vonnegut writes of Rabo Karabekian’s struggle to paint in *Bluebeard*, he himself was also known to have the same struggle in his own attempts at art.

Vonnegut uses examples not only of his experiences, but also of his personality and struggle with mental illness. Lawrence Broer discusses this extensively in his novel *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*. Broer explains many of the mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and depression, that are seen in many of Vonnegut’s novels. He believes that Vonnegut himself had several of the symptoms and as such was best able to incorporate them

into his novels. Rabo Karabekian is the perfect example of one of these characters. Vonnegut strongly drew from his own experiences and emotions to create Rabo, and because of this Rabo is able to bring redemption to Vonnegut.

Although the connection between Vonnegut and *Bluebeard* seems obvious, few critics write on *Bluebeard* in terms of Vonnegut, choosing instead to elaborate on his use of the Abstract Art movement in the novel.<sup>3</sup> However, a few critics have chosen to discuss *Bluebeard* in terms of Vonnegut's canon such as Hartley S. Spatt in "Kurt Vonnegut: Ludic Luddite." Spatt argues that "Vonnegut's fame rests primarily on his works of social satire: *Player Piano*, *Mother Night*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*...but these novels. . . have failed. . . . So, Vonnegut turned to 'comic' books, novels whose premises are so absurd that no sane reader could ever fear they might contain a social message: *Slapstick*, *Bluebeard*, *Hocus Pocus*" (*At Millennial's End* 132). Spatt examines how Vonnegut's books have changed as Vonnegut realized that his novels were not influencing the world the way he may have been hoping they would. As *Bluebeard* is such a different work from Vonnegut's earlier novels because of the lack of political and social evaluations and satire as well as the aspect of redemption seen in the novel, Spatt's theory is relevant as Vonnegut does seem to be trying something different in this later novel. Vonnegut does seem to change his technique and does not advocate for as many social and political changes in his later books as he does in the beginning. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an anti-war novel, yet *Bluebeard* is merely the autobiography of a veteran.

Before addressing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, or *Bluebeard*, it is important to understand Vonnegut's first attempt at a war novel while using humor to undermine the darker topics. *Mother Night* has many important qualities to recognize as it is Vonnegut's

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<sup>3</sup> David Andrews in "Vonnegut and Aesthetic Humanism," Cliff McCarthy in "*Bluebeard* and the Abstract Expressionists," Edward Kopper in "Abstract Expressionism in Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*," and David Rampton in "Into the Secret Chamber: Art and the Artist in Kurt Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*."

third novel (1961), published after *Player Piano* and *Sirens of Titan*, both science fiction novels. The story is told firsthand by Howard Campbell, Jr. who worked in radio broadcasts for Germany during World War II, but was actually a spy for America. It is Vonnegut's first attempt at a first person, autobiographical sketch. In many ways, it is the start of the idea of *Bluebeard* because of this. However, the novel adds many things to Vonnegut's canon. It is where the author starts experimenting with techniques (adding himself to the narrative and using "so it goes" to minimize the impact of heavy material) that he continues in many books after this one, particularly seen in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Bluebeard*. Edward Jamosky and Jerome Klinkowitz write in their article "Kurt Vonnegut's Three *Mother Nights*" about these new additions as they analyze each new preface and addition to the novel written by Vonnegut. They discuss what the 1966 preface to the novel shows as Vonnegut's progression in writing: "*Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), which incorporates the author himself as a character in its opening and closing chapters, was his work in progress during these years. The Introduction to the 1966 hardcover of *Mother Night*, however, is Vonnegut's first recorded instance of talking about himself at the beginning of a novel, a practice he has maintained in all subsequent works to date" (217-8). The two critics address the life events that happened to Vonnegut between his books and how these events affected his writing. This is important to recognize as these topics are important in subsequent books and as part of Vonnegut's writing style. Vonnegut's newfound ability to add himself into his forewords and novels is an important aspect of his writing style and allows him to become a character in many of his novels. In addition to the inclusion of Vonnegut himself into his work, the 1966 foreword also brings about the start of Vonnegut's discussion of his time in Dresden and being a part of the corpse mines that started after the firebombing. He says more about his time in that introduction than he does in *Slaughterhouse-*

*Five*, his book specifically about his time in Dresden (218). Jamosky and Klinkowitz write about how this addition of historical facts changes the reading:

For *Mother Night* it provides a new relativism with which to read the novel: the editor is now closely associated with the text and is providing moral guidance in addition to Campbell's own statements. What was once a foreign and exotic document now becomes a more homely and familiar story, for we are told that the author himself was there and that the narrative's relative schizophrenia is his own interpretation of the truth of events. (218)

The use of Vonnegut's own life allows readers to find a new connection between themselves and the author. This is an important aspect as it comes back several times in Vonnegut's other novels. Because he connects the real to the not real, it is hard to distinguish between the two. This creates a discourse between reality and fiction that allows for analyses and comparisons to be made. *Mother Night* discusses World War II and Vonnegut's own experience in the war, just as *Bluebeard* discusses the same war. Both novels are fictional autobiographies that use Vonnegut and war as a connecting piece where it becomes harder to separate between reality and fiction.

Although *Bluebeard* and *Mother Night* share various similarities, they are different in one aspect. Howard Campbell, Jr. identifies that he is writing from prison, then starts at the beginning of his time in Germany and the war and progresses forward until the end of his life. He tells only part of his life story, focusing on his time in the war and hiding afterwards. In comparison, Rabo Karabekian digresses from his chronological order with his present situation. *Bluebeard* covers the majority of Rabo's life starting with him being 71 years of age and having just invited a 45-year-old woman, Circe Berman, into his house to write her own stories: "I promised you an autobiography, but something went wrong in the kitchen. It turns out to be a

*diary of this past troubled summer, too!”* (1). Rabo realizes that his present has become just as important as his past because of the new woman in his life. Circe Berman realizes that Rabo is caught up with his own past and insists that he start writing his own autobiography as a way to deal with his life.

Although many themes are similar to those in Vonnegut’s other novels, *Bluebeard* has many differences from the other novels. For example, many novels make multiple references to other works by the author. However *Bluebeard* references few other novels, yet the main character and his art are referenced in many of Vonnegut’s other novels as he started in *Breakfast of Champions*. Rabo Karabekian seems to be in his own separate world, while others still recognize him as part of theirs. Furthermore, the connection, or lack thereof, with other characters, books, and locations is an important aspect of Vonnegut’s work because it creates a discourse between the novels. Part of the author’s charm is how his characters and novels are all connected throughout his canon. Specific characters are mentioned in several novels, certain towns are the location in many of his stories, and alien races and locations are referenced multiple times as well. Marc Leeds has put all of Vonnegut’s works into a computer database and was able to create an encyclopedia to cross reference all instances of interwoven texts. *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia* proves just how expansive and intertwining Vonnegut’s works are. Kilgore Trout is perhaps the most well-known character to indicate this. He is a science fiction writer who has published many short stories in racy magazines and various paperback novels that many characters read and discuss in multiple Vonnegut novels. For example, Trout is mentioned as Eliot Rosewater’s (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*) favorite writer, Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is introduced to him (via Rosewater), in *Breakfast of Champions* Trout is the keynote speaker at the arts festival in Midland City, and in some cases Trout and his stories

are not outright named as Trout's, but are easily recognized as in *Hocus Pocus*. Another example of this repetition of characters is Howard Campbell, Jr. from *Mother Night*, who is also referenced in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Kathryn Hume in her article "Vonnegut's Melancholy" outlines many of these instances and what they do for the canon:

Rabo Karabekian is a minor character in *Breakfast of Champions*, but becomes protagonist of *Bluebeard*. The Rumfoord family turns up more than once, as does the shyster lawyer Norman Mushari. Kilgore Trout figures as character or as author of stories read by characters in at least seven novels. Since many of Trout's plotlines are parables of the absurd and futile and grotesque, and since Vonnegut and his characters cherish these stories, they contribute a note of continuity that helps unify the corpus. (224)

These various uses of characters bring together the canon of Vonnegut's literature and connect them all in one long discourse. Although many characters make a repeat appearance, one character made a big enough impact on Vonnegut that he took the small part and turned it into an entire novel. That character is Rabo Karabekian, who is first introduced in *Breakfast of Champions*, published in 1973. Rabo's paintings are also referenced in *Deadeye Dick*, and he eventually warrants his own autobiography detailing his life as an abstract painter.

These connections become important when looking at *Bluebeard* using Linda Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction. The literary theory is first introduced in the collection *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction* in the essay by Linda Hutcheon: "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History." The theory is a conglomeration of various other theories such as postmodernism and historiography. Postmodernism is defined by Hutcheon as "intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality" (3), and historiography in Hutcheon's context is "a sense of the presence of the

past” (4). Essentially, Hutcheon thinks of postmodernism as full of metafiction, the act of texts referencing themselves and other texts of similar nature. Hutcheon explains that “the term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and context of the past” (3). Her concept of historiography is to understand that there is a past and a history to all things. The main idea of the theory is that all texts are made up of other texts from history and from the author’s own history. For example, Hutcheon discusses how “Barth’s *The Sot Weed Factor* manages both to debunk and to create the history of Maryland for its readers through not only the real Ebenezer Cooke’s 1707 poem but also the raw historical record of the Archives of Maryland” (15). Her explanation elaborates on her theory and shows the use of historiographic metafiction and what it adds to a text. By addressing a specific text, Hutcheon shows her theory in practice and the implications that are then made from it.

Hutcheon uses various contemporary novels to explain how each novel is compiled of themes and ideas from other stories, mostly those with a historical reference such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Ragtime*, and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (3). In the article, she explains her theory and how she finds literary texts always referencing other literary texts: “A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance” (7). Hutcheon’s ideas show that texts build on each other and must be read as part of the entire canon in order to be completely enjoyed. As such, it is necessary to look at other works written around the same time and by the same author and to look at the history of the nation in order to get the true gist of a novel. This method allows the work to be understood as the author intended



it to be as the reader will be able to understand the whole cultural and historical context that the author was intending for the novel.

While applying Hutcheon's theory to Vonnegut, it is clear that Vonnegut draws from his other characters, himself included, as he writes each additional book. His novels all have historical significance as well, and they draw on various battles and experiences from World War II. *Bluebeard* becomes a more significant part of the Vonnegut canon when one considers how much the novel has to say on historical events and other fictional characters. Hutcheon uses Vonnegut specifically in her article to help explain her theory: "readers of a novel like Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* do not have to proceed very far before picking up these signals" (9). Hutcheon acknowledges that Vonnegut's novel is an ideal instance of her theory because it has so many references to other things in Vonnegut's canon. She goes on to discuss the various aspects of Vonnegut's writing that allude to her theory. For example, she mentions all of the references to Vonnegut's other novels in *Slaughterhouse-Five* such as the Tralfamadorians being from *The Sirens of Titan*, and the historical events such as the firebombing of Dresden. She concludes that these historical and literary references "are fair game and all get re-contextualized in order to challenge the imperialistic (cultural and political) mentalities that bring about the Dresdens of history" (10). Hutcheon's theory allows the reader to put the novel, any novel being read, into the proper place and understand even better what it has to say on the culture.

Thus, it becomes clear that Vonnegut's writing style is best suited to historiographic metafiction as it makes many references to the past. *Bluebeard* as a "hoax autobiography" uses various past events such as World War II and the Abstract Art movement ("Author's Note" *Bluebeard*). The novel references specific artists such as Jackson Pollock and historical figures

such as Benito Mussolini. Both Dresden and *Breakfast of Champions* are mentioned or alluded to. Because of this, the novel should be read in light of the other works of Vonnegut and from Vonnegut's own life as he himself has done work as an abstract painter himself. Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction theory works best with *Bluebeard* as it is written on a base of other novels and history that helped cause it to be what it is. This theory adds a deeper level to understanding *Bluebeard* because it helps draw out the historical events that helped create the novel. The novel is opened up in a new, and as yet unlooked at, way by understanding the historical and metafictional references. This theory when applied to *Bluebeard* shows connections within and without the text that help unravel the storyline and contribute to the idea that *Bluebeard* brings redemption to Vonnegut and his canon of works, specifically *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, because they are one discourse instead of individual books.

