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## “Never Trust a Survivor”: Historical Trauma, Postmemory and the Armenian Genocide in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*

# ABSTRACT

The article focuses on Kurt Vonnegut’s lesser-known and underappreciated 1987 novel *Bluebeard*, which is analyzed and interpreted in the light of Marianne Hirsch’s seminal theory of postmemory. Even though it was published prior to Hirsch’s formulation of the concept, Vonnegut’s novel intuitively anticipates it, problematizing the implications of inherited, second-hand memory. To further complicate matters, Rabo Karabekian, the protagonist-narrator of *Bluebeard*, a World War II veteran, amalgamates his direct, painful memories with those of his parents, survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Both the novel and the theory applied to it centre on the problematics of historical and personal trauma, engendered by two genocides which are often the object of comparative analyses: the Armenian Genocide, also referred to as the Armenian Holocaust, and the Jewish Holocaust. The latter is central to Hirsch’s interdisciplinary work in the field of memory studies, encompassing literature, the visual arts and gender studies. In *Bluebeard*, Vonnegut holds to account a humanity responsible for the atrocities of twentieth-century history: two world wars and two genocides for which they respectively established the context. The article examines the American writer’s reflection on death and violence, man’s destructive impulse and annihilation. In a world overshadowed by memories of mass extermination, Vonnegut interrogates the possibility of a new beginning, pointing to women as agents of renewal and sociopolitical change. He also identifies the role that art plays in the process of potential reconstruction, the story of Karabekian, a failed artist and highly successful art collector, being a *Künstlerroman* with a feminist edge.

**Keywords:** Vonnegut, Hirsch, Armenian Genocide, historical trauma, postmemory, art, feminism.

*Bluebeard*, Kurt Vonnegut's twelfth novel, is not among his best-known works; nor is it among his most appreciated ones.<sup>1</sup> As Charles J. Shields reminds us in the American writer's first—and so far only—biography, “[w]hen it was released in spring 1987, many major publications, including *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, chose not to review it. As an extended debate on aesthetic theory and the role of an artist, it's convoluted and too allegorical” (378).<sup>2</sup> Classifying *Bluebeard* as a “novel . . . about art and art theory” (378) seems to suggest that it is not a work typical of Vonnegut either. Indeed, it is no use looking for traces of science fiction or science *tout court*, for even though some of the characters or situations may appear somewhat overblown, the novel follows the conventions of realism and the author does not devote any particular attention to new technologies in it. Neither is *Bluebeard* the best example of Vonnegut's postmodern stylistic experiments, although one will certainly discern elements of postmodernism in it. However, as for other components of Vonnegut's literary DNA, such as black humour, which manifests itself in, for instance, the use of interjections reminiscent of the famous “So it goes” from the writer's *magnum opus*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, things look different.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, although *Bluebeard* is not, strictly speaking, a war novel, deeply humanistic reflections on war and peace, the cruelty of

<sup>1</sup> A measure of it may, for instance, be the absence of *Bluebeard* from certain compendial works—both American and Polish ones—dealing with American literature. Examples include *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, whose edition published over ten years after the appearance of *Bluebeard* mentions, in a rather extensive biographical entry devoted to Vonnegut, most of his novels, both early and later ones, but not the one with which the present article is concerned. This is also the case with Krzysztof Andrzejczak's history of American prose, *Opowieści literackiej Ameryki. Zarys prozy Stanów Zjednoczonych od początków do czasów najnowszych*, an otherwise informative and detailed publication.

<sup>2</sup> Shields, who devotes considerable attention to *Bluebeard* in his biography of Vonnegut, is not enthusiastic about the novel. He depreciates and simplifies it, in fact seeing it, despite obvious arguments to the contrary, which are put forward in the present article, mostly as a reflection of the crisis in Vonnegut's second marriage. However, Shields is not a literary critic or literary scholar, but a biographer, and his opinion of *Bluebeard* seems to dovetail with the biography's sensationalist aspect, discussed in one of the essays included in my monograph *Teksty transatlantyckie. Szkice o literaturze amerykańskiej i francuskiej*. Shields's biography, *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life*, published four years after the novelist's death, actually provoked protest from Vonnegut's relatives. See Flood.

<sup>3</sup> As Gavins observes, “the phrase ‘So it goes’ . . . is used exactly 100 times during the course of the novel [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] and . . . almost always follows descriptions of traumatic or emotive events experienced by Billy [the protagonist]” (117). The narrator of *Bluebeard* uses similar phrases in similar contexts, though not with the same frequency, thereby introducing into this novel as well the elements of distance and absurd which Gavins discusses in relation to Vonnegut's most famous work.

which man is capable and what one should do in order to be truly human, play an important role in the story of Rabo Karabekian, the protagonist-cum-narrator.

Just as some reviews of *Bluebeard*, which provoked extreme reactions from American critics, were enthusiastic, so the novel itself eludes clear-cut classification, revealing a wealth of meanings to which justice has not perhaps been fully done yet. Narrated by a Karabekian nearing the end of his days, the story encompasses his whole life, from his birth in the middle of World War I to 1987, the year in which he started to write his autobiography/memoirs and which is also the year in which Vonnegut's novel was published. The story of Karabekian, a failed artist and a world-renowned collector of the works of "the real painters" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 50), that is the Abstract Expressionists, seems to mostly concern art, as well as the artist's fate and dilemmas, combining elements of the Bildungsroman and the Künstlerroman, to which the coming-of-age novel is related. However, a careful reading of *Bluebeard* makes it clear that other aspects of the novel also deserve to be looked at more closely by both readers and literary scholars. In addition to issues which have already been mentioned, namely art and war, Vonnegut's novel touches upon the problematics of family, male-female relations, the condition of women and feminism. Moreover, the American writer attempts to settle accounts with the twentieth century, which—if we consider, as historians sometimes do, its actual beginning to be the outbreak of the Great War—is coeval with his protagonist. Exegetes of the novel may also be interested in dealing with its form, wondering, for instance, how Vonnegut explores and exploits the codes and conventions of autobiographical writing. It is possible that it was *Bluebeard*'s multilayered structure, which is not to be confused, as Shields does, with convolutedness, which underlays the helplessness to which the American author admitted when the novel was nearly finished. In January 1987, Vonnegut wrote in a letter to Peter Reed:

