

DCCD 2020**Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding****THE HOLY GRAIL AS A DIALOGUE OF STORIES IN THE
NOVEL BY KURT VONNEGUT 'BLUEBEARD'**

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Abstract

The article is devoted to analyzing a novel by Kurt Vonnegut “Bluebeard” in order to identify some of its allusions and references. The author claims that the text refers to the so-called Matter of Britain, specifically to the adventure of a knight in search of an unreachable sacred object, the Holy Grail. It helps the writer to explore the issues of determining a person’s identity and the purposes of art. The analysis has shown that the main opposition *form* versus *idea* reveals itself in the tensions between realism and abstract expressionism in art and between “soul” and “meat” of the main character Rabo Karabekian. The first conflict is tied to the succession of the Fisher King, the keeper of the grail, and his knight: a modernist artist Rabo is a knight for a realist illustrator Dan Gregory and a Fisher King to a popular writer Circe Berman close to social realist philosophy. The second one is connected with his broken communication with people in his life and his quest for belonging and identity. The resolution lies in balance reached through sharing stories about art objects and life experiences. This dialogue helps better understand yourself and other people and heal the wounds of the past.

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1. Introduction

The development of the literature of the US has unique features since the dominant culture of this country is a combination of traditions of different peoples. Borrowings inevitably begin to change over time and undergo significant transformations in literary texts created in the New World.

Arthurian legends have become a part of American literature and culture. The penetration of Arthurian stories and characters into popular culture in the 20th century can be seen everywhere in the architecture, painting, advertising, film industry, comics, company names, toys, computer games, youth organizations, mass media, politics, etc. All these references are quite numerous.

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is “*the* representative post-World War II American writer” (Morse, 2000, p. 395), who adapted and extended popular literary forms and experimented extensively with literary techniques. He is also considered a master of allusions (Iakhontova, 2019, p. 507). The fate of the main character Rabo Karabekian in his novel “Bluebeard, the Autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916-1988)” (1987) refers to the medieval legend of the search for the Holy Grail. The author “weaves numerous Arthurian allusions into his fiction” (Lupack & Lupack, 1999, p. 273). The main novel analyzed in this article “Bluebeard” is not the first one where Kurt Vonnegut invokes Arthurian themes and images. “Mother Night” (1961) tells the story of Howard W. Campbell Jr., a Nazi playwright, one of whose plays “The Goblet” directly narrates a version of the Holy Grail legend (Leeds, 2016). Numerous references could be found in “Deadeye Dick” (1982) as well, where, for instance, Joseph of Arimathea’s story is recounted. This article attempts to identify the distinctive features of the Holy Grail in the 20th century text.

2. Problem Statement

The work by Kurt Vonnegut is a parody of an autobiography. It is written by an elderly rich artist of Armenian origin. “In literary studies of the last decades issues of multiculturalism have been widely explored, especially within the frames of modernist and postmodernist paradigms” (Chernetsova & Maslova, 2019, p. 47). Right now, the sense of in-betweenness and otherness in characters has already reached popular genres like crime fiction and youth literature (Broomans, 2018). As Vonnegut was himself of German origin, the writer always felt on the margin or the periphery (Merrill, 1977, p. 82). The multicultural identity of Rabo Karabekian, a second generation American citizen, allows him to experience surrounding culture differently and notice aspects otherwise lost to sight. His marginal position makes him feel as if he does not belong fully to any culture and community. The novel could offer some insight into how to approach this issue.

In addition, the path of Rabo as a knight errant corresponds to the stages of the development of art. K. Vonnegut himself produced artwork, so the author’s interest in it is not surprising. One of the aspects of the Grail in “Bluebeard” is the main character's search for his place in the world of artistic creation and an attempt to leave a mark on the history of art. This allows reconsidering purposes and functions of art in the contemporary society.

3. Purpose of the Study

Determining the features of the interpretation of the Holy Grail by American author Kurt Vonnegut taking into account the historic and cultural contexts is the primary aim of this work. The hypothesis is that though the search for the “sacred object” the main character engages in the dialogue of stories about his life and pieces of art created or studied in the process of it. He seeks to establish his identity with the help of art as one of the meaning-making human activities.

