

PARADOX REVISITED IN *BLUEBEARD*

©Loree Rackstraw

First Annual Meeting of the [Kurt Vonnegut Society](#)

American Literature Association, May 2009

Boston, MA

Bluebeard is Kurt Vonnegut's 1987 novel about *soul* or *awareness* which, like life itself, may be challenged at times by accidents or contradictions. During the last year or two of Kurt's life, he shared some poignant phone observations with me that I felt were especially significant to this novel. In particular was his paradoxical view of what life often felt like to him, namely: "LIFE IS NO WAY TO TREAT AN ANIMAL." He believed this was his most important breakthrough, his Einsteinian insight, his own "E equals MC squared."

I figured this rather dreary insight stemmed from his observation that the human capacity for sensory awareness, along with intellectual ability to assign *meaning* to such experience, can and often does result in contradictions or painful conflicts. To be *aware* of our earth and its processes is one thing, but to *reason* that it exists for the primary purpose of human exploitation or power can (and has) led to its abuse. Global climate change is a prime example.

Besides that, getting old was a bore to Kurt, even though he was "trying to be a good sport about it." Shortly before the end of his life, he called to warn that he really was finally certain that Einstein's relativity theory was absolute, and that it irrevocably proved the paradoxical truth that *life is no way to treat an animal*. He said this in an unusually quiet voice, as though whispering an apology for sharing a dismal secret.

The closest I've come to comprehending his Einstein reference concerns the relationship between mass and energy. To oversimplify, Einstein recognized they are

opposites but interdependent. One might be transformed into the other and vice versa, but they can never be separate. In Bluebeard's case, this might be comparable to the narrator's observation, in the potato barn painting, of the bloated body of the old queen of the Gypsies: "Dying is the only way to get fat in Happy Valley." That is, the decaying dead flesh or matter "fattens" it, ironically providing the basis for another aspect of matter, perhaps another life form. It's not a pretty picture.

This insight occurred about the same time I paid renewed attention to Kurt's "Author's Note" at the beginning of *Bluebeard*, in which he says his novel is a 'hoax autobiography' ... so it's not "a responsible history of the Abstract Expressionist school of painting." He even adds that his "book was inspired by the grotesque prices paid for works of art during the past century...." And we know Kurt was never happy that wealth in the hands of a few could "endow certain sorts of human playfulness with inappropriate and hence distressing seriousness." Such seriousness can blind people to spontaneous awareness experiences like "the mudpies of art" and the joy of children's games, or dancing, or singing songs. Likewise, elitism can deprive poor people of access to the creative arts, and to what Kurt believed was the sacred awareness of the artist.

So I'm here to suggest that *Bluebeard* actually is autobiographical. It reflects on what both darkened and sustained his life, plus his gratitude for a "soul" that provided ecstatic and renewing energy for his "meat" from time to time.

Kurt told me that sometimes he really did *experience* "soul" when creating his doodle-like images, or when he spontaneously achieved an intuitive insight. Like Rabo, he could easily draw a perfectly realistic image, even though he found it "too damn easy," perhaps like the narrative tedium of describing minute details of an object or event,

which he avoided. As a writer, it was usually the actual moment of handing over a finished manuscript that provided his peak experience, his moment of rapture.

We all know, however, that writing was, and had to be, central to his life. But on the other hand, *Kurt really did adore railroad trains*, and truly mourned the loss of the steam engines of his youth. In my Vonnegut memoir, *Love as Always, Kurt*, I try to give evidence of this curious rhapsodic irony, for the sake of literary history if nothing else. To me, it suggests Kurt's belief that humans can experience many kinds of renewing awareness if they are attentive.

For now, let's surmise *Bluebeard* is autobiographical, hoax or not, of Kurt Vonnegut. Its setting is quite similar to Kurt's Manhattan residence, a brownstone in a neighborhood much like Gregory's. Although Gregory's art-filled dwelling connected three brownstones via that magical top floor, it became single again after he moved to Italy. Likewise, Kurt's lovely summer property in the Hamptons, although not located on a beach, included a large potato barn (like Gregory's), which he eventually transformed into his studio.