I am about a month from finishing another novel—this one about an Abstract Expressionist painter in his seventies, looking back on the founding of that school of radical non-representation. It is called *Bluebeard* because he has a painting locked away which nobody is supposed to look at until he's dead. I wish to hell I knew what the book is *really* about. I should *know* by this time. My God—I'm on page 305! (Vonnegut, *Letters*)

The present article focuses on representations of historical trauma and the survivor experience in *Bluebeard* as exemplified by two world wars, Rabo Karabekian being a veteran of the second one and his parents having

managed to survive the Armenian Genocide during the first one. The latter determines the fate of Mr. and Mrs. Karabekian and, indirectly, the fate of their son, for whom it becomes a formative experience of sorts, even though he did not really participate in it.<sup>4</sup> Central to the analysis undertaken here are the notions of memory and postmemory, that is inherited memory and inherited trauma, which mark survivors' children and affect their identity. Particular attention is given to family, the parent-child relationship and the intergenerational conflicts engendered by traumatic survivor experience and its consequences. Predictably, the motifs which are examined include war, death and violence. Moreover, artistic expression and the role of women, both of which are connected with the problematics of historical trauma, postmemory and family in Vonnegut's novel and the theory applied to it in this article, inevitably come under scrutiny.

The concept of postmemory, formulated by American scholar Marianne Hirsch, constitutes the theoretical framework of the present article. Hirsch, a literary scholar and leading exponent of the academic discipline known as memory studies, was born in Timișoara in the late 1940s into a family of Ukrainian Jews who had survived the Holocaust. The publication of her 1992 article entitled "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory" marked the beginning of her study of postmemory, which she continues to this day. The above-mentioned article discusses the famous, Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus*, in which notable American illustrator Art Spiegelman, the son of Holocaust survivors, deals with the Sho'ah, taking inspiration from his own parents story and depicting the Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats. Hirsch is appreciated for her contribution to Holocaust studies. Simultaneously, however, she points out that the study of postmemory is not limited to problematics related to the extermination of the Jews, its object being "a global space of remembrance" (Hirsch, "Interview"). In addition to literature, including comparative literature, her interests encompass the visual arts, with particular emphasis on photography and film as well as gender studies. Hirsch makes it clear that memory is not a category determined by gender. Nevertheless, she acknowledges drawing on feminist theory and methodology when exploring the connections between "past and present, words and images, and memory and gender" (Hirsch, "Interview"). The issues to which she devotes particular attention also include family and

<sup>4</sup> One of the parts of the monograph *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies*, edited by leading American-Armenian historian Richard Hovannisian, is devoted to representations of the Armenian Genocide in literature and culture. However, none of the essays collected in it is concerned with Vonnegut's novel, and his name does not appear in the book at all.

violence. In her monographs and articles, she examines the questions of “intergenerational transmission,” the narrative tradition and “[i]nherited trauma” (Hirsch, “Interview”).<sup>5</sup>

As such, it may be stated that the main trajectories of Hirsch’s research dovetail with the problematics central to Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*, and the application to literary analysis of the theoretical concept formulated by her is more than justified. In an interview given a few years ago, which constitutes a summary of her scholarly work to date, Hirsch defines the notion of postmemory, to which in time she added the term *postgeneration*, in the following way:

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“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. As I see it, the connection to the past that I define as postmemory is mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch, “Interview”)

Referring to the secondary nature of postmemory, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the interdisciplinary nature of her research into it, which encompasses both the private and the public spheres and combines various areas of life, such as museology, the media, art and culture, Hirsch notes:

Inherited trauma transmitted familially—or even culturally—can have significant effects on our lives, but it is not we who have suffered persecution or deportation. It is for this reason that I am particularly interested in tracing the workings of postmemory through a second- and now also third-generation aesthetics as manifested in literature, film, and visual arts. (Hirsch, “Interview”)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Since the appearance of the article “Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory,” Hirsch has published, among others, the monographs *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*.

<sup>6</sup> By the “first generation” Hirsch means the generation which survived the Holocaust or some other traumatic historical events. The “second generation” are thus the survivor’s children while the “third generation” are their grandchildren.

Significantly, the genocide with which the present article is concerned is also alluded to by Hirsch, who suggests it is underexplored in relation to postmemory:

The process and structure of intergenerational transmission that I understand as postmemory has become an important explanatory vehicle and object of study in numerous contexts ranging from American slavery to decolonization; the Vietnam war, the dictatorships in Latin America and Eastern Europe, the *Armenian*, Rwandan and Cambodian genocides, the Japanese internment camps in the US, the stolen generation in Australia, and others. These resonances and connections are important and announce new directions in the field of memory studies. (Hirsch, "Interview," italics mine)

Artistic expression of postmemory is also the subject of this article, which is devoted to a literary work whose author himself did not grapple with what Hirsch refers to as "inherited trauma," but whose hero carries the burden of his parents' atrocious experiences, which eventually find expression in his own painterly oeuvre. The statement to which the article owes its title is part of the advice that the protagonist of *Bluebeard* often hears from his father: "Never trust a survivor . . . until you find out what he did to stay alive" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 35). The advice concerns a man who deceived Rabo's parents although he was their compatriot and a survivor of another Armenian massacre. The reader will never know what exactly Vartan Mamigonian "did to stay alive," just as Karabekian Senior probably did not know, either. What is known, however, is that Mamigonian later made an immense fortune out of arms dealing. Vonnegut's suggestion that survivors of major disasters, historical or otherwise, should be viewed with suspicion or at least reserve, has a symbolic dimension, since it points to the complex psychological, historical and cultural implications of this kind of experience, to the way it leaves its mark not only on those to whom it happens, but also on their descendants.

