

Hope and Despair: A Carnavalesque Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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The main concern of Vonnegut's novels is to attack a set of beliefs that men surrender themselves to, thereby, causing misery to themselves. The significance man attaches to artificial constructs like race, nationality, even national dogma, forces man to snap the common thread that links all people. For a broader readership who felt conventional fiction was inadequate to express the way in which the common man's life had been disrupted by radical social changes of the postwar era, Vonnegut wrote novels structured in more pertinently contemporary terms, bereft of such unifying devices as conclusive characterization or chronologically organized plots. As a counterculture hero of the turbulent 1960's and a best-selling author among readers of popular fiction (in the three decades after), Kurt Vonnegut is at once more traditional and more complicated than his enthusiasts might like to believe.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (1922 - 2007) was born to a descendant of a prominent German-American family. His father was an architect and his mother was a noted beauty. Both spoke German fluently but declined to teach Kurt the language in light of widespread anti-German sentiment following World War I. In 1943 Vonnegut enlisted himself in the U.S. Army and took part in the Battle of the Bulge, Belgium, where he was captured by the Germans as a Prisoner of War (POW). Though he has German roots, he was forced to work at a factory in the city of Dresden. On February 13, 1945, when Dresden was firebombed, Vonnegut and the other POWs survived because they were in a meat locker of a slaughterhouse. The scene of senseless misery and mass destruction at Dresden played a key role in Vonnegut's development of pacifist views and his experiences as a soldier had a profound impact on his writings which reflect the helpless human condition through which he emphasizes the role of chance in human actions. All of his fourteen novels are filled with topsy-turvy, carnivalesque images and races of his own invention.

This paper offers a carnivalesque interpretation of *Cat's Cradle* which deal with the human degradation caused by religion and science. The novel has a story-writer and a narrator as characters; and, also has a subtitle, *Cat's Cradle – The Day the World Ended*. Vonnegut conceals a complex texture beneath a deceptively simple surface using the carnival features of parody and the dehumanization projected through war. His use of contradiction and uncertainty as fictional devices represents a significant technical innovation.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "carnavalesque" refers to a source of 'liberation, destruction and renewal'. The origin and meaning of the

carnavalesque can be best understood by analyzing the concept of the carnival. In the carnival, social hierarchies of everyday life are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. Thus fools become wise, kings become beggars; opposites are mingled (fact and fantasy, heaven and hell). Official seriousness quite often is a mask that conceals pious pretensions and false authorities. Carnival tries to secure this freedom by celebrating and valorizing all that is low, in the process subverting all that is high and holy. Bakhtin likens the carnivalesque in literature to the type of activity that often takes place in the carnivals of the popular culture which sought a release, a freedom from all that is official, authoritarian and serious.

Cat's Cradle (1963) was Vonnegut's first novel to draw serious critical attention. This apocalyptic satire on philosophy, religion, and technologic progress centers on a chip of Ice-Nine capable of solidifying all water on earth. The novel exemplifies Vonnegut's blend of scornful and humorous satire and his use of narrative deflections to examine contemporary life by showcasing the state of the world and humanity. Vonnegut introduces a religion called "Bokononism," which parodies all religions and to propagate the belief that well-meaning lies are more helpful to humanity than absolute truths. The novel begins on a typical carnivalesque note:

Nothing in this book is true.

Live by the *foma* (harmless untruths) that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy. (*Cat's Cradle*, 5)

Vonnegut juxtaposes science and religion and characterizes the institutions constructed around them as destructive and dehumanizing. The novel exhibits a realistic world where the lies of religion serve a better purpose than the truth of science. This juxtaposition of truth and lies and their inversion serve the topsy-turvy nature of this carnivalesque world.

According to Vonnegut faith is not rooted in religion, but in man himself. Vonnegut believes that writers can influence people's ideas profoundly. Vonnegut also parallels religion's attempts to explain the origin of the earth with his Creation story. "In the beginning," he writes (referencing the book of Genesis) "God created the earth and looked upon it with his cosmic loneliness" (265). God then "created every living creature that now moveth" (265) out of mud. One of these creatures was Man. Man then inquired what the purpose of this creation was. God's answer is "I leave it to you to think of one for all this" (265). Vonnegut is playing with the human belief that there must be a purpose for everything. This is what leads people to espouse religious beliefs in the first place. Religious people have tried for centuries to determine "the reason for all this" and have developed elaborate answers. Yet, if we are to believe Bokonon, all of it is "foma" and life doesn't require a purpose.