Primarily because historiographic metafiction is about identifying connections between history, culture, and texts themselves, it is important to recognize that Kurt Vonnegut is a character in his canon as seen in *Breakfast of Champions* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, as well as his last novel, *Timequake*. As such, it then becomes relevant to look at the similarities between author and creation, such as Karabekian's use of humor to hide his pain, which is matched by Vonnegut's own use of humor and is just one of many similarities between the writer and character. The two match up with many of their views, particularly seen in the way that Rabo thinks of the new generation and where America is heading: "I complained to Slazinger and Mrs. Berman at supper last night that the young people of today seemed to be trying to get through life with as little information as possible" (*Bluebeard* 91). Vonnegut himself was very political and outspoken about how he felt about America and where it, and the world, was going: "Our

children have inherited technologies whose byproducts, whether in war or peace, are rapidly destroying the whole planet as a breathable, drinkable system for supporting life of any kind” (*A Man without a Country* 70). Vonnegut was a pessimist about the state of the world and discussed it frequently, just as Rabo does. Another connecting factor is the use of abstract art. Rabo deals with art extensively even though he is never really successful at it. In comparison, Vonnegut throughout his life dabbled in art. He would use it as a distraction from his writing. Rabo and Vonnegut find art to be the most relaxing activity and one that brings them happiness. Neither of them considered it an actual career, and yet both made it an essential part of their lives.

Vonnegut’s life experiences that contribute to Rabo’s character are part of what makes the novel so enjoyable to read as it seems more realistic, which the use of historiographic metafiction helps portray, by showing the connections to historical events and people such as Vonnegut himself.

In addition, Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Bluebeard* uses Hutcheon’s theory well because of the historic events he relies on to tell the story of Rabo Karabekian. The title character was born to Armenian survivors of the “massacre by the Turkish Empire of about one million of its Armenian citizens” (*Bluebeard* 3). He becomes an apprentice to the fictional Dan Gregory, joins the Army, marries his nurse, and, when the Abstract Art Movement started to gain popularity in America, becomes an abstract painter. However, Vonnegut makes it clear that the novel “is not to be taken as a responsible history of the Abstract Expressionist school of painting, the first major art movement to originate in the United States of America” (“Author’s Note ” *Bluebeard*). Instead, Vonnegut writes that “it is a history of nothing but my own idiosyncratic responses to this or that” (“Author’s Note”). *Bluebeard* relies heavily on this art movement that was started in America which was influenced and started because of World War II and the creation of photography. The returning veterans found that they could not express themselves clearly

anymore and turned to art as a way to express their inner turmoil. The art movement also continued after other similar movements such as surrealism, which was a direct response to photography. Artists had to find a new way to paint as cameras could now portray the intricate details that were once specific to master painters.

Rabo Karabekian addresses this exact issue in the novel. Because of the uniqueness of the paintings and the shocking difference of the new style from others, prices were raised exponentially, and painters were able to get paid large amounts of money for their works. Vonnegut addressed this: “May I say, too, that much of what I put in this book was inspired by the grotesque prices paid for works of art during the past century” (“Author’s Note”). Rabo’s part in *Breakfast of Champions* is almost completely comprised of this exact issue as people are outraged that someone paid him \$50,000 for a picture of a piece of tape over a few layers of paint on a canvas. However, Vonnegut fights hard to give a reason behind abstract paintings which is what *Bluebeard* strives to do: make sense of the twentieth century and the Abstract Art movement that came out of it. Rabo Karabekian’s part in *Breakfast of Champions* is crucial to understanding the rest of his life as he tells it in *Bluebeard*, as his part in *Breakfast of Champions* tells more of Rabo’s time as an artist that is not seen or mentioned as much in *Bluebeard*. Because of this, understanding where Rabo was when he was an abstract painter is important to understanding who he is while writing his autobiography in *Bluebeard*.

Finally, by comparing *Bluebeard* to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it becomes obvious why the two novels should both be read together. One reason to compare the two novels is the vast similarities between them concerning such topics as PTSD, the pain of continuing to live after the war and trauma is over, and what it takes to keep on living once the war is over, friends are dead and gone, and there are bills to be paid and life to be lived. The two novels are incomplete

without each other. *Slaughterhouse-Five* leaves the main character without any hope of redemption or cure for his PTSD, whereas *Bluebeard* shows a character able to bring redemption to himself, his past, and Kurt Vonnegut. The two novels need to work together to identify Kurt Vonnegut's purpose in writing various novels of similar themes, which is to bring redemption to his readers through his characters.

In summary, Kurt Vonnegut spent almost sixty years writing a variety of novels, plays, essays, short stories, and speeches. He is known as one of the best writers of the second half of the twentieth century. His literature has been read in high schools across the nation. He has also won several book awards over the decades. He lived a full life, and it is prevalent in his novels. Vonnegut spent his life contributing to American literature and hoping to help his readers understand life and love it for what it is. Books and documentaries have been made on Vonnegut's major works like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Mother Night*, and *Cat's Cradle*, but little is written on the lesser known novels that make up the bulk of Vonnegut's canon. *Bluebeard* is a vastly overlooked novel that has barely been studied in the grand scheme of Vonnegut literature. Although *Bluebeard* is different from other Vonnegut novels, it brings a deeper meaning of redemption that is not seen in Vonnegut's other works. By comparing *Bluebeard* to other more esteemed Vonnegut novels, it will become clear that *Bluebeard* brings redemption to Vonnegut and his body of literary works. Vonnegut opens his discussion on redemption in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, where Billy Pilgrim is unable to find redemption. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut is able to acknowledge that he and his characters need redemption but is unable to fully grasp it. By *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut uses Rabo Karabekian to find redemption for himself as author and his characters. These three novels when studied together create a discourse on Vonnegut's own

journey to find redemption as seen through his characters and the creation and study of Rabo Karabekian.

## Chapter Two: Redemption in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Bluebeard*

When asking someone if he has heard of or read Kurt Vonnegut, he will probably give a negative response and ask, “Who?” But if he is asked if he has read *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he is likely to say he has either read it or at least heard of it. “So it goes” is one of the most well-known and oft-quoted phrases coined in a novel in the twentieth century. It is used in various songs and movies, by various bands, and even news anchors. Taylor Swift’s 2017 Album *Reputations*, too, has a track titled “So It Goes” that may be a reference to the novel and Vonnegut, as there are multiple other literary references on the album. However, “so it goes” has a much deeper meaning, as does the novel. Vonnegut used the seemingly arbitrary and simple phrase as a way to minimize the much bigger emotions of death, grief, and depression. The phrase stands as a coping mechanism to deal with the absurd amounts of death and destruction that main character Billy Pilgrim, and Vonnegut himself, witnessed in World War II as a prisoner of war in Dresden when the firebombing happened there in February of 1945, and he became part of the corpse mining operations.

The novel addresses the psychological impact of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the challenges of returning to a normal life after witnessing so many atrocities. Many critics<sup>4</sup> and academia as a whole agree that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is Vonnegut’s best novel because of these themes and his technique used, particularly seen in the use of science fiction to indicate the problems of PTSD. Although Vonnegut uses science fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it is to bring awareness to the issues of PTSD and not to find a solution to the problem. In *Bluebeard*, though, that science fiction element is left out, and so Vonnegut is able to bring redemption into the novel in a way that is not seen when science fiction is present. Although Vonnegut’s entire canon is wrought with novels that address the issues of PTSD and war, it is *Bluebeard* that best

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter Freese’s “The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut”

functions as a counterpart to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Both novels strongly address PTSD and what it means to live after witnessing so much death. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is renowned for this theme, but *Bluebeard* is a lesser known novel that deals with this theme just as extensively. *Bluebeard* also gives redemption to the main character from PTSD and survivor's guilt, which *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not do. Because of these similarities, *Bluebeard* should be considered by academia and literary critics as vital to Vonnegut's literary canon and literary studies as a whole. It becomes clear by using Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction that the connections between the texts argue for the similarities between the two novels specifically when analyzing them as one continuous text. Connecting the two novels together shows Vonnegut's progression of characters and his own struggle with PTSD, as his later novel *Bluebeard* gives a redemption to Rabo Karabekian that is not seen in any of his previous novels, especially not in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

In order to understand the use and absence of science fiction, it is important to understand how and why Vonnegut started using science fiction in his writing and how he came to be labeled as a science fiction writer. In *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (1974), Vonnegut discusses how he came to be known as a science fiction writer, even though he has many short stories, and several novels that have no, or little, science fiction aspects to them. Vonnegut writes "Years ago I was working in Schenectady for General Electric, completely surrounded by machines and ideas for machines, so I wrote a novel about people and machines, and machines frequently got the best of it, as machines will. And I learned from the reviewers that I was a science-fiction writer" (1). Vonnegut never set out to write science fiction. He simply wrote what he knew and what he was around, and thus it influenced his work. He goes on to say about his being identified as a science fiction writer that:



I supposed that I was writing a novel about life, about things I could not avoid seeing and hearing in Schenectady, a very real town, awkwardly set in the gruesome now. I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘science fiction’ ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.

The way a person gets into this drawer, apparently, is to notice technology. The feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works, just as no gentleman wears a brown suit in the city. (1-2)

Vonnegut wanted to be known for his literary achievements and his discussion of life and humanity. He strove to break away from the title of science fiction writer, while still continuing to use tropes from the genre in order to get across his points. He accomplishes this in *Slaughterhouse-Five* which was nominated for a Hugo and Nebula award, as well as making it to the *New York Times* bestseller list for sixteen weeks. The novel brings about the marriage of good writing and science fiction, which critics did not previously believe could be done.

Vonnegut often had to defend his use of science fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In 1973, the author was interviewed for *Playboy Magazine* and asked the important question: “*Slaughterhouse-Five* is mainly about the Dresden fire bombing, which you went through during World War Two. What made you decide to write it in a science-fiction mode?” (*Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* 262). Kurt Vonnegut responded with:

These things are intuitive. There’s never any strategy meeting about what you’re going to do; you just come to work every day. And the science-fiction passages in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are just like the clowns in Shakespeare. When Shakespeare figured the audience had had enough of the heavy stuff, he’d let up a little, bring on a clown or a

foolish innkeeper or something like that, before he'd become serious again. And trips to other planets, science fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing on the clowns every so often to lighten things up. (262)

The novel benefits from the use of science fiction as it helps readers to relate to the characters. Specifically, returning war veterans (from both World War II and the Vietnam War) were able to relate to the narrator, Billy Pilgrim, who was seeing his entire life at various instances and barely able to remember what was happening in current time. Vonnegut uses science fiction and time travel as a way to express what post-traumatic stress can do to a person.

Before going further in analyze of *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *Bluebeard*, it is important to have an understanding of the psychological definition and symptoms of the illness before addressing Vonnegut's use of PTSD in these two novels. Although the phrase and definition of PTSD was not created until 1980, the symptoms have been around for a much longer period of time as other names. For example, after World War I it was known a shell-shock. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) as "the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events" (274). The symptoms are extensive and varied but include the following: repeated memories of the event, recurrent dreams of the event, flashbacks, distress at something that triggers memories of the event, and avoidance of anything associated with the event (271-2). Especially of importance is the symptom of reliving the traumatic event as if it is currently happening. The DSM discusses this as flashbacks: "The traumatic event can be re-experienced in various ways. Commonly, the individual has recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive recollections of the event" (274). The length of these events can vary: "The individual may experience dissociative states that last from a few seconds to several hours or even days, during which

components of the event are relived and the individual behaves as if the event were occurring at that moment” (274). In many ways, this description of the symptoms portrays what is happening to Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as he uses time travel to cope with his experiences in the war. Vonnegut would not have known about the exact definition of PTSD, but was familiar enough with the symptoms and issues because he was experiencing it himself and was able to incorporate those into his character Billy Pilgrim.