Strikingly, not only does Vonnegut's novel touch upon the question of postmemory and explore its dialectics because postmemory, as Hirsch points out, is full of tensions and contradictions, but it also contains, in literary form, what could be described as an intuitive protodefinition of the concept formulated by Hirsch five years after *Bluebeard* was published. In the novel's first chapters, Rabo Karabekian and Circe Berman, a recently widowed writer, whom the protagonist meets accidentally and who spends the summer at his house and encourages him to start working on his autobiography, discuss the so-called survivor syndrome. Circe diagnoses Karabekian's late father with it:

“Your father had the Survivor’s Syndrome,” said Circe Berman to me on my beach that day. “He was ashamed not to be dead like all his friends and relatives.”

“He was ashamed that I wasn’t dead, too,” I said.

“Think of it as a noble emotion gone wrong,” she said.

“He was a very upsetting father,” I said. “I’m sorry now that you’ve made me remember him.”

“As long as we’ve brought him back,” she said, “why don’t you forgive him now?”

“I’ve done it a hundred times already,” I said. “This time I’m going to be smart and get a receipt.” I went on to assert that Mother was more entitled to Survivor’s Syndrome than Father, since she had been right in the middle of the killing, pretending to be dead with people lying on top of her, and with screams and blood everywhere. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 29)<sup>7</sup>

Rabo argues that “[e]verybody who is alive is a survivor, and everybody who is dead isn’t. . . . So everybody alive must have the Survivor’s Syndrome” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 39). Berman believes that her host has a grudge against his father and is, paradoxically, jealous of the latter’s traumatic experiences. Rabo’s claim that, as a permanently maimed war veteran, he has the right to consider himself a survivor, too, fails to convince her. “You may be entitled to the Survivor’s Syndrome, but you didn’t get it,” Circe concludes (40). The finale of their discussion reveals that Circe’s good knowledge of the topic is not due to her Jewish roots, since none of her relatives has experienced the Holocaust, but to her work on one of her best-selling novels for teenagers, which have brought her fame and fortune. *The Underground* is the story of a friendship binding three American schoolgirls from different ethnic backgrounds, whose seemingly irrational bond is in fact based on the survivor syndrome “inherited” from their ancestors, survivors of the Sho’ah, Nagasaki and the civil war in Nigeria in 1967–70. Berman tells Karabekian that *The Underground* is a novel “about people like you: children of a parent who ha[s] survived some sort of mass killing” (41). In Rabo’s case, the power of the “inherited trauma” is doubled because both his parents miraculously escaped death during the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian Genocide, also known as the Armenian massacre of 1915, is regarded as the first genocide of the twentieth century and that is

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<sup>7</sup> Rabo Karabekian’s father hides in an outhouse under a heap of excrement, which saves his life and spares him the sight and sounds of the massacre.

how Vonnegut describes it in his novel. He does not expose the reader to graphic descriptions of cruelty; nor does he delve into the historical details of the mass killings and ethnic cleansing, which in this particular case are exceptionally lurid. Out of the complex genesis of the events in question, which encompasses the ethnic and religious hatred which turned Turkish Muslims against Armenian Christians, as well as political determinants and the context of the Great War, Vonnegut selects two unarguably significant factors. The Armenians belonged to the intellectual and social elite, and, to make matters worse, their compatriots lived in Russia, which Turkey considered an enemy. The essence of the genocide itself is summarized by Vonnegut in two sentences, economical and devoid of pathos, formulated in a matter-of-fact, direct and pictorial way:

The Turks simply took all the Armenians they could find in their homes or places of work or refreshment or play or worship or education or whatever, marched them out into the countryside, and kept them away from food and water and shelter, and shot and bashed them and so on until they all appeared to be dead. It was up to dogs and vultures and rodents and so on, and finally worms, to clean up the mess afterwards. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 15)

The narrator of *Bluebeard* notes with bitter irony that the massacres perpetrated by the Turks were a prefiguration of what the Nazis were to do even more efficiently and effectively during World War II:

The problems presented by such ambitious projects are purely industrial: how to kill that many big, resourceful animals cheaply and quickly, make sure that nobody gets away, and dispose of mountains of meat and bones afterwards. The Turks, in their pioneering effort, had neither the aptitude for really big business nor the specialized machinery required. The Germans would exhibit both par excellence only one quarter of a century later. (14–15)

The analogy between these two murderous chapters in global history will resonate even more strongly towards the end of the novel. The genocidal actions of the Young Turks are sometimes referred to as the Armenian Holocaust,<sup>8</sup> but, while knowledge of the Sho'ah is very common, the Armenian Genocide is not nearly as deeply ingrained in collective consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Matosyan.

<sup>9</sup> For an extensive study of the Armenian Genocide and its aftermath, see Dadrian's *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, as well as Dadrian and Akçam's *Judgment at Istanbul: The Armenian Genocide Trials*.

The motif of the family album in reflection about photography plays a crucial role in Hirsch's study *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. She refers to Roland Barthes's book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Hirsch points out "the relationship of love and loss, presence and absence, life and death that for him [Barthes] are the constitutive core of photography" (*Family Frames* 4). She reminds us that Barthes's *Camera Lucida* "defines loss . . . as central to the experience of both family and photography" (5). Loss is interconnected with time and mourning because he understands that "[t]he referent haunts the picture like a ghost: it is a revenant, a return of the lost and dead other" (5). *Camera Lucida* deals with, Hirsch concludes, the way "[f]amily is structured by desire and disappointment, love and loss. Photographs, as the only material traces of an irrecoverable past, derive their power and their important cultural role from their embeddedness in the fundamental rites of family life" (5).

The trope of photography recurs in Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*. The protagonist has a theory about modern art, which began with Impressionism and led up to his favourite Abstract Expressionism. According to Karabekian, modern art was born in large measure due to the fact that painters, who up to that point had faithfully reproduced reality, could not withstand the competition of the camera, a peerless and infallible copyist. In one of the novel's first chapters, Rabo Karabekian pictures "the past as though it were a vista through a series of galleries like the Louvre, perhaps" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 37). This imaginary museum is filled mostly with paintings and drawings authored by both himself and other, much more notable artists. The first exhibit in Karabekian's make-believe museum is, however, a picture of a house which Rabo's parents bought from Vartan Mamigonian prior to leaving for the United States, only to find, upon their arrival in America, that the property they had purchased did not exist at the address given. Overwhelmed by a sense of failure, which, more or less consciously, he tries to inculcate in his son, Karabekian Senior keeps the picture for years. It is his parting gift to the adolescent Rabo as the boy goes out into the great world, that is New York: "If you happen to come across this house," he said in Armenian, "let me know where it is. Wherever it is, it belongs to me" (38). In the Karabekian family, the ill-fated photograph becomes a symbol of injustice, unfulfilled hopes and failure in life, for which, in the protagonist's opinion, his father is as responsible as the cruel and dishonest people he has happened to cross paths with. In a symbolic gesture, the main character destroys the picture of the house immediately after his father's death.