As a direct witness to the bombing of Dresden as a soldier during World War II, Vonnegut was left with haunting memories of the senseless misery and mass destruction of war which get clearly reflected in *Cat's Cradle*. Right at the beginning, the reader is warned: "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be

founded on lies will not understand this book either” (16). Rightly so, Bokononism, the religion Vonnegut introduces in the novel is based on lies which in the carnival lens is unmasking of truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks.

One of the major themes of the novel is the tension between the community and the individual. The various images of science and religion function as a representation of a shared culture and its values and simultaneously isolate the reader and narrator from these cultural distinctions because the narrator revises the traditional, communal interpretation of the sign. The novel is akin to carnival's element of parody. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, looks closely at sixteenth-century parody which conceptualizes the theory of the carnival. Bakhtin's discussion of carnival and parody invites an evolution of parodic texts. Based on which the themes of the individual's isolation and involvement with the community are highlighted.

The narrator in *Cat's Cradle* is John who intends to write a book called *The Day the World Ended* chronicling the events in the lives of well known individuals on August 6, 1945, when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. In the process the first person he contacts is Newton Hoenikker, the son of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, 'one of the so-called "Fathers" of the first atomic bomb' (16). When Newton - Newt - replies, he reveals information about his past years and his family. Newt's mother had passed away leaving Angela, her unattractive six-foot daughter, in control of the family. As it turned out, his father never paid much attention to the family, and especially held little or no interest in the bomb itself on the day the bomb was dropped. On that day, Newt was standing around his father's study and finds him playing with a loop of string. He sees his father twisting it around his fingers in the shape of a cat's cradle. He approaches little Newt and,

...went down on his knees on the carpet next to me (Newt), and he showed me his teeth, and waved that tangle of string in my face. 'See? See? See? He asked. *Cat's Cradle*. (*Cat's Cradle*, 21)

Newt, having never really received any attention from his father sees his ugly, cigar-reeking face up close and gets scared and runs outside. "...my father was the ugliest thing I had ever seen," (21) writes Newt to John. This particular episode in the novel recalls Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque realism of carnival that presents men,

who are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the readymade and the completed ... They are contrary to the classical images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriac of birth and development. (*Rabelais*, 25)

In *Cat's Cradle* there are three personas at work simultaneously: Vonnegut, the author; Jonah, the narrator; and, Bokonon, who writes books on Bokononism. All three are aware of the fact that 'lies told for the sake of artistic effect...can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth,' and vice versa (Reed, 125) as stated in the editor's note of *Mother's Night* [another of Vonnegut's books]. Lundquist's work

Kurt Vonnegut details that Vonnegut influences the reader to question not only the novel's realism, but reality itself:

This is just the point implied by Vonnegut's cosmic irony with its continuous laughter at systems and philosophies and its paradoxically pragmatic attempts at dealing with the new view of reality. (88)

Vonnegut here comments on the meaninglessness of human pursuits because the world does not learn or benefit from experience from the senseless misery of war and other human constructs.

The cat's cradle also the title of the novel becomes a leitmotif of life in general in the novel. Vonnegut introduces the "cat's cradle" as a metaphor for different interpretations of life. Just as Newt says, "A cat's cradle is nothing more than a bunch of X's between somebody's hands" (165). The story travels from the home turf of Vonnegut's imagination—Ilium, New York—to San Lorenzo where a religion based on 'lies' called Bokononism is practiced, when a sense of doom (in the form of Ice-Nine) overtakes mankind. Newt had an older brother Frank Hoenikker who had left them on the day of his father's funeral and was never heard of again. Newton in a way becomes the protagonist of the novel as his life and actions are discussed throughout the narrative. The three Hoenikker children are each in possession of their father's invention: “

Ice-Nine – It was blue-white. It had a melting point of one-hundred-fourteen-point-four-degrees Fahrenheit. (*Cat's Cradle*, 50)

Felix Hoenikker's invention of Ice-Nine was created to address the military's need for a way to get through mud quickly while on the battlefield. Ice-Nine, effectively freezes any liquid with which it comes in contact, and the invention could be heralded as a great success for Science and a considerable asset to the U.S. military. But the truth is that, this 'creation of science' will destroy a nation's water supply and will ensure its eventual demise. Contrary to the general belief that Science can address itself to all human problems, Felix and Frank Hoenikker's experiences as scientists reveal that scientific knowledge does not provide sufficient answers. Ironically, Science is frequently exploited to create human problems, and scientists like the Hoenickers usually do little to prevent this because they are too concerned with discovering truths to weigh the consequences of their discoveries. This mingling of the established truths and lies is a subversion of the established norms.