Billy’s experiences with the Tralfamadorians and their concept of time is an example of his PTSD and how he is trying to cope with what he saw in the war. Billy is able to become “unstuck” in time and relive any moment of his life, but often it is the moments of war that he is reliving. This “ability” is a symptom of Billy’s PTSD. In her article "Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatric Approach to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*," Susanne Veas-Gulani discusses Billy’s PTSD symptoms and how they appear in the novel: “Being ‘spastic in time’ thus is a metaphor for Billy's repeatedly re-experiencing the traumatic events he went through in the war, particularly as a POW during the Dresden bombings. Psychologically, Billy has never fully left World War II” (177). Billy’s symptoms are reliving events, and so he creates the idea that he is able to do so because of his experience with the Tralfamadorians. Billy puts himself in control of the situation by believing he is a time traveler throughout his timeline instead of recognizing that he is suffering from mental trauma because of what he witnessed in the war. He knows when he will die, when he will be a POW, and everything else that happens to him during his life time. This ability to move between memories is how he is able to cope with the events of World War II. Veas-Gulani goes on to say that:

Although the idea of Tralfamadore as a coping mechanism may strike one as bizarre, it seems to Billy the only option in a world that fails to provide him with a different path. . .

.With the help of his Tralfamadorian fantasy and his idea of time travel, Billy conquers his trauma in a way that enables him to function. He controls his anxiety, so that nothing can surprise or scare him. (180)

Billy finds his own way of dealing with his psychological condition because the medical professionals he turns to are not able to help him. By using the Tralfamadorians and time travel, he is able to still continue living what could be considered a normal life as he is able to marry, have kids, and hold down a job in the optometry field. Some critics<sup>5</sup> argue that Billy Pilgrim is not actually abducted by the aliens. They believe that it is just a symptom of his PTSD. This idea aligns with how Billy's ability to be "unstuck in time" is also just a symptom of the illness. Billy creates the Tralfamadorians and their way of seeing time to cope with his own traumatic experiences after encountering the science fiction writings of Kilgore Trout while in a mental institution. However, Veas-Gulani argues that Billy's system is not as helpful as it may seem: "The price Billy pays for appearing normal is high. Not only is he bound to a life of indifference, passivity, and a science fiction fantasy, but also he can never fully escape from the trauma that continues to intrude into his life" (180). Although Billy is able to cope with the trauma he experiences on a day-to-day basis, he will never be able to have anything more from his existence than simply reliving various parts of it and exhibiting passivity in all parts of his life. For example, he knows that a chartered plane he would be on would crash and kill his father-in-law. He gets on the plane anyway: "Billy Pilgrim got onto a chartered airplane in Ilium twenty-five years after that. He knew it was going to crash, but he didn't want to make a fool of himself by saying so" (196). Billy knows all of the events of his life and yet does everything the same every time. He says nothing about them to anyone and simply lets himself experience the

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanna Veas-Gulani and Lawrence Broer

traumatic events again and again because this way he at least is no longer surprised by anything that happens to him.

In true Vonnegut form, Billy Pilgrim is not the only character in the author's novels to deal with PTSD and other mental disorders. Lawrence Broer in *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut* believes that "probably no characters in contemporary fiction are more traumatized and emotionally damaged than those of Kurt Vonnegut" (3). The list of the disorders used in the novels is extensive as described by Broer and Vonnegut. Broer addresses them as the following: depression, suicides, and psychopathic violent tendencies. Vonnegut himself identifies the mental illness he uses as such: "combat fatigue, demonic depression, echolalia, sexual mania, [and] masochism" to name a few (3). However, these extensive mental illnesses and deep psychological connections between all the characters in Vonnegut's extensive canon allow the reader to see what Vonnegut is trying to say: mental illness comes in many forms, and all are treated differently.

Eliot Rosewater and Billy Pilgrim, "Vonnegut's prototypical fragmented hero" as Broer calls them (3), battle the same issues of PTSD in a world where they cannot be helped except from within themselves (as psychology is not able to help these characters): "Vonnegut's people become automated shadows, responding only mechanically to offers of love or affection" (4). Vonnegut's goal, then, is to try to help these "shadows" and the world at large by discussing what is wrong with them. The characters can all be connected into one long narrative of Vonnegut's discourse on humanity by using Hutcheon's historiographical metafiction theory as the framework, as they are all connected through either historical events or thematic similarities as is particularly seen in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut starts with Billy Pilgrim, his most well-known character, who is unable to find redemption from his issues as Veas-Gulani states.

However, by the time *Bluebeard* is written, Vonnegut is able to give redemption to Rabo Karabekian from almost the same issues. The connectedness of these characters and themes address the events that Vonnegut himself lived through and how he uses those experiences as a way to help others and himself. Broer uses Vonnegut's own words from various interviews and *Wampeters, Foma & Grandfalloons* to indicate just how much the author connects his stories and his own life:

That man, a traumatized survivor of Dresden, trying to adjust to an absurd world after the war, battling his despair over a world that seems unyielding in its suffering and destructiveness, is Kurt Vonnegut. No wonder that Vonnegut should say to us, "I find myself turning all my books into one book"; "The big show is inside my own head"; "I myself am a work of fiction." (12)

Vonnegut understands that he himself has become "a work of fiction" and that he is "turning all of [his] books into one book," which indicates just how connected all of his stories are. Vonnegut recognize that his novels are all connected into one discourse.

Linda Hutcheon in her essay discusses this concept of Vonnegut's books all being connected and how that makes them all one long discourse. She uses *Slaughterhouse-Five* as an example of historiographic metafiction as it is a prime example of her theory. This is because it is connected to so many historical moments, real people (such as Vonnegut himself who identifies where he was during these actual events), and references to other Vonnegut novels. Hutcheon identifies the historical events as being real as opposed to simply fictional, and how Vonnegut acknowledges in the first chapter that "all this happened more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 1). She then proceeds to outline what fictional parts contribute to the novel and her theory:

Counterpointed to this historical context, however, is the (metafictionally marked) Billy Pilgrim, the optometrist who helps correct defective vision – including his own, though it takes the planet Tralfamadore to give him his new perspective. Billy's fantasy life acts as an allegory of the author's own displacements and postponements (i.e., his other novels) that prevented him from writing about Dresden before this, and it is the *intratexts* of the novel that signal this allegory: Tralfamadore itself is from Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*, Billy's home in Illium is from *Player Piano*, characters appear from *Mother Night* and *God Bless you, Mr. Rosewater*.

Hutcheon argues that these historical events and fictional connections all explain part of what took Vonnegut so long to write *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It took some time for Vonnegut to come up with the right words to describe his experience because his own PTSD was hard for him to face and write down while he was still recovering from his traumatic time in Dresden. It was only finding Tralfamadore as Billy's coping mechanism that allowed Vonnegut to write on his own traumatic experience in Dresden. Vonnegut gave Billy his own experience in Dresden, and thus used the novel as his own way to find his peace with those events through writing them for Billy. This idea seems plausible as Vonnegut wrote four novels and dozens of short stories before he was able to write about his traumatic experiences of Dresden. Vonnegut used his writings the way that Pilgrim uses his time travel: as a way to cope with his PTSD.

Vonnegut's connections with Dresden and Billy Pilgrim lead many critics and readers to view *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the work that best represents Vonnegut and his thoughts on war and mental illness brought on by it. However, as great a novel as *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, it is not the only book that deals with these issues and should not be the only one considered as such. Instead, it should be considered merely the start of Vonnegut's discourse on PTSD and mental illness

with *Bluebeard* being the end of the discourse. *Bluebeard* uses similar themes, events, and historiographical metafiction as a way to discuss PTSD, survivor's guilt (as seen in Rabo Karabekian's father), and how to live in the world after the war. But more importantly, it is also *Bluebeard* that finally gives Kurt Vonnegut the redemption he was seeking in the character of Rabo Karabekian. What Vonnegut starts in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is finally finished in *Bluebeard*. It is only when the books are seen together that this is made clear.

Although many critics<sup>6</sup> love the experimental structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Bluebeard* also has an interesting structure important to understanding the novel and the redemption that Rabo is able to find. The two structures are almost opposite of each other. Billy Pilgrim switches between any given memory or life event that takes place over his lifetime. Rabo Karabekian merely switches between his present, being 71 in New York, and the chronological timeline since his birth moving forward. Yet, these two structures work together to show the redemption of Rabo Karabekian and the eternal suffering of Billy Pilgrim, cursed to relive each moment again and again. *Bluebeard* is a more linear story that begins with Rabo Karabekian at the age of 71 telling the story of his life. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, begins with a chapter narrated by Vonnegut who discusses his own life experiences and then transitions into that of the life and experiences of Billy Pilgrim. Vonnegut does not make any attempt to insert himself into *Bluebeard*, as he does in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. *Bluebeard* is told only by Rabo Karabekian as it is his autobiography. It alludes to many historical events, but does not allude to any other Vonnegut novels, except for *Breakfast of Champions*.

Although Hutcheon does not discuss any other Vonnegut novels, her theory is still relevant to them. *Bluebeard* refers to historical characters and historical events, and even to Vonnegut's own life and style in a way that still reflects Hutcheon's theory. Historiographic

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<sup>6</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, Kathryn Hume, and Peter Freese



metafiction is about finding connections between reality and fiction, and *Bluebeard* still has those with the inclusion of historical events and people. For example, the use of the Abstract Art period when combined with Vonnegut's own experience with the movement shows a connection that otherwise could not be made without Hutcheon's theory. The art movement is both a historical event and, in *Bluebeard*, a fictional one as well. Vonnegut was part of the historical one, Rabo was part of the fictional one, but both were part of the movement and thus are connected through the event. Being able to relate Rabo Karabekian to Vonnegut then connects Rabo Karabekian with Billy Pilgrim and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which shows the bridge between the two novels that seems nonexistent as the novels are so different. Hutcheon's theory shows the connections between the two characters, underscoring that Rabo Karabekian is able to find the redemption not only for himself, but for all other Vonnegut characters that were written before him.

Although *Bluebeard* is self-contained within the Vonnegut canon, connections can still be made even though they are not explicitly stated. The autobiographical nature of the novel allows the reader who is familiar with Vonnegut to recall other novels told in this way such as *Mother Night* or *Hocus Pocus*, both of which take an autobiographical and more straightforward approach. This approach in *Bluebeard*, as opposed to the nonlinear one of *Slaughterhouse-Five* that jumps between moments as Billy Pilgrim has accepted the Tralfamadorian concept of time, allows the reader to understand Rabo's life from when he was a child to his life in his old age. However, like Billy Pilgrim, Rabo switches between present and past tense rather frequently and freely as he encounters things in the present that are relevant for him to discuss. *Bluebeard* still has a fairly straightforward structure, as it is told in a straightforward way with brief interludes in the present.

It is Rabo's different sense of time that contributes to the idea of redemption. Billy Pilgrim is only able to return to the past, with brief glances of his present. Rabo Karabekian gets to live in the present with encounters in the past. He is not stuck living the past over and over again the way Billy is. He lives most of his life being continuously surprised in the present, which leads to his self-forgiveness and redemption because he is able to learn from his mistakes and accept that he has moved past his mistakes. Rabo is never sure what will happen next. When he returns home from a trip to New York and finds that Circe Berman redecorated his Abstract Expressionism foyer into a Victorian era one he is flabbergasted enough to let his eyepatch fall off without even noticing it. Because of this sense of surprise, he is able to recognize how important being surprised and having new experiences is. When he finally shows his final, and best, painting to the world, he recognizes that he can forgive himself because he did something better than he ever had before. When Rabo returns to the past he has all of the benefits of his old age to help contribute to his redemption. He is able to understand more than he did at the moment, something that Billy Pilgrim is never able to do. Although the two characters both seem to be able to travel through their own timelines, it is Rabo Karabekian who is able to benefit from it. When he looks back he can see the things he did correctly, and all the things he did horribly. He is able to learn for the future how to be better than he was. Billy is left reliving the same experiences again and again, whereas Rabo is able to learn from his mistakes and deal with them in his present.