When it comes to the photograph of the Karabekians' mirage house, questions of nostalgia and sentimentalism are particularly problematic.

Effectively, what we have to deal with in this particular case is not so much a dreamy longing for bygone bliss as regret and bitterness over a lost chance for happiness, which, to make matters worse, deprive one of future chances for happiness, as well. Such a negative attitude to life and its vicissitudes also marks the way the protagonist's father approaches photography as such. Rabo remembers that, unlike his wife, Karabekian Senior "refused to touch a camera, saying that all it caught was dead skin and toenails and hair which people long gone had left behind. I guess he thought photographs were a poor substitute for all the people killed in the massacre" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 75). On the one hand, this approach inscribes itself into the aforementioned argument that the art of capturing reality on film has a strong thanatological dimension. On the other hand, Mr. Karabekian's stance is devoid of a certain idealism which may be attributed to photographs, to those who look at them and probably also to those who take them. To put it simply, Rabo's father notices the transient dimension of photography, but has no illusions as to what lies behind this dimension. This, in turn, brings to mind the conclusions to which a reading of Barthes has led Hirsch. As she puts it, "[P]hotography, he [Barthes] implies, does not facilitate the work of mourning" (*Family Frames* 20) because "[p]hotography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability" (20).

Both in the theory formulated by Hirsch and the Vonnegut novel discussed here, the concept of postmemory is inextricably linked with the problematics of the family, which "[i]n the second half of the twentieth century . . . becomes the object of intense social and cultural scrutiny and observation. There is nothing about the notion of family that can be assumed or in any way taken for granted" (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 10). Hirsch simultaneously points out the complicated status of the family in a century marked by historical cataclysms, generating external and internal tensions, with which the basic social unit has to cope:

In the postmodern moment, the family occupies a powerful and powerfully threatened place: structurally a last vestige of protection against war, racism, exile, and cultural displacement, it becomes particularly vulnerable to these violent ruptures, and so a measure of their devastation. But, as *Maus* also demonstrates, these external perils do not disguise the violence and destruction that occur within the family itself, the power of the father to silence the mother's voice, the power of the son to rewrite the father's words. (13)

*Bluebeard* is a vivisection of family relations, as well as a story about the need for belonging and attempts to fulfil this need by entering various familial and parafamilial structures. In the protagonist's case, apart from the nuclear family from which he comes, the family he starts when he first marries and the one he gains through his second marriage, these structures include, by his own admission, the army, in which he serves during World War II, and the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.<sup>10</sup> It is hard to resist the impression that what matters to Rabo, aware as he is of the dangers and dependences of which Hirsch speaks, is not only the very fact of having relatives, including those to whom he is not related by blood, law or marriage, but also their number. He regrets that large families, like the ones from which his parents came, were murdered by the 'Turks. It may therefore be assumed that the genocide which nearly cost Mr. and Mrs. Karabekian their lives affects almost all the important human relationships their son forges as an adult.

The Armenian Genocide leaves a particularly strong mark on the protagonist's relationship with his father, whose trauma is more severe than that experienced by his mother:

Although my mother's memories from the Old World were more gruesome than my father's, since she was right there in the killing fields, she somehow managed to put the massacre behind her and find much to like in the United States, and to daydream about a family future here.

My father *never* did. (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 15)

Rabo's attitude to his parents, in particular his father, is tainted by retrospective thinking, by his reflecting on the choices which were made—or failed to be made—by the Karabekians, all of which were either directly or indirectly linked with the events of 1915. The protagonist's mother and father met while escaping their Turkish oppressors, which, in a sense, makes his own existence the effect of atrocious historical events.

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<sup>10</sup> All these structures turn out to be impermanent or incomplete. The protagonist's mother dies young when he is still a child. His father, with whom he has a difficult relationship, passes away shortly after Rabo has entered adulthood. The main character's first marriage breaks down after about ten years. Following their parents' divorce and their mother's remarriage, Rabo's sons take their stepfather's name and break all ties with their biological father. Karabekian's second marriage is happy and lasts until his wife's death, but the couple is childless, which the protagonist mentions with regret. Similarly, the narrator's relations with his comrades-in-arms and members of the art world fail to stand the test of time. Rabo's friendship with writer Paul Slazinger, probably the longest in his life, since it lasts several decades, comes to an end while the seventy-year-old protagonist is writing his autobiography.

Rabo accuses his parents of helplessness and passivity, which, after their arrival in the United States, results in their spending their entire lives in a place, as it were, assigned to them by Mamigonian while they could move to an Armenian community in the same state, which in all likelihood would make the life of an immigrant family easier. In the small Californian town where they settle, Rabo's father, a former teacher, earns his living by mending and making shoes, and bitterly resigns himself to professional degradation, something his son will never forgive him. The main character of *Bluebeard* actually believes that the historical cataclysm and the ensuing trauma justify only to a certain extent his father's inertia and bitterness. Later in life, Karabekian Senior, a once ambitious man, does virtually nothing to improve his social and intellectual status or at least his well-being: "Oh, no—it wasn't Mamigonian who tricked him into being the unhappiest and loneliest of all the world's cobblers" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 38). As a counterbalance to his father's attitude, the narrator of *Bluebeard* gives examples of Armenians who have managed to realize the American Dream: "And Armenians haven't succeeded only in business here. The great writer William Saroyan was an Armenian, and so is Dr. George Mintouchian, the new president of the University of Chicago. Dr. Mintouchian is a renowned Shakespeare scholar, something my father could have been" (39).