4. Research Methods

The method of the research involves text analysis and comparison, studying the main elements of the original myth and how they are incorporated into a new cultural environment. That requires analyzing historical contexts and motifs, concepts and images of both cultures and comparing them with each other as they are presented in the novel.

There is no one unified version of the grail story. We took into consideration the most famous and influential medieval texts that are at the core of the myth: “Perceval, le Conte du Graal” (1135-1190) by Chrétien de Troyes, “Parzival” (1210) by Wolfram von Eschenbach, “Le Roman du Graal” or “Joseph d'Arimate” by Robert de Boron (XII-XIII centuries), “Le Morte d'Arthur” (1485) by Sir Thomas Malory. There are also some essential interpretations of the legend (Celtic, ritual, occult) from the beginning of the XX century that influenced its perception (Marino, 2004).

The basic plot tells of a young naïve boy who wants to become a knight. He accidentally gets into the magic castle of maimed Fisher King who himself needs healing as well as his kingdom in the state of wasteland. The Holy Grail, a sacred magic item, keeps him alive. The knight is supposed to ask a question about its purpose to save everyone.

In the extensive research “King Arthur in America” (1999) Barbara T. and Alan Lupack claim that in the USA the Holy Grail is mainly related to reconstructing the world and changing the society for the better, the search for an ideal or perfection (Lupack & Lupack, 1999). The interaction of modern literary texts with chivalrous legends leads to a certain reinterpretation of medieval or national myths and even to their criticism which ultimately helps to reveal their influence on the contemporary society and its people. Every case of reinterpretation is unique as writers are influenced, for example, by the landscape (Idilova, 2019), cultural (Hart, 2017) and historical contexts (Gubbini, 2019), etc.

5. Findings

In the novel “Bluebeard” art plays a crucial role. There realism in art is associated with the original mentor of the main character and a famous illustrator Dan Gregory. The artist started his career with drawing paper money. In relation to many of his skills, Rabo uses the verb “counterfeit” (8 times in the text of the novel). But the advent of camera in the nineteenth century makes capturing real objects meaningless. He is in many ways related to the Fisher King, the traditional guardian of the Holy Grail. Rabo as a knight in a similar way accidentally finds his way into the house of this famous illustrator.

Gregory has a negative attitude towards the “new” art at the time. He forbids everyone who lives in his house to go to exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art because he considers their works to be a fraud. The reason for this may be that modernists do not depict familiar objects of the material world.

What is considered art and what is not turns out to be important to determine because, according to Gregory, it is the creators who establish the values of people: “Painters—and storytellers, including poets and playwrights and historians <...> are the justices of the Supreme Court of Good and Evil, of which I am now a member, and to which you may belong someday!” (Vonnegut, 2011, pp. 149-150). This attitude to ideas and people resembles fascism imposing one unified vision of the world on everyone. K. Vonnegut even makes references to its Italian founder, Benito Mussolini, whom Gregory idolizes. This becomes the reason why he gradually loses all his friends and, in the end, dies in the war for his dictator. This is his “wound” similar to that of the Fisher King.

The main character learns to draw realistically as well as Gregory but his works, unlike the master's paintings, lack what is referred to in the novel as “a soul”. The works of the illustrator are “vibrant with the full spectrum of his own loves, hates and neutralities” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 164). In other words, they express his past distinct experience and show “Dan Gregory in three dimensions all the same. He lives!” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 164). They are his source of eternal life, the Holy Grail.

In search of something similar for himself, Rabo Karabekian becomes a part of the New York group of abstract expressionism. As noted in the Grove Encyclopedia of American Art (2011), in the United States this movement existed after World War II between the 40s and 60s of the XX century. The artists (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, etc.) “shared interest in presenting self-identity, the mythic or spiritual content, and process as the subject in order to submerge or eliminate representation” (Marter, 2011, p.16). They wanted to portray the true essence of things outside of their material form.

Similarly, the main character, after returning from the war, begins to see reality beyond appearances. It is symbolic that during the fighting, he loses an eye. His paintings are one-color huge canvases with multi-colored stripes, which in his head symbolize a scene or a story. At the same time “each strip of tape was the soul at the core of some sort of person or lower animal. <...> not so much like tape, actually, but more like low-intensity neon tubes” (Vonnegut, 2011, pp. 224-225). This was similarly done by abstract artists of the so-called color field painting.