It is not Rabo's story-telling that connects the two narrators, but his way of living after his second wife dies. He lives alone in his mansion with only his friend and fellow veteran, Paul Slazinger, as company. His life consists of remembering his past instead of finding a new way to live. Lawrence Broer discusses that it is Circe Berman who addresses Rabo's sense of time. It is

she who not only allows for his disfigured eye socket to be exposed, which Broer discusses in terms of Lacan and Freud's "castration complex," which is the physical representation of a psychological problem that can only be fixed with a patch (201). This is important as Rabo's missing eye is the physical representation of him never being able to move much past the war and his lost "family." The eyepatch is the physical reminder that he no longer has an eye or the family he found in the war. As long as he does not take the eyepatch off, he does not expose himself to the present or fully move on from the past. He never even let his second wife see him without his eyepatch on: "So now they were seeing the scar tissue which I had never even shown Edith" (115). Circe Berman redecorating his prized foyer causes this all to happen. Rabo is shocked again at the simple fact that his friends do not "recoil in horror or cry out in disgust" at the sight of him without his eyepatch (115). Instead, Rabo is faced with the realization that he "looked just about the same, with or without the eye patch" (115). Rabo starts to realize that he is more than just an eye patch and an old soldier, which is all brought on by Circe's involvement in his life.

Circe makes him deal with these issues of the past instead of just reliving them: "you and your ex-pal here never got past the Great Depression and World War Two" (*Bluebeard* 121). Broer writes that "Circe in her first words to Rabo . . . shocks him into dealing constructively with the present. . . .Circe forces Rabo to become "unstuck" in time by insisting he take up painting again and that he write his life story. Reversing the chronic regression of Billy Pilgrim, Rabo announces, "Back to the Present" (Broer 169). Broer's discussion here shows that Vonnegut reverses the ideas of time in the two novels. Billy always thinks "back to the past," whereas Rabo Karabekian always returns to the present.

Rabo Karabekian is constantly being thrown back into the present from his revelries in the past. He is constantly reminded that Circe Berman is living in his house and nagging him about the potato barn. Billy Pilgrim, on the other hand, is constantly being thrown into the past and reliving the horrible moments of his life such as being a POW or his family dying. The difference is that Billy is stuck reliving the horrible moments, unable to move on with his life, while Rabo is starting to heal and be able to move toward the future and forgive his past. This is primarily seen in the last passage of *Bluebeard* when Rabo, “with all [his] heart,” exclaims: “Oh, happy Meat. Oh, happy Soul. Oh, Happy Rabo Karabekian” (287). This final moment shows Rabo’s forgiveness of his past and acceptance of his current work. He no longer finds that his “soul” and “meat” (his physical body) are at odds with each other. He is able to recognize that he has done something good and no longer has to be ashamed of all of his past mistakes.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* and Billy Pilgrim represent the cycle of being stuck in PTSD and constantly reliving trauma, which shows the reader what life is like when one is unable to receive or accept help. On the other hand, Vonnegut uses *Bluebeard* and Rabo Karabekian as a way to represent healing and being able to move on with a life that has a past filled with trauma with the right help. The two books when read in light of each other show both sides of mental illness and the two outcomes. As such, it is just as important to understand Rabo Karabekian and to see that healing is an option after trauma.

Although Billy Pilgrim struggles to find peace, one moment when he knows peace in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is after World War II has ended and he has been set free as a POW. In conjunction with that, Rabo Karabekian’s final moment of redemption is brought about by his painting of his own like moment. At the end of *Bluebeard*, Rabo Karabekian exposes what is in his potato barn: the painting “Now It’s the Women’s Turn.” It depicts the view that Kurt

Vonnegut himself saw at the end of World War II. The detailed description is mentioned in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well. To Vonnegut, the image is important enough to him to repeat in multiple novels and in detail in the painting. Vonnegut as narrator in chapter one of *Slaughterhouse-Five* describes the scene where “the war in Europe had been over for a couple of weeks” and continues on: “We were formed in ranks, with Russian soldiers guarding us – Englishmen, Americans, Dutchmen, Belgians, Frenchmen, Canadians, South Africans, New Zealanders, Australians, thousands of us about to stop being prisoners of war. And on the other side of the field were thousands of Russians and Poles and Yugoslavians and so on guarded by American soldiers” (7). Vonnegut describes just how many nationalities were represented at this exchange and just how many people were affected.

Rabo Karabekian paints this almost exact image in *Bluebeard* as his final painting and his best as he is finally able to paint with his soul and not just his “meat.” Rabo says that the painting is a picture of “where I was when the Second World War ended in Europe” (268). He goes on to describe what exactly is in the thirty-two foot painting:

On an average, there are ten clearly drawn World War Two survivors to each square foot of the painting. Even the figures in the distance...prove to be concentration-camp victims or slave laborers or prisoners of war from this or that country, or soldiers from this or that military unit on the German side, or local farmers and their families, or lunatics set free from asylums, and on and on. There is a war story to go with every figure. (270)

This picture reflects the immensity of what Vonnegut, Billy Pilgrim, and Rabo Karabekian see and experience in the war and how it ended. This image at the end of the war signifies the freedom they have once more and the start of having their own lives again. Not only is this a unifying theme in the two novels, but it is yet another point proving the redemption that Rabo is

able to find that Billy is not. Rabo finds redemption in the painting of the picture. It took him decades to come to terms with what he witnessed on the last day of the war. It is the singular picture that shows both the reader and Rabo himself that he really can paint and that his soul and meat can both do good things. This final painting is the point that shows Rabo's true redemption for himself. He finally finds peace from the war by painting the most important thing he was ever a part of. Billy is able to have no such act of redemption. Instead, he is only able to relive the day for brief snatches of happiness before he is forced back to the POW camps or Dresden corpse mines.

Furthermore, the two characters take similar approaches to how they deal with returning to "normal" life after the war. This topic is seen in both novels, but also shows just how unredeemed Billy Pilgrim really is. The way Billy tries to live after returning from the war and returning to optometry school shows his inability to function the way he did before the war. He struggles to reintegrate into life. He goes through several years of school, yet admits himself into a mental institution within 6 months of his graduation. He is unable to accept that he has to keep living after what he experienced. When Billy is in the mental hospital, he avoids his mother every time she comes to see him because "she made him feel embarrassed and ungrateful and weak because she had gone to so much trouble to give him life, and to keep that life going, and Billy didn't really like life at all" (130). Vonnegut exposes that Billy has no real desire to keep living and feels guilty that he is still living when others have done so much to keep him alive because he believes his life is not worth the trouble everyone went through for him.

This issue is the main one at the root of the novel as Billy is never truly able to accept anything he is experiencing, and thus he turns to the Tralfamadorians and time travel as a way to escape his life. Susanne Veas-Gulani explains that this is why Billy is not able to be surprised or

anxious anymore as he believes that he has seen his entire life and can move to any part of it at any time (180). Billy is never capable of truly moving on from his past. He is merely able to relive specific moments time and time again, which is living only a half-life without real, strong emotion. His return to life after the war is not strong, and he is not able to survive well as he is never able to fully come to terms with what he has witnessed, choosing instead to focus on other moments of his life, both real (the actual World War II memories) and false (being in the Tralfamadorian Zoo with his porn star and child).

Although Billy's way of addressing his PTSD brings awareness to the problem, it is harder to understand what Vonnegut is trying to say with the Tralfamadorians and time travel than some novels without multiple readings, critical commentaries, and an understanding of how PTSD works. *Bluebeard*, on the other hand, makes it is easier to understand Rabo's pain and how he is able to find redemption from his PTSD. Rabo Karabekian, unlike Billy, actually loses his first wife (they get a divorce) and children because he disassociates himself from his family and with real life. He says while watching Dan Gregory paint that:

When he was doing art, the whole rest of the world dropped away. And I would be like that, too, after the war, and it would wreck my first marriage and my determination to be a good father. I had a very hard time getting the hang of civilian life after the war, and then I discovered something as powerful and irresponsible as shooting up with heroin: if I started laying on just one color of paint to a huge canvas, I could make the whole world drop away. (138)

Rabo uses painting as his way of escape, just as Billy uses time travel and science fiction. However, Rabo is not able to maintain a normal life and pushes others away as he focuses on one simple, mundane task. He focuses his energies on his abstract art and on his friends who were

also victims of the war, and his family left him because of it. Rabo's way of dealing with the trauma shoves people out of his life the way that Billy's does not. Billy was able to maintain a family and a steady job for the majority of his life. It is not until his mother and wife die and his daughter and son are adults that he relapses into a more nonfunctioning state. Rabo is able to recognize that he and his other friends and fellow painters are not doing well after the war in a way that Billy seems to struggle with. He tries to continue living as if everything was fine with his flashbacks and reliving of the past and knowing he would be abducted by aliens. Rabo may not live well, but he is able to acknowledge that he is struggling with how to live after the war and does the best he can to cope with that. Because of this, Rabo Karabekian finds redemption because he acknowledges his problems. Billy is never able to acknowledge his problems and lives a life that is incomplete because of it.

One of the strongest points to recommend *Bluebeard* as a counter-novel to *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the redemption of Rabo Karabekian as a character giving hope to the reader in a way that is not seen in Billy Pilgrim. Rabo at the end of the novel is finally able to forgive his past and his mistakes that contributed to him losing his children and first wife. He is able to acknowledge that it is not his own fault that such tragedies happened or that his friends committed suicide. He accepts that he can only do so much. His final work of art shows just how important his life has been and how he is able to do something good with the life he is given. Unlike Billy Pilgrim, Rabo does not have to hide "his head under a blanket" to avoid those who fought to keep him alive (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 127). This point highlights the possibility of recovering from the horrors of war and learning to live, and even thrive, in life after experiencing trauma.



The two novels both address the greater issues of war. *Slaughterhouse-Five* powerfully brings awareness to the issues of PTSD and mental health, but *Bluebeard* shows the other, and equally important, side that it is possible to recover and live a good life after being witness to and experiencing such atrocities as war brings. Although *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel worthy of critical acclaim, *Bluebeard* should not be forgotten in the literary canon because of the way it also deals with many of the same subjects with a different conclusion that shows an equally important aspect of the issues experience with PTSD. By reading the two novels in conjunction with each other, the bigger picture that Vonnegut is trying to paint becomes clearer. Although Billy Pilgrim does not receive redemption, Rabo Karabekian does and thus solidifies *Bluebeard's* place in Vonnegut's literary canon.

### Chapter Three: Rabo Karabekian's Path to Redemption in *Breakfast of Champions*

The first introduction of Rabo Karabekian is in Kurt Vonnegut's 1973 novel *Breakfast of Champions*. The novel tells the story of Dwayne Hoover, a used car salesman, and his descent into madness. Vonnegut incorporates a multitude of experimental techniques in the novel including the addition of Vonnegut himself as character and narrator, which connects the author to his creations. Other important aspects of the novel include techniques such as the use of drawings that the author drew and having the audience be a futuristic society that may not understand what basic things from today are such as the American flag or billboards. The narrator, Kurt Vonnegut, interacts with his characters and gives his own opinions on them. In particular, Vonnegut creates and then discusses the character Rabo Karabekian, whom Vonnegut liked enough to write an entire novel about fourteen years later. *Breakfast of Champions* is a novel where Vonnegut plays with the construction of a novel and the interaction between author and creation. In the discourse on Vonnegut's redemption, *Breakfast of Champions* is the stepping stone between there being no hope of redemption in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and full redemption in *Bluebeard*.

Although the author has many recurring characters, places, and even aliens throughout his extensive canon, *Bluebeard* is the only instance when he expands on one minor character, making him into a major character. Rabo Karabekian is introduced as a minimalist painter in *Breakfast of Champions* and has a minor role in the novel as a whole. He is there for the art festival in Dwayne Hoover's home town of Midland City. In order to better understand Rabo's autobiography, it is important to understand where Vonnegut started with him as a character in *Breakfast of Champions*. These two parts are essential to understanding the connection of Vonnegut to Karabekian. By comparing the two novels, the bigger picture of who Rabo Karabekian is as a character becomes clearer.