By contrast, the quintessential American belief that you must never give up and that life's adversities are all the more reason to redouble your efforts, as well as archetypal American optimism and a tendency to think ahead, characterize Mrs. Karabekian. As far as Rabo's future is concerned, she is the one who shows initiative, which leads to her son becoming a disciple of Dan Gregory, formerly known as Gregorian, a New York-based Armenian illustrator who has achieved spectacular success in America.<sup>11</sup> The undertaking which—whatever one thinks of all its consequences—enables young Rabo to get out of his provincial hometown and escape from the lack of prospects is sabotaged from the very beginning by his father, who is, to put it mildly, sceptical about it. He questions both the idea itself and the credibility of Gregory and his mistress, Marilee Kemp, thanks to whom Mrs. Karabekian's plan works. Rabo's father persists—as does, for that matter, the protagonist's mother—in using the original form of the famous illustrator's surname and criticizes Gregory for having allegedly cut himself off from his ethnic roots.

<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Karabekian's resourcefulness is compatible with the overall message of *Bluebeard*, which depicts women as self-reliant, active and decisive, as well as prepared to mend what men have destroyed or neglected. This aspect of the novel is perfectly summarized by the title of Rabo Karabekian's last, monumental painting *Now It's the Women's Turn*.

As for Mr. Karabekian, he never masters the English language to the extent necessary to become a headworker in America and speaks to his family mainly in Armenian. The fact that in conversations he refers to Armenian culture, history and tradition may be seen not only as proof of his being faithful to his own national identity, but also as an act of resistance to the culture, history and tradition of the New World, to which he never really acclimatizes himself. One may get the impression that an attachment to the past and one's ethnic roots, which the novel's narrator respects and approves of as such,<sup>12</sup> becomes, in his father's case, one more way of dwelling on past tragedies and failures, exacerbating his sense of injustice, discouragement and chronic acedia. Mr. Karabekian refuses to take up the challenge and set himself more ambitious goals because "that [i]sn't *humiliating* enough" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 25), as his son ironically puts it. As a result, "he bec[omes] his own Turk over here, knocking himself down and spitting on himself" (25). Driven by masochism, as well as a sense of guilt or at least loyalty to his compatriots who did not survive the genocide, "he welcome[s] all proofs that the planet he had known and loved during his boyhood ha[s] disappeared entirely" (25), since "[t]hat [i]s *his* way of honoring all the friends and relatives he ha[s] lost in the massacre" (25). With time, as a relatively young man, he becomes mentally united with the victims of the Armenian Genocide, in fact heading only for death and turning, in the words of one of his few acquaintances, into "a perfectly contented, self-sufficient zombie" (66).

Relevantly, Hirsch describes the graphic novel *Maus* as the story of the author's parents as well as "the story of Art Spiegelman's own life dominated by memories which are not his own" (*Family Frames* 26). Despite the emotional distance and grudge which mark his relationship with his father, Rabo Karabekian is aware of the fact that, by writing his autobiography, he immerses himself, as did his father all his life, in the past, including his parents' story, tragically inscribed into history with a capital H. He therefore experiences what Hirsch, in her examination of *Maus*, identifies as "Spiegelman's challenge [which] is to be able to inscribe in the story his ambivalence—both his passionate interest and desire and his inevitable distance and lack of understanding" (13). Rabo's narration is replete with allusions to the Karabekians' past, but also—importantly, since, as Hirsch points out, genocide encompasses both biological extermination and "cultural genocide" (13)—with references to his own Armenianness, to historical facts and the cultural heritage of the nation from which he comes, as well as to what it means to be a true Armenian. For instance,

<sup>12</sup> During his army days, Rabo Karabekian is encouraged to change his name to Robert King, which he fails to do. He also leaves his immense fortune to his two sons from his first marriage on the condition that they return to their original Armenian surname.

the protagonist has no doubt that, contrary to what Mamigonian did, an Armenian worthy of the name must be honest. A counterexample of Armenian honesty is Rabo's mother, who takes jewels belonging to one of the victims of the massacre, but manages to do so without desecrating the corpse. Mrs. Karabekian reverts to this detail in stories of her survival, which she tells her son on numerous occasions because, as Hirsch would put it, "[s] he is the survivor who has a story to tell" (19). The question of morality is directly related to the question of potential revenge for the wrongs suffered by the victims and survivors. When eight-year-old Rabo, who is aware of what the Armenian Genocide was from an early age, asks his father about it, Karabekian Senior restricts himself to expressing the hope that, as a result of the extermination and exodus of the Armenians, Turkey "is an uglier and even more joyless place, now that *we* are gone" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 43).

The genocide experienced by the protagonist's parents affects his life on several levels: the cultural, moral, existential and psychological. At a very basic level, one may also speak of a cause-and-effect relation: the narrator does not joke when he blames Mamigonian for his having been permanently maimed on the front lines of World War II. Moreover, and perhaps as importantly, the previous generation's traumatic experiences incline Rabo to think about his own life in terms of those experiences, which become a point of reference for him, and even superimpose themselves on his own traumas. They shape not only the narration contained in the autobiographical book on which he is working, but also his own inner narration. At one point in the novel, Circe Berman encourages him to describe his state of mind following the departure of his first wife, who took with her their children, as well as their portraits painted by Rabo, the latter action having a symbolic dimension. The protagonist recalls "feeling what [his] father must have felt when he was a young teacher—and found himself all alone in his village after the massacre" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 229).

The most famous survivor of the Armenian Genocide may be Arshile Gorky, an American painter of Armenian origin, whose mother died as a result of the hardship caused by the ethnic cleansing. As an exponent of Abstract Expressionism, mentioned in Vonnegut's novel alongside other prominent representatives of this artistic movement, such as Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, Gorky is also a link between the motif central to *Bluebeard*, namely art, and the themes of genocide, war and cruelty, with which the present article is concerned. Importantly, Gorky's oeuvre is sometimes read in the light of the atrocious experiences which marked his childhood.<sup>13</sup> In Rabo Karabekian's case, the effect of both the artist's own and inherited trauma on his creative output is also visible.

<sup>13</sup> For an examination of this subject, see Pitman.