The categories of *difference* and *belonging* “determine our self-image and self-understanding among others”, in other words, our identity (Fedorenko, 2016, p. 17). The opposition *solitude* versus *isolation*, which describes essential aspects of loneliness (Mashoshina, 2015, p. 45), is closely connected with them. Rabo enthusiastically applies paint to huge canvases and becomes more and more immersed in his creative unconscious, not noticing what is happening around him. This way he loses his friends-artists, who one after another commit suicide, as well as his family – his wife and two sons leave him. Additionally, due to poisonous and short-lived acrylic paint, all his paintings are destroyed. In search of his grail by isolating himself he loses belonging to any community of people and becomes a new Fisher King.

At this point Rabo Karabekian completes transition from rags to riches and buys a mansion by the ocean and arranges an improvised “museum” of abstract expressionism there from the remaining

paintings of his friends. Circe Berman, a writer of popular teen literature, makes her way into the house. She begins to actively change the life of its inhabitants. Her literature deals with acute social problems occurring at the moment that cyclically points to realism.

In the legend of the Holy Grail, the knight Perceval must ask about the meaning of the mysterious object and the illness of the Fisher King in order to cure him and make the barren land of his kingdom fertile again. Neither the pictures in Rabo's house, nor their names convey any message verbally but only evoke an emotional and visual experience. According to Circe, paintings must carry a message: "What's the point of being alive <...> if you're not going to communicate?" (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 39). Thus, she sees art not as an attempt to depict the visual world or spiritual reality but as a means of dialogue and asking questions.

Circe tries several ways to help the elderly artist quite unceremoniously. One of her radical methods includes an attempt to redecorate the foyer of his mansion and hang colored lithographs of Victorian girls on swings which Rabo does not consider art: "They were truthful about material things, but they lied about time <...> that time was liquid, that one moment was no more important than any other, and that all moments quickly run away" (Vonnegut, 2011, pp. 90-91). They do not capture the transience and fluidity of life.

However, Circe explains the historical context and makes him assess the situation from the point of view of the Victorians who knew "how sick or unhappy so many of these happy, innocent little girls would be in just a little while — diphtheria, pneumonia, smallpox, miscarriages, violent husbands, poverty, widowhood, prostitution—death and burial in Potter's field" (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 138). Indeed, women in the nineteenth century did not have many freedoms and rights. The contrast between the happy innocent girls involved in children's activity and what the future holds for them leaves a deep impression on people.

Guests from time to time come to Rabo Karabekyan's house to look at his collection of paintings. When he once retells the context of lithographs for guests from the USSR, they assess these paintings as "the most important pictures in the house" (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 166). Art is perceived through its interpretation. For Circe it should guide people, teach them moral lessons, make them more responsible for their actions, for example, to prevent the poverty and illness of innocent girls. All these scenes depict suffering that should evoke empathy and awaken conscience. However, Kurt Vonnegut questions whether portraying cruelty can make people better.

He notices that the military industry occupies a huge part of the US economy and dictates the way information is transmitted. The main message of the mainstream art forms that are paid for by "the merchandising of death" is put in this phrase: "War is hell, all right, but the only way a boy can become a man is in a shoot-out of some kind, preferably, but by no means necessarily, on a battlefield" (Vonnegut, 2011, pp. 71-72). The writer here refers to the wasteland of American media and culture. D.E. Morse notices that in all Vonnegut's novels "America reflects substantial, irreparable loss or defeat" (Morse, 1991, p. 116) by losing something valuable like belief in gods, progress, revolution, political wisdom, justice.

Any abstract artist, according to Rampton (1993), does not approve of teaching and instructing people through art: "The nonrepresentational artist refuses even to countenance the bourgeois notion of

moral impulse in a work that celebrates nothing but itself” (p. 18). As an art object may not be interpreted in the way the author wanted, the moral message may not be always read by viewers or readers as it is not firstly understood by Rabo in case of Victorian girls on swings. Thus, both artistic methods in the novel (realistic and modernist) represent two extremes – focusing on the external or internal, on the form or idea.