Kurt Vonnegut struggled with pessimism and depression. In *Breakfast of Champions* he writes: “when I get depressed, I take a little pill, and I cheer up again. And so on” (4), indicating his depression was bad enough that he took medication for it. However, Rabo Karabekian forced the author to look at the world in a new way again and again by explaining a different way to see human beings. Because of Vonnegut’s experimental writing techniques and inserting himself into *Breakfast of Champions*, he is able to have a greater connection with his creations, most particularly seen with Rabo Karabekian. Starting with *Breakfast of Champions* and ending with *Bluebeard*, Rabo Karabekian brings redemption to Kurt Vonnegut.

Before analyzing the text, it is important to understand Vonnegut as a writer and why he enjoyed playing with the rules of literature as seen in *Breakfast of Champions*. Kurt Vonnegut started out as a short story writer. He may have been one of the last authors to say that, as the genre has started to die out as TV has become more popular. Vonnegut’s writing style is different from most as he was not trained to be a writer. Because of this his writing style is not for everyone. Dan Wakefield in his essay “In Vonnegut’s Karass” writes about Vonnegut’s style: “Vonnegut is the sort of writer whom you either like a lot or dislike a lot; if you like one of his books, you are likely to enjoy the others” (62). His style is unique, and one either likes it or does not like it. Mainly, Vonnegut believed in the use of showing and telling when writing. Vonnegut did the work for the reader, so the reader could enjoy what he was reading. Vonnegut spent his entire writing career writing about things that interested him. He worked from the scientific approach asking the question “what if?” and then following that through until he found an answer. In a 1995 interview for the *Atlantis* with Francisco Collado Rodríguez, Rodríguez kept asking Vonnegut what literary people influenced him, how he planned out his novels, and what he intended to say. Vonnegut would only respond with answers about his science background,

his older brother, Bernard, and the “what if?” question. This ability allowed Vonnegut more room to play as he had no restrictions. Vonnegut had nothing to dictate to him what he needed to say, allowing him to experiment with the rules of writing. His main way of breaking tradition was his use of metafiction and adding himself into his works and interacting with his characters.

Not only is Vonnegut’s writing technique experimental, it also falls into Linda Hutcheon’s theory. Vonnegut’s self-insertion is a major aspect of Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction. The author uses intertextuality as a way to connect his characters and himself as character to them. He references many of his other creations such as the town of Ilium (*Player Piano*), Eliot Rosewater (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*), and Kilgore Trout (first introduced in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, but referenced in multiple other Vonnegut works such as *Slaughterhouse-Five*). By being one of the characters, Vonnegut gets rid of the bridge between author and creation. He allows for Hutcheon’s theory to take over connecting him to the text and being able to be analyzed and connected to his novels. This method allows the reader to understand more what Vonnegut is trying to get across to his readers about his own mental illness and the redemption that he finds in Rabo Karabekian.

Although Vonnegut struggled with mental illness, he was able to find relief in the arts. His daughter Nanette in “My Father, the Doodler” writes that her father once told her how “he believed that people worked through their neuroses through art” (10). Art was his way to find redemption, and he used both writing and painting to do so. When Vonnegut writes about art, specifically the Abstract Art movement, he is trying to show how useful art is to finding redemption, mainly because he found it to be a relief for himself. By making Rabo Karabekian a painter he is showing his potential to bring redemption not only to himself, but also to Vonnegut. Rabo is announced to the readers as a painter, and for the Abstract Art movement. Vonnegut

introduces Rabo thusly: “Dwayne missed it when two distinguished visitors to the Arts Festival came in and sat down on barstools next to Bunny’s piano. They were white. They were Beatrice Keedsler, the Gothic novelist, and Rabo Karabekian, the minimal painter” (201). His addition to *Breakfast of Champions* is a remarkable way of bringing a deeper level to the novel of redemption and understanding because of his being an artist, which shows a deeper connection as to why Kurt Vonnegut is able to find redemption through him. The two are able to connect over their art as they both use it as a way to escape other things. Vonnegut feels more connected to Rabo because of the shared joy of being a painter, and thus is able to find redemption through him because of this.

However, it is hard to connect the idea of redemption to the character of Rabo at first as he does not seem like a person who is capable of redemption for either other people or himself. Rabo’s first appearance leaves the reader with an impression of who he is going to be as a character, and yet he surprises both the reader and Vonnegut. His and Beatrice Keedsler’s conversation gives a preliminary idea of who this character is, yet it leaves the characters open for change:

“This *has* to be the asshole of the Universe,” said Rabo Karabekian, the minimal painter.

Beatrice Keedsler, the Gothic novelist, had grown up in Midland City. “I was petrified about coming home after all these years,” she said to Karabekian.

“Americans are always afraid of coming home,” said Karabekian, “with good reason, may I say.”

“They *used* to have good reason,” said Beatrice, “but not anymore. The past has been rendered harmless. I would tell any wandering American now, ‘Of course you can go home again, and as often as you please. It’s just a motel.’” (201)

Rabo appears to care little about this small town, and yet he is able to say that it is still home to people. Rabo’s agreement with Beatrice shows that he himself is afraid to go back home, as there is nothing there for him. Yet, he realizes that Beatrice is right and does not try to contradict her. He recognizes that going home should not be the ordeal that so many make it. This realization helps shape him and starts his ability to forgive as he recognizes that the past has to be overcome. However, it is still important to note that even from the first time Rabo appears he recognizes aspects of life that should be easier to overcome than they are. He knows that going home is not an easy thing to do as he himself is never able to, yet he understands that it should be thought of that way. By going home, Beatrice is able to accept her past, forgive it, and move on. Rabo is able to recognize that Beatrice’s comment is important for him to understand, and partly a stepping stone to himself being able to “go back home.”

Furthermore, Rabo’s ability to bring redemption to Vonnegut is mostly because of the direct interaction between the two in *Breakfast of Champions*. They sit in the same cocktail lounge listening to the same conversations. Vonnegut agrees with the crowd that Rabo’s painting is absurd and is just as shocked that Rabo has a real explanation for his painting. The two are able to interact in a way that many characters and authors do not. Although Vonnegut inserts himself into other novels such as *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Timequake* (Vonnegut’s last fictional novel), it is his insertion of himself into *Breakfast of Champions* that is of real interest as he interacts directly with his own characters, particularly Rabo. Because of his self-insertion, Vonnegut becomes the intertextuality of his novel, breaking the line between

characters on the page and real, historical events and life and connecting all his works and himself to them.

Vonnegut as character then links the novel with the world of Vonnegut as author, allowing the reader to make connections otherwise not able to be made. Vonnegut is able to connect with both reader and characters by using himself as a character. His ability to reference himself and his own life, especially when he was a part of historical events, connects his creations to these same historical events. Hutcheon's theory then shows that these historical events and relations to Vonnegut improve the plot of the novel and further Vonnegut's ultimate goal of trying to find redemption for both himself and his characters. This connection is made by making both history and fiction a discourse that work together to express the redemption that is seen in the novels. By connecting the historical with the fictional, Vonnegut is able to tell a more realistic and in-depth story that allows him to be just as influenced by his characters as his characters are by him. Vonnegut's direct interaction with the characters on the pages of *Breakfast of Champions* allows him to understand them better and thus find the best way to give them the redemption he seeks, especially for Rabo Karabekian, who helps Vonnegut find some semblance of redemption for himself.

By becoming an actual character, Vonnegut is able to have a deeper understanding of his creations and his ability to create them. He uses this technique to be a better writer and a better person, allowing him to be just as influenced by his creations as they are by him. His interaction creates a deeper level of his understanding of the characters he has created and the creative process:

The bartender took several anxious looks in my direction. All he could see were the *leaks* over my eyes. I did not worry about his asking me to leave the establishment. I had

created him, after all. I gave him a name: Harold Newcomb Wilbur. I awarded him the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Soldier's Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, and a Purple Heart with two Oak-Leaf Clusters, which made him the second most decorated veteran in Midland City. I put all his medals under his handkerchiefs in a dresser drawer. . .

And he went on staring at me, even though I wanted to stop him now. Here was the thing about my control over the characters I created: I could only guide their movements approximately, since they were such big animals. There was inertia to overcome. It wasn't as though I was connected to them by steel wires. It was more as though I was connected to them by stale rubberbands. (207)

Vonnegut admits that characters develop into their own creations to an extent, and he can only control them so much. He accepts that he must stay committed to what they would do as characters and not just what he would have them do or say. Vonnegut respects the distance between himself as character and himself as author. He knows he has control over his characters as he wrote them, but he also lets them have their story without interfering when he is among them. Vonnegut, by being a character, creates the distance to be both influenced by and to influence, which allows him to find unexpected redemption from Rabo Karabekian, who turns into a better character than Vonnegut anticipated. Instead of simply being the creator behind a typewriter, Vonnegut becomes part of the narrative and a character in his novels. This allows him to have more direct interaction with his characters and be influenced by them. He is then able to find redemption from Rabo Karabekian because he recognizes that Rabo is more than just words on a page.

Vonnegut's interaction with his characters continues throughout the entire novel, and he discusses various ones and his opinions on them, specifically Rabo Karabekian. Vonnegut was

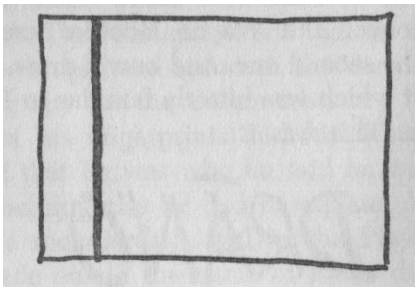


influenced enough by Rabo's character to give him his own novel written as if it was an autobiography. Vonnegut returns from his discussion of other characters to discuss Rabo Karabekian in more detail: "and it was time for me to have Rabo Karabekian, the minimalist painter, and Beatrice Keedsler, the novelist, say and do some more stuff for the sake of this book. I did not want to spook them by staring at them as I worked their controls, so I pretended to be absorbed in drawing pictures on my tabletop with a damp fingertip" (211). Vonnegut is very careful in this section to keep his characters from knowing he is there. He chooses to be a part of the scene but is trying to be careful about his level of meta-fiction. He does not want to allow the characters to know that they are in a novel and his creations. Instead, he chooses to keep them ignorant and only allows the reader to understand what is happening. He chooses to be in the novel, but he does not want the novel to be a discussion on how characters know they are characters in a novel. He chooses instead to allow the reader to be aware of the intertextuality and self-referential nature of metafiction. Rabo is only able to bring Vonnegut and himself redemption because he does not realize he is merely a character in a novel. Vonnegut is able to receive the redemption brought on by Rabo because he realizes Rabo is his own person and can make his own story within the control of Vonnegut.

Vonnegut's interactions and thoughts on Rabo Karabekian are most seen in *Breakfast of Champions* because of his self-insertion into the novel. This almost direct relation with the character allows Vonnegut to get a deeper understanding of the man before him. While Vonnegut is simply writing the character, Rabo and his paintings are only black and white on the page. However, when Rabo is in front of Vonnegut in the novel, he becomes three dimensional and his paintings suddenly make sense. This is not immediate. It takes more interaction with Rabo before Vonnegut starts to be redeemed by him. While Vonnegut the character is trying to

avoid being noticed in the cocktail lounge by his creations, he draws, among other things, a version of Karabekian's painting *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*:

My duplicate was a miniature of the real thing, and mine was not in color, but I had captured the picture's form and the spirit, too. This is what I drew:



The original was twenty feet wide and sixteen feet high. The field was Hawaiian Avocado, a green wall paint manufactured by the O'Hare Paint and Varnish Company in Hellertown, Pennsylvania. The vertical stripe was day-glo orange reflecting tape. This was the most expensive piece of art. . .

It was a scandal what the painting cost. It was the first purchase for the permanent collection of the Mildred Barry Memorial Center for the Arts. Fred T. Barr, the Chairman of the Board of Barrytron, Ltd., had coughed up fifty thousand dollars of his own for this picture.