Rabo Karabekian's career in the visual arts may be divided into three stages. The first one encompasses the attempts undertaken in his schooldays and his apprenticeship with Gregory, which consists mostly in the boy running errands for his mentor. Although their masterly realism borders on the kind of precision that is proper to photography, the famous Armenian's works do not predestine him to achieve the status of a truly great artist because "[t]hey [a]re truthful about material things, but they lie[] about time" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 80). This, however, does not change the fact that Gregory's illustrations bear the strong imprint of their author's personality, which is not the case with Karabekian's otherwise technically perfect drawings. The lack of individual artistic trademarks is the reason why a professor of fine arts whom Rabo, now working as a graphic designer in a New York advertising agency, approaches refuses to accept him into his class.

The next stage of the protagonist's artistic activity begins after World War II, when he becomes friends with painters of the Abstract Expressionist circle. They are the ones who present him with pictures which later make him the world's leading collector of the New York School. Rabo himself also starts to create nonfigurative art. Initially quite successful as an abstract painter, Karabekian eventually fails miserably: as a result of his using impermanent paint which peels off, the pictures, to the buyers' dissatisfaction, turn into unpainted canvases again. Compromised as an artist and abandoned by his first wife, the nearly middle-aged protagonist undergoes a nervous breakdown before being emotionally rescued by a wealthy, warm and likeable woman who becomes his second wife. By her side, Rabo leads a happy, affluent and, by his own admission, idle life for the next twenty years, simultaneously becoming, thanks to his collection, a rich man in his own right. Her death leads to his sinking again into depression, during which, however, he returns to painting and creates his *magnum opus*, a multigure composition which summarizes his life, both personal and artistic. The latter is as if suspended between mimetic and figurative art, on the one hand, and non-representational art on the other.

Karabekian crosses paths with several people who understand painting in the traditional way. This is the case with Gregory, who hates the modernists in general and Picasso in particular, as well as with two women who despise Abstract Expressionism: Dorothy, Rabo's first wife, for whom being a true painter is tantamount to being a skilful draughtsman and a realist, and Circe Berman, who has a low opinion of Karabekian's impressive collection. By contrast, the two other important women in his life, Marilee Kemp, with whom Rabo in time embarks on an affair, and his second wife, Edith, take a different stand. The former, inspired by Karabekian, amasses her own large collection of Abstract Expressionist

works; the latter, invariably kindly, remains neutrally benevolent as far as her husband's artistic preferences are concerned. Hovering between the two poles, the protagonist of *Bluebeard* moves from one to the other to eventually return to figurative art in his last work.

The secret which the potato barn situated on Karabekian's Long Island estate hides and to which the novel owes its title<sup>14</sup> is a gigantic painting, a panoramic vision woven from the protagonist's war memories, on which is superimposed his parents' experience of the Armenian Genocide. This historical juxtaposition confirms the rightness of what Circe Berman tells Paul Slazinger when he quotes George Santayana's statement "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" : "[W]e're doomed to repeat the past no matter what. That's what it is to be alive" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 88). That the ekphrasis contained in the finale of *Bluebeard* also draws on Vonnegut's own experiences is evident from the novelist's letter to George Strong, a fellow soldier and prisoner in Dresden during the carpet bombing of 1945, and thus a co-participant in the events which inspired *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

In the last chapter of what may be my last book, *Bluebeard*, I describe the valley we came to after we walked away from the schoolhouse at Hellendorf. Six of us appropriated a Wehrmacht horse and wagon, and traveled around for several days unimpeded by anyone. We made it back to the slaughterhouse, I'm not sure why, and were arrested by Russians, who locked us up in the barracks of what used to be a training camp for Army Engineers. That was outside Meissen, I think. Then we were taken in Model A trucks to the Elbe at Halle, and traded one-for-one for subjects of the U.S.S.R. held by the Americans on the other side. Many of these, including Gypsies and Ukrainian turncoats, I heard later, were shot or hanged almost immediately. What fun! (Vonnegut, *Letters*)

In *Bluebeard*, the protagonist's analogical experience is referred to as "Old Soldier's Anecdote Number Three":

"One evening in May," I said, "we were marched out of our camp and into the countryside. We were halted at about three in the morning, and told to sleep under the stars as best we could."

<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, this is an allusion to a seventeenth-century fairy tale of the same name by French author Charles Perrault. It tells the story of a man who serially gets married and serially murders his wives, subsequently hiding their bodies in a chamber to which only he has access. His last wife fails to respect the interdiction, which saves her life. In Vonnegut's novel, Circe Berman tries to find out what it is that Karabekian keeps in his potato barn, but, unlike in the original French version of the story, she achieves her aim with the owner's permission.

“When we awoke at sunrise, the guards were gone, and we found that we were on the rim of a valley near the ruins of an ancient stone watchtower. Below us, in that innocent farmland, were thousands upon thousands of people like us, who had been brought there by their guards, had been *dumped*. There weren’t only prisoners of war. They were people who had been marched out of concentration camps and factories where they had been slaves, and out of regular prisons for criminals, and out of lunatic asylums. The idea was to turn us loose as far as possible from the cities, where we might raise hell.”

“And there were civilians there, too, who had run and run from the Russian front or the American and British front. The fronts had actually met to the north and south of us.”

“And there were hundreds in German uniforms, with their weapons still in working order, but docile now, waiting for whomever they were expected to surrender to.” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 204)

Not only does the ekphrasis of the painting *Now It's the Women's Turn* constitute the coda of Vonnegut's novel, but it also summarizes its wartime strand. Echoes of World War II recur in the pages of *Bluebeard* in the protagonist's flashbacks, memories and musings, at times interlocking with reminiscences of other wars, before and after. The male characters in the novel are often veterans, who have been in the wars in both the literal and figurative senses. Apart from Rabo Karabekian, who lost an eye at the front, *Bluebeard* features two other former soldiers, both of whom are the main character's best friends, Terry Kitchen and Paul Slazinger, who shares with the protagonist “[l]oneliness and wounds from World War Two which were quite grave” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 148). Fred Jones, Dan Gregory's assistant, used to be a flying ace in the Great War; they will both perish in Egypt, fighting on Mussolini's side. Even John Karpinski, Rabo's East Hampton neighbour, was wounded in Korea while his son never returned from Vietnam, about which the narrator comments as follows: “One war to a customer” (43). William T. Sherman's oft-quoted statement “War is hell” finds its expression in the narrator's reflections as he inventories Gregory's collection of militaria: “I can remember thinking that war was so horrible that, at last, thank goodness, nobody could ever be fooled by romantic pictures and fiction and history into marching to war again” (130). This belief is gainsaid by the wartime experiences of the characters in Vonnegut's novel,<sup>15</sup> whose message is *par excellence* antimilitary and pacifist.