This opposition is longstanding and is originally attributed to Plato. This division is also represented in the text through the opposition *soul* versus *meat*: “My soul knows my meat is doing bad things, and is embarrassed. But my meat just keeps right on doing bad, dumb things” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 273). The “meat” or body is most closely related to animal instincts and base desires, while the soul is related to reason and morality, but it has little control over meat. His abstract expressionist paintings are to liberate the people from their meat: “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” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 273). People are not blamed for their actions, and the responsibility for them passes to their bodies. In the end, communication inside Rabo Karabekian between his soul and his body as well as externally with other people is broken. This is how his wound as a Fisher King is shown in the text.

Communicating with young people who use his pool leads Rabo to conclude: “the young people of today seemed to be trying to get through life with as little information as possible” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 99). When there is an abundance of information, only the one that is easiest to understand and process is perceived, i.e. it is most often products of popular mass culture. The American writer notices a tendency that the main modern art forms often overwhelm the viewer, numb the ability to feel. As Vonnegut (1989) expressed in an interview: “This is a national tragedy, of course—that we've changed from a society to an audience” (p. 273). The forms of communication are evolving now in the direction of reducing energy consumption and occupied space while simultaneously expanding the meaning and content (Zurabova, 2018, p. 109). There is not enough time to process and interpret the information received. In addition, it becomes difficult to evaluate its credibility (Mazur & Duchlinski, 2020). This is precisely what the author considers as necessary to understand the other point of view and yourself.

The main secret of Rabo is his picture hidden in his potato barn, which everyone is forbidden to enter as he is scared to show it. It is because his previous attempts to become a serious artist, a father and a friend, in other words, to build meaningful relationship, end in failure.

In the end, Rabo decides to show Circe the picture. It occupies the entire potato barn and depicts a moment of his past – the last day of the war (May 8, 1945). On a green field bordering on Czechoslovakia and East Germany in the morning there are soldiers of various armies and people released from camps. The picture is detailed and realistic like a photograph but the artist places on it people from his life that were not present on this field. The dead and the living, real or imaginary, are there. It seems that all of humanity has gathered on that field. “There is a war story to go with every figure in the picture, no matter how small” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 300). The artist shares the past of his family and his own experience in all its diversity, both troubles and joys. Later, however, he prefers that people should be co-creators in the process of interpreting the painting: “Make up your own war stories as you look at the whatchamacallit, I tell people” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 300). As Jerome Klinkowitz (2012) points out, Kurt Vonnegut in his own work “by piecing together his own life story in a fluid manner from more than a dozen distinct time

frames that comprise America <...> is allowed to construct a valid work of art that relies less on exposition than on imaginative construct much like Rabo Karsbelian's end-of-the-war masterpiece" (pp. 130-131). An exchange of different interpretations of art objects – a dialogue of stories – makes a person aware of their personal problems and helps accept them.

Therefore, art is the gateway between life and death, fleeting and eternal, both beyond the real world and inside of it: "In Bluebeard's secret chamber is death; in Rabo's, a painting that depicts life and death" (Rampton, 1993, p. 22). It is a balance between external and internal as well. The woman points out to Rabo that his "meat" deserves respect for creating the painting. Circe, as a knight in search of the Grail should do, helps him no longer hide his truth inside the potato barn. This ending also supports Vonnegut's "notion that extended family could be a solution to our rootless and emotionally numb existence" (Hume, 2000, p. 261) as Circe and Rabo find friendship and resist their bleak loneliness.

Rabo's path is compared by American scholar Hertweck (2011) to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission happening in South Africa due to the collapse of the Apartheid: "To think that there would be any right answer to questions such as these misses the point; instead <...> the goal is simply to open discussions, to defuse aggression, and, ultimately, to find routes to better, more just relations" (p. 151). Circe, in turn, learns how to survive the death of her husband as she reads the stories of Rabo in his autobiography about the sorrows he experienced.

6. Conclusion

As we can see, firstly, with the help of the canvas, Rabo Karabekian found a balance between his body and his soul. Secondly, he was able to capture his "soul" or identity. The author offers us a way "to forge a moral identity composed of a mosaic bits and pieces of experience and history" (Morse, 2015, p. 198). All these are different aspects of his Holy Grail that the knight Circe Berman helps him get. Both the mystical object and various types of art have a therapeutic effect, help to understand a person's identity and a life's purpose, keep continuity and meaningful relationships between people.

In conclusion, in the novel "Bluebeard" by Kurt Vonnegut, a dialogue of stories about art correlates with how the Holy Grail is depicted in the medieval Arthurian legends.

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