Midland City was outraged. So was I. (212-13)

Vonnegut's thoughts on Rabo do not go far below the surface level at first. However Rabo's painting is the key to unlocking the redemption that is coming. The picture seems minimalist and simple, yet Rabo has a very rational explanation of it that changes the way Vonnegut sees humanity and thus starts his process of redemption. Also, this section shows Vonnegut's original feelings about Rabo, which is important to understand as they change so drastically by the end of the novel. Vonnegut's agreement with Midland City that the price was absurd shows how he

feels about the Abstract Art Movement and the amount of money that could be made in the industry. Vonnegut expands on his sentiments towards Karabekian further: “I thought Karabekian with his meaningless pictures had entered into a conspiracy with millionaires to make poor people feel stupid” (214). He does not try to hide his impression of his own character. However, Vonnegut’s opinion changes toward the character once Karabekian starts defending himself. Partly what brings about the redemption for both author and character is this change in Rabo himself.

The event that sparked this change in Vonnegut’s attitude toward Rabo is the speech Rabo gives defending *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*. Vonnegut as character even acknowledges what importance the speech is going to have for himself, saying that “it was about to give birth to a new me” (224). The interaction between Vonnegut and Rabo Karabekian is critical to understanding Vonnegut’s expansion of this character. Vonnegut connected deeply with something in Rabo Karabekian. It is in this section that Vonnegut’s statement about his creations being connected by a rubber band starts to come to life as Rabo Karabekian takes on a life of his own that Vonnegut was not expecting. Vonnegut did not anticipate this outbreak and realizes just how far some of his creations could go out of his own control.

Bonnie the waitress has a sudden outburst about how ridiculous Rabo’s painting is, yet Vonnegut is the one most renewed by it. Out of the entire cocktail lounge that hears Rabo’s response, Vonnegut is the only one who took it to heart and let it change him and his way of seeing people. Rabo earns the respect from the crowd, but he only changes one person’s life. Vonnegut records the events as he perceives them in the cocktail lounge: “Karabekian slid off his barstool so he could face all those enemies standing up. He certainly surprised me. I expected him to retreat in a hail of olives, maraschino cherries and lemon rinds. But he was majestic up

there” (225). Karabekian shows that he is not a coward and that he is not afraid of other people’s opinions about his art work. Vonnegut suddenly realizes just how big of a character Rabo is and how much more potential he could have in a much longer story. It is this sudden turn in Vonnegut’s thoughts that allows *Bluebeard* to become a published novel because it is when Vonnegut comes to realize how important a character Rabo Karabekian is and the redemption he might finally allow Vonnegut to find. However, it is the rest of Rabo’s speech that makes the deepest impact on Vonnegut:

“I now give you my word of honor,” he went on, “that the picture your city owns shows everything about life which truly matters, with nothing left out. It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal – the ‘I am’ to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us – in a moose, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and maybe sacred in any of us. Everything else is dead machinery.” (226)

This defense of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* is Rabo’s shining moment where he gets the chance to explain his painting’s meaning that so many do not understand. This speech shows the potential and need of an entire novel for this character. The way of thinking of humans as “unwavering bands of light” is such an interesting and wonderful concept that the reader wants to know more about this man who sees life in this way and paints it as such. The speech shows what abstract art is trying to do: represent life in a new way. According to Lawrence Broer in *Sanity Plea*, this way of thinking has a major impact on Vonnegut as author:

Vonnegut comes to see this awareness according to the vision of Rabo Karabekian as an “unwavering band of light,” a sacred, irreducible living force at the core of every animal. This epiphany sets in motion the essential drama of this book and perhaps of all Vonnegut's work, his spiritual rebirth, in which he determines to repudiate his former pessimism and in which the tragically repressed voice of hope in his work gains ascendancy over its negative counterpart. (105)

Rabo Karabekian is seen as the light at the end of the tunnel for Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions* and in *Bluebeard*. The character is constantly forcing Vonnegut to take a more optimistic view of humanity and life. Because Vonnegut did not expect the painting to have a deeper meaning, he was able to be impressed and redeemed because of the deeper thinking of the art movement. Before, Vonnegut thought that the art movement was all about conning people out of their money. However, Rabo forces him to recognize that this is not true. Abstract art has rational explanations and emotions behind it just as any other paintings do. Vonnegut realizes that there is a deeper meaning to *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* and that it is Rabo's own way of dealing with his own neuroses from the war.

Although Rabo Karabekian soon fades from *Breakfast of Champions*, the main character, Dwayne Hoover, takes over with his mental meltdown. However, Vonnegut still takes the time to mention that his “life was being renewed by the words of Rabo Karabekian,” and so it is as he picks up the character fourteen years later and writes his biography (229). *Breakfast of Champions* is one step closer to Vonnegut finding redemption for himself and for his characters. Although he does not completely find it yet (nor does Dwayne Hoover), he does find the start of redemption. In Kurt Vonnegut's words, “God bless Rabo Karabekian!” (231).

#### Chapter Four: How Rabo Karabekian Brings Redemption to Kurt Vonnegut

Many authors insert part of themselves into their characters and creations. However, in Kurt Vonnegut's case, there is a piece of Vonnegut in many of his characters. Over the years critics<sup>7</sup>, readers, and scholars alike have made assumptions about Vonnegut and his alter-egos in his writings. One of the most prominent of these is the connection between Vonnegut and Kilgore Trout. Trout is the fictional writer who appears in novel after novel in multiple ways. In *Breakfast of Champions* when Vonnegut inserts himself into the novel, Trout is the only character that Vonnegut chooses to address directly and let in on the secret that he is only a character in a novel: "I am going to set at liberty all the literary characters who have served me so loyally during my writing career. You are the only one I am telling" (301-2). Vonnegut seems to like Trout more than his other characters. However, Trout is not the only character with similarities with his author.

Rabo Karabekian is just as much an alter-ego to Kurt Vonnegut, if not more so, as Kilgore Trout. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut saw enough potential in the character of Rabo Karabekian to give him his own novel and an expansive back story in *Bluebeard*. Karabekian and Vonnegut share many similarities of two people who lived through the twentieth century. For example, they lived through the Great Depression, World War II, the death of their mothers at an early age, divorcing their first wives, and both used abstract art as a way to cope with PTSD. Comparing author and character shows the realistic pieces of the character. Kathryn Hume writes that "*Bluebeard* does not feature Vonnegut directly, but much that gets said about representational and abstract art, about kitsch, about pop writing and art novels is of authorial concern" (224). Hume's point reiterates that Vonnegut shares a strong connection with Rabo Karabekian. Part of this connecting piece relates back to the connection Vonnegut makes with

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Broer, Harold Bloom, Jerome Klinkowitz, and Kathryn Hume

the audience by making himself relatable. Hume writes that “Intimacy with the author makes readers feel personally intimate with the work, and Vonnegut rewards his fans by putting in references that only they will fully appreciate, thus increasing the sense of friendship” (225). Hume’s article highlights Vonnegut’s life and how he incorporated it into his writings. This is present particularly in *Bluebeard* with all of the connections that can be made between Rabo and Vonnegut.

Viewing character and author through the lens of historiographic metafiction shows more connections that might otherwise not be seen because of the historical and culture connections that the theory uses. This is particularly seen in how Vonnegut made Rabo Karabekian only ten years older than himself. This allows the two to go through many of the same historical events of the twentieth century while being in similar stages of life. Analyzing the historical similarities between the two shows the importance of studying *Bluebeard* as it shows the relevance of remembering these important events of the last century. Because of these references, the two are connected on a deeper level as historical and fictional realities become one rather than separate.

In order to understand the similarities between author and character, it is important to understand where the author came from and then to analyze where the character came from as told in *Bluebeard*. Kurt Vonnegut was born in 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana. He mentions often that his family is of German descent on both his mother’s and his father’s side. During both World Wars this became an issue for his family. He writes in his autobiographical collection *Palm Sunday* (1981) “the anti-Germanism in this country during the First World War so shamed and dismayed my parents that they resolved to raise me without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the music or the oral family histories which my ancestors had loved. They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism” (21). Vonnegut

goes on to mention that this new ignorance of one's culture was indeed a common thing for most German-American families during the first half of the twentieth century. Patriotism for America was put above the culture of generations before. He lamented the loss of his heritage.

Vonnegut has such an expansive knowledge of his family because of a family historian who tracked both sides of his family back and was able to give accounts of all four of Vonnegut's grandparents and his parents. He uses expansive passages from a manuscript "An Account of the Ancestry of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., by an Ancient Friend of His Family" written by a man he calls his Uncle John who refers to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. as K and Vonnegut's father as Kurt (19). Vonnegut gives the account of his various grandparents and then moves on to discuss his own parents and what living was like in the 20's and 30's. Vonnegut's father was forced to give up the family trade of architecture when the Depression hit and the family struggled to make money: "but by the time K came along to his adolescence, the family was in financial trouble. He knew only the hard times of the 1930's...His parents were in straitened circumstances. There was practically no building in the Depression years and Kurt's professional income vanished" (54). This lack of funds and low income continued on for the family until the Second World War hit:

Meanwhile came the Second World War in December 1941 and once again America was arrayed against Germany. Bernard (Vonnegut's older brother) at twenty-four escaped the draft, but Kurt Jr., at nineteen was caught. He was enlisted in the army as a private and sent to training camp. This came as a great shock with acute distress to Edith (the mother)...She simply could not see daylight. Kurt, Jr., got leave from his regiment to come home and spend Mother's Day in May 1944 with his family. During the night



before, Edith died in her sleep in her fifty-sixth year on May 14, 1944. Her death was attributed to an overdose of sleeping tablets taken possibly by mistake.” (55-6)

Vonnegut ends the narrative of his family history with the death of his father from cancer. He comments little about how these events affected him. However, in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (1974) in the “Playboy Interview” Vonnegut, upon finally deciding to visit his parent’s graves, explains that: “There are two stones out there in Indianapolis, and I looked at those two stones side by side and I just wished – I could hear it in my head, I knew so much what I wished – that they had been happier than they were. It would have been so goddamned easy for them to be happier than they were. So that makes me sad” (254-5). He never fully gets over his parents’ death or the unhappiness they had and instilled in him. Vonnegut carried the sadness of his parents into the rest of his life and into his writing.

Although Vonnegut was a third generation immigrant, Rabo is a first generation immigrant. However, the similarities are still there and important to study as immigration was a major part of the twentieth century in America. Rabo Karabekian “was born of immigrant parents in San Ignacio, California, in 1916” (*Bluebeard* 1). He also has a family history that was once bigger and grander than he ever knew it to be himself: “my mother and father had families bigger than those two of mine back in the Old World – and of course their relatives back there were blood relatives. They lost their blood relatives to a massacre by the Turkish Empire of about one million of its Armenian citizens” (2-3). Not only were his relatives slaughtered in the massacre, his parents were witnesses to it and yet managed to survive, which shaped the way they were and how they raised Rabo. Rabo is told growing up to “never trust a survivor. . . until you find out what he did to stay alive” (27) because his parents wanted to make sure he does not make the same mistakes they did such as blindly trusting someone who offers help. This comes

through when Rabo discusses the differences between his mother's and father's experiences. His mother only survived because she had to pretend to be dead on the battlefield, whereas his father survived by hiding in a privy. However, it is not his mother who holds on to survivor's guilt although she was on the front lines. It is his father who is unable to let it go and enjoy life in America even though he was removed from most of the massacre (4). This difference causes Rabo to resent his father for not being able to move on the way his mother could. In many ways, this issue is what shapes Rabo. His father was never able to find relief and redemption from his youth, and so Rabo struggled for years to do just that because his father never showed him how to overcome the past. Rabo spends a decent part of his autobiography discussing his parents and what it was like growing up with them because of the impact they had on his life by never moving past the massacre.

Like Vonnegut on the sadness of his parents, Rabo recalls: "I can stand loneliness, if I have to. I stood it when a boy" (9). His parents did not interact with him much or try to teach him much of their old ways. Upon first meeting Circe Berman, her first request instead of a greeting is: "Tell me how your parents died." Rabo, after expressing how strange it is to greet someone like that and upon hearing her reason behind it, (" 'What does 'hello' mean?' And I said, 'I had always understood it to mean 'Hello.' 'Well it doesn't,' she said. 'It means don't talk about anything important.' It means, 'I'm smiling but not listening, so just go away.'" She went on to avow that she was tired of just pretending to meet people. 'So sit down here,' she said, 'and tell Mama how your parents died'" (13).) goes on to give how his parents died: "And I told Mrs. Berman this about my mother: 'She died when I was twelve – of a tetanus infection she evidently picked up while working in a cannery in California...At least she didn't have to endure the Great Depression, which was only one year away.' I said. And at least she didn't have to see her only

child come home a cyclops from World War Two” (14). This parallels a similar passage in *Palm Sunday* when discussing the death of Edith Vonnegut, the author’s mother: “She missed by a matter of two months the birth of her first grandchild, the son of her daughter Alice. She would miss seeing twelve grandchildren in all. She missed by seven months the capture of her son K by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge, and his imprisonment in Dresden until the end of the war” (55-56). Both mothers missed important parts of life by only a few months, as well as missing the more tragic and terrible events that happened to those children in World War II.