<sup>15</sup> After the end of World War II, Marilee Kemp, now the widow of an extremely wealthy Italian aristocrat, creates in her Florentine palazzo a safe haven for women who have been harmed by the war and by men.

Rabo Karabekian notices an ironic analogy between what Fred Jones felt when he shot down plane after plane and what the Abstract Expressionists felt during the process of creation. The difference, he points out bitterly, is that “what Pollock did lacked that greatest of all crowd pleasers, which was human sacrifice” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 141). As a young man, Rabo loses himself in painting, but sees himself as a talentless artist, someone whose “shallowness as a participant in a life of serious art” (133) is evident. However, this does not change the fact that, despite not thinking highly of his painterly *chant du cygne*, he is not completely dissatisfied with it either. He observes sarcastically that the canvas “might actually outlive the ‘Mona Lisa!’” (177).<sup>16</sup> The monumental painting depicts “human sacrifice,” the victims of war, who are either already dead or about to die, or will at best survive the war physically and spiritually maimed. According to its author, the message of the painting is “Goodbye” (172), “the emptiest and yet the fullest of all human messages” (171).

It is worth taking a closer look at the aforementioned crossover nature of *Now It's the Women's Turn*. The human figures depicted in the painting have their own fictitious stories, some of which Rabo tells Circe Berman when, accompanied by her host, she finally manages to cross the threshold of the mysterious potato barn. The fragment of Vonnegut's letter to Strong and the relevant passage from *Bluebeard* quoted earlier in the present article give us an idea of what the “gruesome Disneyland” (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 241) created by Karabekian looks like. The immense canvas is filled with the microscopic figures of “clearly drawn World War Two survivors” (241), including those who are unlikely to have met in the same geographical context during the war, which, however, emphasizes the global dimension of the military conflict in which the protagonist of Vonnegut's novel participated. Contrary to what the title of the composition may suggest, it seems that women are largely absent from it, a fact which Circe points out. Rabo explains to her that her impression results from the havoc wreaked by war, which deprives women of their health and beauty and makes them indistinguishable from the men in the painting. Another reason for this apparent absence is that the female inhabitants of the local villages are hiding from rapists in basements, probably in vain. There is, however, one female figure who attracts attention: the dead Gypsy queen. This particular element of Rabo's work is a tribute he pays to his mother's experiences and memories of the Armenian Genocide because the deceased has on her jewels which some living person will find.

<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to the paint used by Rabo Karabekian to create his now non-existent canvases. The advertisement for Sateen Dura-Luxe alluded to da Vinci's famous painting. As it turned out, the producer had grossly overestimated their product.

*Now It's the Women's Turn* thus amalgamates events which took place not only during World War II, but also during the Great War. As such, it is a blend of its author's memory and postmemory. For Rabo Karabekian, his parents' traumatic reminiscences are so vivid that they become part of himself. Relevantly, Hirsch points out the symbolism of the way Spiegelman, who was born in 1948, portrays himself in *Maus*. He wears, for instance, a striped concentration camp uniform or a mouse mask, as opposed to the Jews who lived in the time of the Holocaust, depicted simply as actual mice (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 27), in keeping with the meaning of the graphic novel's German-language title. Spiegelman's work thus "demonstrates how immediately present their war memories have remained for Art and his parents in their subsequent life, and how unassimilated. But [following his mother's death] the grieving Art does not actually *remember* the concentration camp whose uniform he wears—mediated through his parents' memories, his is a postmemory" (32). Rabo Karabekian's situation is more difficult than Spiegelman's because his memory and trauma are triple: in his own life, he has experienced atrocities comparable to his mother's and father's horrific experiences. As a result, the painting which is, in a sense, a summary of his own existence includes fragments of the historical events which the Karabekians miraculously survived. The fact that they are merely fragments perfectly fits the theory of secondary memory: using the term *mémoire trouée*, which is French for "holed memory," borrowed from Henri Raczymow's essay, Hirsch notes "the indirect and fragmentary nature of second-generation memory" (23), that is postmemory.

At the most basic level, it may certainly be stated that, while creating his *magnum opus* and transmuting the material provided by primary and secondary memory, Rabo Karabekian uses an amalgam of sources. He draws, at his own discretion and in accordance with his own feelings, on his mother's and probably also—albeit in a less direct way—his father's memories and, more generally, on the postmemory-drenched atmosphere in which he grew up. Such a *modus operandi*—notwithstanding all the differences—brings to mind analogies with what Hirsch sees as the main idea behind Spiegelman's graphic novel. In her words, *Maus* is "Art's graphic interpretation of Vladek's [Art Spiegelman's father's] narrative. This is a 'survivor's tale'—a testimony—mediated by the survivor's child through his idiosyncratic representational and aesthetic choices" (*Family Frames* 26).

"*Maus* is," Hirsch observes, "the collaborative narrative of father and son: one provides most of the verbal narrative, the other the visual; one gives testimony while the other receives and transmits it. In the process of testimony they establish their own uneasy bonding" (*Family Frames* 34). The relationship between the protagonist of *Bluebeard* and Karabekian Senior can hardly be deemed good and unproblematic. The difference is that, in Vonnegut's novel,

the main character's father never works through his trauma and fails to form a close and healthy bond with his son. The fact that, as Hirsch points out, working on his graphic novel "represents his [Art Spiegelman's] attempt both to get deeper into his postmemory and to find a way out" (32) makes one realize that, for Rabo, painting *Now It's the Women's Turn* is similarly a form of therapy, conducive, hopefully, to working through both his own and inherited trauma. While *Maus* is the fruit of cooperation, *Now It's the Women's Turn* is the work of a single author, though it may be speculated that Rabo's parents, who have been dead for decades when he embarks on his monumental project, are, to a certain extent at least, its co-authors.