Vonnegut attacks and exposes society's flaws while questioning its intelligence and this is evident in the conversation between John and Dr. Von Koenigswald:

“I agree that all religions, including Bokononism, are nothing but lies.”
...I will do anything to make a human being feel better, even if it's unscientific. (*Cat's Cradle*, 179-180)

Society has placed many impediments like religion and science in man's growth in the name of protecting its members from the unknown. Vonnegut attacks science and religion with equal intensity and counters the established thinking through his counter-religion of Bokononism, a religion of "shameless lies"(16). Newt summarizes religion best when he compares it to the cat's cradle "Religion! . . . See the cat? . . . See the cradle?" (150). Towards the end Bokonon realizes the futility of religion in one's life and thinks of an alternative book he could write discarding the Books of Bokononism:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (*Cat's Cradle*, 231)

Vonnegut depicts Bokonon as a holy wanderer finding nothing but junk, lies, and idiocy, he talks about the creations of humanity and their attempts to convince themselves and others of the importance of their pursuits. Bokonon laughs when he thinks of these fools, because human pursuits will never matter, and it will never even matter whether he laughs or cries. Here, the parody of religion represents "forms of the mask" (*Rabelais*, 39-40).

Vonnegut presents religion as more useful and less dangerous than science, despite its paradoxes and shortcomings. In the novel, religion is beneficial not because it conveys some truth about the world, but rather because it gives people elaborate lies in which to believe. Bokonon's lies prove more liberating than the Hoenikkers' truths, because his lies have the means for making men feel better about their lack of purpose and destitute existence. The technological advancement leads to the destruction of human race because of science's frequent disinterest in humanity's survival. Vonnegut attempts to show that humans' temptation to control life, death, and nature has led to advances like the atomic bomb and other novel ways of bringing death in exchange for power.

The multiplicity of searches, utilising either religion or science, brings on the realisation of the complexity of moral and aesthetic experiences. Bokonon's, and eventually John's, answer to this complexity which affects the individual's ability to choose a course of action, is ironic detachment. There is a motivation during carnival time to create a form of human social configuration that 'lies beyond existing social forms' (*Rabelais*, 280). Thus Bakhtin's carnival theory can not be reduced to terms such as anarchic or irresponsible. It is, in fact, a diverse tactic, one that may be implemented and sustained wherever there is a dominant regime. Not only does *Cat's Cradle* cast doubt on the usefulness or wisdom of searching for truths, and our

traditional ways of doing so, but the idea of self determination and the ability of a person to control their destiny is questioned.

Everything happens "as it was supposed to happen", and that no chasing of destiny will ever fulfill our desires, even if we catch what we are chasing (76). This phrase is repeated as a refrain throughout the book. John gets Mona, and is not satisfied; Frank is offered the Presidency, and doesn't want the responsibility that goes with the power; all three Hoenikker children buy what they dream of with Ice Nine, and none are happy. So we might as well live as best as we can in the moment we are in, and laugh. As the book continues, the almost inescapable conclusion is that in Vonnegut's world we must be aware of the lies and truths that we are choosing to accept, that "the primary criterion for choosing a philosophy of life is pragmatic: not whether or not it is 'true,' but whether or not it works" (Mayo, 28).

The nature of the novel gives one a feeling that one is 'reading' rather than immersing oneself unselfconsciously in the text, making us recall Bakhtin's observation that Rabelais set his story in "the immediate foreground of his images is the world he had lived in and the people he closely knew" (*Rabelais*, 445). Just as we become used to the idea that we are reading about the writing of a book *The Day the World Ended* that turned into another book *Cat's Cradle*, we are again introduced to another set of fictional books - *The Books of Bokkonon*. Then Papa Monzano and Frank Hoenikker get a brief look-in with fictional ghost-written statements, and then Philip Castle's fictional book on San Lorenzo. And so it goes typical of the carnival features of "exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness [which] are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style (*Rabelais*, 303).

Vonnegut appears to be a man very much in touch with what he sees as the basic ridiculousness and meaninglessness of life, the universe, and everything. *Cat's Cradle* dissects many of the institutions that we hold sacred, that give our lives structure and meaning and stability. In many ways, this novel is an exercise in pulling aside the curtain and revealing the Great and Powerful as nothing more than a con man with some gadgets, a man who ultimately has no more useful knowledge about the meaning of it all than do any of the rest of us. The novel completes a full circle with the end connecting to the beginning where the novelist reiterates that nothing in the book is true. Vonnegut's excellent technique and unique style are unbelievably powerful. This thought-provoking text and incredibly-well developed characters are not to be forgotten either.

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