The two fathers are just as similar. Both never remarry and die alone after the children have all moved out of the house and continue on with their lives: “[Rabo’s father died] in the Bijou Theater in San Ignacio in 1938. He went to the movie alone. He never even considered remarrying” (*Bluebeard* 14). In comparison from *Palm Sunday*: “[Kurt Vonnegut, Sr.] died quietly in his sleep on October 1, 1957 – quite alone” (57). Vonnegut took the aspects of his own parents’ deaths and turned them into aspects of his fictional character. The connection is remarkable similar and is but one of many aspects the two share throughout Vonnegut’s nonfiction and Karabekian’s story as told in *Bluebeard*.

A minor detail connecting character and author is the use of semicolons. Kurt Vonnegut states on several occasions when he discusses writing his abhorrence of the punctuation. In *A Man without a Country* while giving his rules of writing, he states: “First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you’ve been to college” (23). Vonnegut avoids using semicolons in his own writing and advocates for others to do the same. In *Bluebeard*, Rabo Karabekian also avoids using semicolons, which is then pointed out by Circe Berman: “‘How come you never use semicolons?’ she’ll say. Or: ‘how come you chop it all up into little sections instead of letting it

flow and flow?' *That sort of thing*" (37). Rabo seems to carry many of Vonnegut's own writing influences. Rabo was also not trained to be a writer, and so he and Vonnegut have both found their own way of doing things that works for them.

Vonnegut's never ending search for a large family comes through in many of his novels, but perhaps most in *Rabo Karabekian*, who discusses in many places his desire, and then loss, of the only two times in his life he claimed to have a large family. Vonnegut asks near the end of his life in his last autobiographical collection *A Man without a Country*: "Why are so many people getting a divorce today? It's because most of us don't have extended families anymore. It used to be that when a man and a woman got married, the bride got a lot more people to talk to about everything. The groom got a lot more pals to tell dumb jokes to" (47-8). He goes on to say: "A husband, a wife and some kids is not a family. It's a terribly vulnerable survival unit" (48). Vonnegut understood that family was important as it created a community. He spent his whole life searching for these communities. Karabekian feels the same way in *Bluebeard*. He never felt that he was part of a family until he had his own military unit and then his collections of friends: "I refused all promotions beyond captain in order to remain with my happy family of thirty-six men. That was my first experience with a family that large. My second came after the war, when I found myself a friend and seeming peer of those American painters who have now entered art history as founders of the Abstract Expressionist school" (2). Rabo never considers any of his other connections as a family. It is only when he is in these much bigger social circles that he calls himself part of a family.

In his own life, Vonnegut also struggled to find an actual family. He admits in *Palm Sunday* one of the times he found himself to be a part of a family: "I found a family here at the *Sun*, or I no doubt would have invited pneumonia into my thorax during my freshman year.

Those of you who have been kind enough to read a book of mine, any book of mine, will know of my admiration of large families, whether real or artificial, as the primary supporters of mental health” (66). Vonnegut stresses in many places just how crucial being a part of a community and part of a family is. It is a major part of one of his less acclaimed novels, *Slapstick or Lonesome No More*, where the president of the United States decides to redefine families and gives everyone a computer generated last name in order for them to all be a part of a bigger family and feel less lonely. Vonnegut states in the introduction to *Slapstick* that: “It is lucky, too, for human beings need all the relatives they can get - as possible donors or receivers not necessarily of love, but of common decency” (5). Vonnegut struggled with feeling alone and strove to have his characters and those around him understand the importance of these families as he seemed to always be looking to find his own large family.

Family and audience are an important issue to Vonnegut. His family life tied greatly into his art in many ways, particularly in who he wrote for. This ties in directly to Rabo Karabekian’s own audience for his art. Although Circe Berman is more of the writer than Rabo Karabekian in *Bluebeard*, they both accept that they are artists of sorts. As such, it is Mrs. Berman who starts the discussion of audience when she points out that Marilee Kemp wrote to Rabo because he was her audience (59). The exchange between Mrs. Berman and Rabo concerns the issue of an audience: “ ‘You were her *audience*,’ she said. ‘Writers will *kill* for an audience.’ ‘An audience of *one*?’ I said. ‘That’s all she needs,’ she said. ‘That’s all anybody needs’” (59). Circe Berman, as a writer for young adults, has learned what she considers the secret to her writing trade: “ ‘That’s the secret of how to enjoy writing and how to make yourself meet high standards,’ said Mrs. Berman. ‘You don’t write for the whole world, and you don’t write for ten people, or two.

You write for just one person” (60). Vonnegut says almost these exact things when discussing the death of his sister at forty-one by cancer in the introduction to *Slapstick*:

For my own part, though: It would have been catastrophic if I had forgotten my sister at once. I had never told her so, but she was the person I had always written for. She was the secret of whatever artistic unity I had ever achieved. She was the secret of my technique. Any creation which has any wholeness and harmoniousness, I suspect, was made by an artist or inventor with an audience of one in mind. (15)

Vonnegut thought that the secret to good art was to have an audience of one in mind. This is not the only case of Vonnegut addressing the subject of a singular audience in mind. When he was interviewed for *The Paris Review* in 1977, recorded in *Palm Sunday*, the subject is brought up by the interviewer: “I said in *Slapstick* that she was the person I wrote for – that every successful creative person creates with an audience of one in mind. That’s the secret of artistic unity. Anybody can achieve it, if he or she will make something with only one person in mind. I didn’t know she was the person I wrote for until she died” (107). Vonnegut realized that he only needed an audience of one, as does Rabo Karabekian.

Perhaps the most important comparison between author and character is that of abstract art. Not only is this important because *Bluebeard*’s central focus is that of the Abstract Art Movement, but also because of the historical indications of the art movement based on historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon when discussing her theory writes that “The United States is a land of immigration” and goes on to address this further: “American fiction since the sixties has been, as described by Malcolm Bradbury, particularly obsessed with its own past – literary, social, and historical. Perhaps this preoccupation is tied in part to a need to find a particularly American voice within a culturally dominant Eurocentric tradition. . . . This is also

what American historiographic metafiction in general is “about” (12). She argues that Americans rely so heavily on history because it is a way to connect with the rest of the world. She sees the abundance of immigrants as a way to show the connections with the rest of the world and to show that America tries to bring other cultures into our own.

Using the Abstract Art movement is especially important to note because it is the first major art movement to start in America. The art movement is also a direct retaliation against World War II and photography. Karabekian comments on this point: “But cameras could do what he had done and what I could do. And I knew that it was this same thought which had sent the Impressionists and the Cubists and the Dadaists and the Surrealists and so on in their quite successful efforts to make good pictures which cameras and people like Dan Gregory could not duplicate” (44). Abstract Art was about doing something that had not been done before.

Historiographic metafiction allows this point to be analyzed and shows why Vonnegut specifically chose this art period and why *Bluebeard* is so important to study. The use of the specific art movement relates back to the war trauma that both Vonnegut and Karabekian have. By referencing the art movement, Vonnegut opens the discussion of using art to help heal war trauma and bring redemption to both character and author.

When it comes to painting and art, Vonnegut and Karabekian have many similarities. Vonnegut turned to art to forget all that he had endured in life and as a way to relax from the more complex form of the art of writing. Both used art as a way to connect to other people and other artists. Nanette Vonnegut, the youngest of Jane Cox Vonnegut and Kurt Vonnegut’s children, wrote in her introduction to *Kurt Vonnegut Drawings*, a collection of drawings and prints that Vonnegut had created and sent to his daughter, that “My father believed in Art and in his dog. Wherever he went, his tick-riddled, shaggy mutt Sandy was with him. Whether it was

music, literature, theater, or the visual arts, he believed practicing the arts saved lives. He once told me that he thought people worked out their neuroses through art” (10). She continues on to quote him along with her own memories of him:

Dad though being a full-time visual artist would have been much more fun than being a writer, even if it meant lopping off a finger or two. “And may I say parenthetically that my own means of making a living is essentially clerical, and hence tedious and constipating. Intruders, no matter how ill-mannered or stupid or dishonest, are as refreshing as the sudden breakthrough of sunbeams on a cloudy day. The making of pictures is to writing what laughing gas is to the Asian influenza.”

I believe my father forgot about the war when he doodled. (10)

Nanette’s memories of her father show just how much art inspired him and helped him continue to write and function. Because art was so important to Vonnegut, it is important to understand how important *Bluebeard* is as a Vonnegut novel. By using the historical movement of Abstract Art, Vonnegut discusses the importance of a way to express ideas when talking can no longer say what needs to be said.

In 2000 at an exhibit of his own art work, Vonnegut was interviewed by writer Donald Friedman and discussed his artwork and what painting meant to him. In the interview Vonnegut addresses what he considers himself: “What I am is a picture designer and I just try to design pictures that are interesting” (“Kurt Vonnegut Shows” 1:10). He goes on to say: “I found out I could design a picture that pleased me anyway” (1:37). His writing may have been directed toward his sister, but his paintings were more for himself than anyone else. To him, it was a relief to get away from the structure and rules of writing that caused him so much difficulty. He compares himself to other writers who found a form of escape such as Faulkner and Fitzgerald.



He mentions that they were able to go to Hollywood as an escape from their writing. However for Vonnegut, “it’s the end of a nightmare in the case of a novelist. It’s a disagreeable thing to do and it goes on day after day for years, so no it’s very unpleasant and this is utterly pleasant (he points toward his paintings). A bottle of Indyink and a camel hair brush and a sheet of acetate stuck to a drawing board” (2:40). Vonnegut found both therapy and escape through his painting just as Rabo does. Vonnegut, in a special introduction to the first edition of *Bluebeard*, wrote: “The most satisfied of all painters is the one who can become intoxicated for hours, days or weeks or years with what his or her hands and eyes can do with art materials, and let the rest of the world go hang.” He merely enjoyed the act of painting, which Rabo agrees with as he could forget everything else when he is just layering paint on a canvas.

Art is such an important aspect of Rabo Karabekian’s life. He learned from a young age that he was rather good at art and did the best he could with that. He is influenced by many other artists throughout his life such as his own father, Dan Gregory, and his friends who are also abstract artists. In *Bluebeard*, Rabo addresses why art can be so important to try:

Dan Gregory did not come down to greet her. I don’t think he would have stopped working if the house were on fire. He was like my father making cowboy boots or Terry Kitchen with his spray gun or Jackson Pollock dribbling paint on a canvas on the floor: when he was doing art, the whole rest of the world dropped away.

And I would be like that, too, after the war, and it would wreck my first marriage and my determination to be a good father. I had a very hard time getting the hang of civilian life after the war, and then I discovered something as powerful and irresponsible as shooting up with heroin: if I started laying on just one color of paint to a huge canvas, I could make the whole world drop away. (138)

Rabo recognizes the importance of painting and how it makes the rest of the world fall away. He sees it again and again in his loved ones and in his own life. Rabo uses art as a way to adjust to his normal life. He admits that civilian life was hard on him. He needs something to help him cope with that. Painting is the way that Rabo, and his friends, are able to connect with each other and with the world around them. Rabo, speaking for Vonnegut, goes as far to admit that the joy of painting is not sharing the painting. The true joy of painting is the act of painting: “There was a general agreement that if we were put into individual capsules with our art materials, and fired out into different parts of outer space, we would still have everything we loved about painting, which was the opportunity to lay on paint” (151). To these artists, the joy of art was to paint regardless of whether anyone else understood or liked the art.