Hirsch points out yet another question which is relevant to Vonnegut's novel. She perceives *Maus* as an example of what Klaus Theweleit refers to as Orphic creation, a product of the human mind which

results from just such a descent [as the Holocaust] into and a reemergence from Hades: a masculine process facilitated by the encounter with the beautiful dead woman who may not herself come out or sing her own song. Orphic creation is thus an artificial "birth" produced by men: by male couples who can bypass the generativity of women, whose bonding depends on the tragic absence of women. (*Family Frames* 34)

In the case of the graphic novel created by Art Spiegelman in cooperation with his father, the absent woman is Anna Spiegelman, Art's mother and Vladek's wife. She committed suicide over twenty years after the end of the war and nearly twenty years before the publication of the first part of *Maus*. To quote Hirsch: "Through her picture and her missing voice Anja [short for Anna] haunts the story told in both volumes [of *Maus*], a ghostly presence shaping familial interaction" (34). *Now It's the Women's Turn* is, officially at least, the work of one man. There is, however, no denying the fact that another man's, as well as a woman's contributions to the painting are unquestionable and that the spirit of the latter along with the collective spirit of many women seem to be hovering over a work which is, like Spiegelman's *Maus*, "the personal and the collective story of death and survival" (34).

The most important of the above-mentioned women is, of course, Rabo's mother, of whom the protagonist speaks with incomparably more warmth than he does of his other parent and whose premature death left a void in his life, simultaneously depriving him of a buffer against his father, of whom he never achieves a true understanding.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Karabekian's

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<sup>17</sup> The main reason why Rabo Karabekian wants his sons to resume his surname is that this is what his mother would have wished: "She wasn't even a Karabekian by birth, but she was the one who wanted no matter where, no matter what, the name Karabekian to live on and on" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 250).

influence on her son's last painting is evident. It may, however, also be argued that the conversation the main character has with Marilee Kemp a few decades before *Now It's the Women's Turn* comes into being also affects the final shape of Rabo's work. For Marilee, war and men are inextricably linked, and the latter's responsibility for violence on a mass scale is unarguable. It is men who start and wage wars, whose victims, apart from men themselves, are women and children.<sup>18</sup> This view is in keeping with the overall message of Vonnegut's novel, whose narrator similarly blames men, their greed, rapacity and cruelty, for military conflicts and other forms of evil, such as colonialism, imperialism, and even capitalism.<sup>19</sup> Marilee tells Rabo that prior to coming up with the idea to collect works of Abstract Expressionism, she contemplated decorating her palazzo with frescoes whose themes and message would have been similar to those of *Now It's the Women's Turn*. She eventually opts for abstract painting because she comes to the conclusion that

[a]fter all that men have done to the women and children and every other defenseless thing on this planet, it is time that not just every painting, but every piece of music, every statue, every play, every poem and book a man creates, should say only this: "We are much too horrible for this nice place. We give up. We quit. The end!" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 205)

By contrast, at the beginning of their acquaintance, Circe Berman, who sincerely detests Abstract Expressionism, encourages Rabo to paint a picture which would portray the dreadful experiences and suffering of his mother and other Armenians, unaware of the fact that such an artwork already exists, hidden in the potato barn. By making Marilee and Circe the protagonist's sources of inspiration and the *spiritus movens* behind what is the culmination of his life's work, Vonnegut reiterates a suggestion which is central to Rabo Karabekian's story. Despite *Bluebeard* being a novel which deals with male worlds, the invariably cruel world of war and the often ruthless world of great art, the future belongs to women, who are likely to have the last word.

<sup>18</sup> Shields's view that "most of the strains in the novel [*Bluebeard*] sympathetic to feminism are drowned out by the importance of women as seductive" (380) is, in my opinion, wrong.

<sup>19</sup> Karabekian Senior's definite opposition to militarism is made clear when Circe Berman asks Rabo whether his father, who died before the outbreak of World War II, would have been proud of his son joining the army. The narrator replies: "Don't forget that it was young soldiers whose parents thought they were finally going to amount to something who killed everybody he'd ever known and loved. If he'd seen me in a uniform, he would have bared his teeth like a dog with rabies. He would have said, 'Swine!' He would have said, 'Pig!' He would have said, 'Murderer! Get out of here!'" (Vonnegut, *Bluebeard* 249).

Filtered through the lens of Hirsch's theory of postmemory, Vonnegut's *Bluebeard* turns out to be an insightful literary study of trauma caused by historical cataclysms, one which is deeper and more complex than a cursory reading of the novel would suggest. The theoretical framework provided by Hirsch illuminates seemingly random or secondary elements of the novel's represented world, some of which might otherwise have been overlooked or underplayed. Vonnegut's writerly intuition enables him to delve into the way historical factors shape the lives of those who are directly affected by them and, just as importantly, the lives of their descendants. Anticipating the work of one of today's leading trauma scholars, Vonnegut explores the complexities and subtleties of what is now referred to as postmemory, bringing to the fore, as does Hirsch in her writings, the intergenerational psychological and cultural implications of traumatic historical events. *Bluebeard* looks at how history marks the family, capturing the tensions within it, and interpersonal relationships in general. It depicts the difficult process of working through trauma and its connection with the creative process. Vonnegut convincingly demonstrates that being a survivor and a survivor's child are tantamount to being steeped in the past, which superimposes itself on the present and determines it. Consequently, the postgeneration, to use Hirsch's term, faces the task of navigating an uneasy inheritance, burdened with guilt, grudge, bitterness and regret. The novel's humanistic and pacifist message is interlinked with gender issues, culminating in conclusions of a feminist nature, which associate men with responsibility for war, genocide and human suffering, and women with hope of peace and renewal. In a Hirschean vein, central to Vonnegut's reflections are the visual arts, namely photography and painting, which are carriers of memory and postmemory, as well as media through which trauma is both expressed and healed.

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