As for characters, several reflect Kurt's consciousness: Marilee is the muse-like "Mary" figure that often energized Kurt's fiction with new awareness, from *Slaughterhouse* on. It is Marilee with whom Rabo shares an orgiastic experience of "nothing but itself," the same words Rabo used to describe the subject matter of paintings by abstract expressionists. And as noted, Kurt himself claimed he had experienced "soul" when he painted or listened to music.

For another aspect of Kurt's personal experience, the character Paul Slazinger, the fiction writer who goes crazy and takes pills, suggests the real author, Richard Yates,

whom Kurt first befriended when they both taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the late sixties. Like Yates, Slazinger experienced the "loneliness and wounds of World War Two which were quite grave." In Yates' later years, he was aided financially and professionally by Kurt, among others, perhaps suggesting the *Bluebeard* experience when Rabo became Slazinger's "insurance plan."

Circe Berman, who bears considerable professional resemblance to Kurt's second wife, is the wealthy author of children's books who appears on Rabo's beach and moves in to energize Rabo, even though she annoys him by replacing his priceless abstract paintings of "nothing but themselves" with chromos of sweet little girls on swings. She insists they will restore balance by helping a viewer imagine painful realities that will eventually face women in life and war. And, by the story's end, she and Rabo experience balance and dance in harmony after he shares his secret painting in the potato barn.

That potato barn painting, as I've noted elsewhere, IS a realistic representation of what Kurt told me he actually witnessed on May 8, 1945, the day World War II ended for him. This was the day his German captors fled, and he walked out a free man from the suddenly unlocked schoolhouse that had become his second P.O.W. prison after the Dresden firebombing. He said his witness of hordes of dazed, wandering people of all ages, many dressed in uniforms from both sides of the war, had made him "unequivocally happy."

Thus, in Bluebeard, the "Peaceable Kingdom" or "Happy Valley" painting, the "whatchamacallit" titled "Now It's the Women's Turn," is Rabo's painting of these shocked survivors sustained by the pure essence of human wonder that transcended the contradictions haunting this novel as well as their and Kurt's own life experience.

I think we can assume this narrative was intended as a revelation of Kurt's creative experience: while the paradox of inseparable soul and meat really was a lifelong challenge over which he sometimes had little control or escape, life also provided him with a revitalizing awareness that could make his soul come ecstatically alive, if even only momentarily. Thus Kurt suggests that *awareness* can renew and help sustain life despite its possibility for painful contradictions or limitations (such as Rabo's single eye),

Bluebeard adds a supporting hint from *Moby Dick*, a book Kurt loved and really did pay attention to: it explains that 17th century whalers could "flense" the animal's meat, that is, strip away all the flesh to the core, metaphorically revealing or recovering its spirit, like the pure essence of human wonder. For Kurt, this meant getting past defensiveness or boredom or masks, until he could momentarily behold or experience the revitalizing power of *soul*.

I think this practice did make life awareness sacred for Kurt Vonnegut, at least from time to time. And it was the creative ARTS that enabled him to share the magic of his inventive vision and its transformative potential. Perhaps *Life is no way to treat an animal*, but on the other hand, it is despite life's paradox that the soul can experience and manifest such rare moments of awareness and discovery. Visitors welcomed into the potato barn each celebrate differing personal insights about the images in Rabo's painting, a work of living art, itself given renewal and validity by its observers. It is *awareness* that makes this participatory and creative human experience not only possible and restorative, but even perhaps sacred. Thus, it transcends paradox for those who freely witness and celebrate it.

So I'd like to think that if Kurt were here today (taking a break from the boredom of Heaven) he would celebrate the birth and transforming *soul* of the now authorized Kurt Vonnegut Society with great delight. May it continue to nurture our awareness and that of all Kurt's readers. Surely it's worth a clambake dinner party every now and then!

And I say: THANK YOU, KURT VONNEGUT, for providing us common folks with *Bluebeard's* perspectives into the magic wonder of your awareness to help us transcend and celebrate life's inevitable contradictions.

-- finis --