Vonnegut shared this with Rabo. He struggled with writing, but felt a joy in painting. Vonnegut constantly struggled as a writer to get the right words and phrases across, so when he turned to art he was able to relax and enjoy what he did. To him, art was a way to express himself without having to work so hard. He discusses the limitations of painting art and how he never feels he has been any good “because it hasn’t mattered that much” (“Kurt Vonnegut Shows” 3:35). For Vonnegut, just doing the painting and creating art was the real importance, just as it is with Rabo and his friends. For both character and author, the creation of the art is where the healing and escape come from.

One last connection between the two in terms of artistry is the interest of the soul. Vonnegut in his interview with Friedman states “that people [should] practice arts no matter how badly because it’s known to make a soul grow” (4:12). Vonnegut saw art as a way to help the soul and the mind. However, this issue of the soul is the exact thing that Rabo struggles with throughout his entire life. He states that from a young age, he was able to draw and paint

remarkably well, but on several occasions it is pointed out to him that he has no soul in his paintings. His first master, Dan Gregory, burns the painting that Rabo painted of his studio for this exact reason: “I managed to ask chokingly, perfectly aghast, ‘what was the matter with it?’ ‘No *soul*,’ he said complacently” (147). Gregory is able to identify almost immediately what is happening in Rabo’s paintings in a way that Rabo is never able to identify. Neither is this the last time that Rabo meets with the problem of his paintings lacking soul. When he tries to become a student in an art class and shows the teacher his portfolio, he is met with an interesting response: “He screwed up his face, “I think - I think – it is somehow very useful, and maybe even essential, for a fine artist to have to somehow make his peace on the canvas with all the things he cannot do. That is what attracts us to serious paintings, I think: that shortfall, which we might call ‘personality,’ or maybe even ‘pain’ ” (181). The teacher sees immediately that Rabo Karabekian is not able to add his personality and life story into what he paints. Rabo is not able to add soul to anything that he does, and so his paintings and drawings all seem to fall flat until he is able to become part of the Abstract Art Movement where drawing and painting all turn into something more important such as therapy for his PTSD. However, even then Rabo is not able to be fully successful as his paintings all literally fall apart because of the paint. The paintings come to physically show the effects of Rabo’s soul and how it is not present in his paintings.

It is not until the end of Rabo’s life that he is able to finally put his heart and soul into his paintings. He struggles with finding his soul throughout his entire life. He himself sees souls differently from the average person, which helps contribute to his abstract paintings. He sees in each painting a story behind it telling the story of a person: “Each strip of tape was the soul at the core of some sort of person or lower animal... If I watch two people talking on a street corner, I see not only their flesh and clothes, but narrow, vertical bands of color inside them – not so much

like tape, actually, but more like low-intensity neon tubes” (202). Rabo is able to separate the soul and the “meat” of a person into separate things. He tries to paint the literal soul of people and animals into his paintings, but he is the only person who knows what the band of tapes represent as, like he states, he does not tell anyone that is what they represent. Rabo goes on to say about his art that “As for my own work there in the studio, the big fields of color before which I could stand intoxicated for hour after hour: they were meant to be *beginnings*. I expected them to become more and more complicated as I slowly but surely closed in on what had so long eluded me: soul, soul, soul” (236). Rabo is only able to add soul in his own way which does not translate well to the rest of the world. The paintings rot just as his soul rots as he is unable to capture his soul and put it onto the canvas. In order for Rabo to paint well, he has to be able to share something with the rest of the world that they can understand. It is this that allows for his redemption. When his final painting is shown to the world they are able to see the soul of the painter. Rabo is then able to find redemption because he has finally communicated his soul to his community.

It is with Terry Kitchen that Rabo discusses his separation of “meat and soul.” Rabo discusses it as his way of forgiving people: ““My soul knows my meat is doing bad things, and is embarrassed. But my meat just keeps right on doing bad, dumb things.” “Your what and your what?” he said. “My soul and my meat,” I said. “They’re separate?” he said. “I sure hope they are,” I said. I laughed. “I would hate to be responsible for what my meat does”” (246). The ability of Rabo’s is his way of being able to forgive people. By separating out the soul and the meat, Rabo is able to forgive the soul for what the meat does.

He recognizes this in himself most of all. He knows his meat will spend time painting and not make enough money, even though in his soul he knows he should get a steady job to

support his wife and children. Rabo applies this way of seeing souls to other people as well by using what he calls flensing, which he explains is an old whaling term when the sailors would strip the blubber, fat, and skin off of a whale leaving only the bones. He explains his way of forgiving people: “So when people I like do something terrible,” I said, “I just flense them and forgive them. . . . I do that in my head to people – get rid of all the meat so I can see nothing but their souls. Then I forgive them” (246). Rabo uses this to distinguish good from bad as well. He is able to forgive a soul, but he is not able to forgive the meat. Even in himself, he is able to forgive his soul, but he is not able to forgive his meat for how much it has messed up over the years. Vonnegut when he painted used it as a way to renew his own soul after everything he endured during his time as a POW and endured during and after the bombing of Dresden. Painting for both of them was a way to scrape away the meat and get right to the soul of what was happening. The last page of the novel shows Rabo Karabekian, and in many ways Kurt Vonnegut, accepting that his meat and his soul are sometimes one and are both able to create something beautiful and good. The final painting that Rabo creates is the pivotal moment of his entire life coming together. Circe Berman makes him accept this:

She cleared her throat. “Well, then,” she said, “isn’t it time for your soul, which has been ashamed of your meat for so long, to thank your meat for finally doing something wonderful?”

I thought that over. “That sounds right, too,” I said.

“You have to actually *do* it,” she said.

“How?” I said.

“Hold your hand in front of your eyes,” she said, “and look at those strange and clever animals with love, and gratitude, and tell them out loud: ‘Thank you, Meat.’”

So I did.

I held my hands in front of my eyes, and I said out loud and with all my heart:

‘Thank you, Meat.’”

Oh, happy Meat. Oh, happy Soul. Oh, happy Rabo Karabekian. (287)

This coming together of both body and soul creates a moment where Rabo is able to accept who he is and all that he has done. This final painting is his life’s work. He has finally been able to put his soul into his work. Kathryn Hume wrote about this scene and what it does for Vonnegut’s canon: “Only *Bluebeard* offers the relaxation of a happy ending, in that the artist manages to paint the one huge picture that joins his skills and his soul into a sum greater than the parts. His soul and his "meat" end up shaking hands in reconciliation” (224). Hume’s point is that it is only in *Bluebeard* that Vonnegut is able to bring an ending that resolves everything happily. The painting is the culmination of both body and soul working together on something greater in order to bring redemption. Another critic, Lawrence Broer, writes: “But it is the amazing painting in Rabo's potato barn that climaxes and confirms his achievement: a harmony of self and society, body and soul, man and artist, that makes him not only sane but happy— Vonnegut's most emotionally fulfilled hero.” Rabo is able to reach an understanding of himself and an acceptance of who he is and what he has done with his life.

Although Vonnegut may not have made an actual appearance in *Bluebeard*, it is the novel where he has put the most of his own autobiography. In many ways, Rabo Karabekian is Vonnegut’s true alter-ego among his characters. Broer states of this that

Vonnegut's metafictional strategy in offering us alternative versions of Kurt Vonnegut exposes, in a sense, his own fictionality and therefore the possibilities of existential authorship within and without the text. Yet in *Bluebeard* the metafictional game takes an

unexpected twist. Whereas in earlier novels Vonnegut establishes his fictive existence by entering the story directly, he makes no such personal appearance in *Bluebeard*. This time he appears more interested in stressing his reality, or wholeness, than his existence as a literary fragment, standing in opposition to his artist hero. Instead of splitting the identity of Rabo the created and Vonnegut the creator, as in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut becomes Rabo Karabekian, the most complete and human of all Vonnegut's creations.

Broer's discussion puts Vonnegut into the novel as Karabekian. Drawing from Hutcheon's theory, Vonnegut is able to address his own issues as he writes this novel about Karabekian as he himself lived through many of the same things as Karabekian lives through. Vonnegut uses the history of the past century, along with many historical events and movements that he understood himself, and so he and Karabekian are essentially both author and character alike in *Bluebeard*.

By studying this connection between Vonnegut and Karabekian it becomes clear that the two are remarkably similar. They lived through many massive historical and personal issues and somehow survived and learned to accept themselves and their art. Vonnegut accepts that his art is for himself, but that it brings peace to the old POW that he is. Karabekian's last painting brings together the body and soul and thus brings happiness and peace for finally accomplishing something that brings about his forgiveness of himself. Vonnegut's creation of Rabo Karabekian shows the author's acceptance of his own work and what he has been able to finally accomplish for himself.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

“We are here to help each other get through this thing, whatever it is.”

-Mark Vonnegut, M.D.

Kurt Vonnegut believed in humanity more than he believed in anything else. He mentions in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* the story of Lot’s wife in the Old Testament: “And Lot’s wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human” (28). And Vonnegut himself was also *so* human as he writes in the list of works “by the same author” at the beginning of *Bluebeard*: “(Enough! Enough!)” to indicate that he does not need or want the recognition of having written so many influential novels. This is seen in no other novel. Because Vonnegut was human, he was able to write about human characters that represent life in all of its greatness, hardness, and humanness. Rabo Karabekian may be his most human character because of the many ups and downs he experiences, but also because he has the ability to bring redemption to a world without redemption.

In many ways, Kurt Vonnegut felt himself responsible for helping humanity. When giving speeches at commencement ceremonies, he would often quote his uncle Alex. In *A Man without a Country* he writes: “Uncle Alex would suddenly interrupt the agreeable blather to exclaim, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is.’ So I do the same now, and so do my kids and grandkids. And I urge you to please notice when you are happy, and exclaim or murmur or think at some point, ‘If this isn’t nice, I don’t know what is’” (132). Vonnegut was perpetually trying to help others to see the good in the world even when all seems dark. Broer addresses this by saying that “part of Vonnegut’s artistic purpose has been to serve his society as a ‘Shaman,’ a kind of spiritual medicine man whose function is to expose these various forms of societal



madness – dispelling the evil spirits of irresponsible mechanization and aggression while encouraging reflectiveness and the will to positive social change” (4). This shows through in his novels, especially *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Bluebeard* where he grapples with redemption. He spent his entire writing career bringing stories to the people in order to help them in any way he could. When he published *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it was just as much for others to find some redemption and relief from their mental illnesses as it was for himself. *Breakfast of Champions*, with its strong mental illness topics, discusses the same thing. Vonnegut wrote in order to bring help to himself and his readers. The creation of Rabo Karabekian was Vonnegut’s greatest contribution to both himself and his readers because of the redemption he was able to bring.

The study of *Bluebeard* and Rabo Karabekian is an important aspect of Vonnegut’s canon and should not be overlooked as it currently is. *Bluebeard* brings a new look at Vonnegut’s novels and creates a discourse between them about redemption. Linda Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction allows the novels to be connected through historical events and characters found throughout Vonnegut’s canon and opens up the discussion that allows the novels to be connected and become one discourse instead of separate novels. Using this approach, *Bluebeard* has many more secrets to be unlocked and with future study might become just as important as Vonnegut’s other novels, especially when it is placed alongside the rest of the novels by the author. Comparing *Bluebeard* to other later novels of Vonnegut would show another side to both author and novel that might expand on this study as well. As Vonnegut has become such an influential writer in both the last century and this century, it is important to study all of his novels and not just the highly acclaimed ones. The study of redemption can be, and should be, expanded to the rest of Vonnegut’s canon.

Starting in 1969 with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut began a discourse of finding redemption for PTSD and mental illness. He made a main character, Billy Pilgrim, who was unable to deal with his PTSD and lived a shallow life because of it. Vonnegut was able to bring attention to PTSD and the lack of real treatment for the issues, but he was not able to find a real solution to the problems he was still facing. By *Breakfast of Champions* in 1973, Vonnegut was able to introduce Rabo Karabekian and the concept of redemption, without actually following through with it. However in 1987 with the publication of *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut was finally able to finish the discourse he started almost twenty years prior and give redemption to both a character and to himself.

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