

# REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN KURT VONNEGUT'S "CAT'S CRADLE"

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## Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's "Cats Cradle" discusses man's endless effort to convince himself that he understands his existence and life. The essence of both the game and the novel is that man's search to find purpose and knowledge of his existence is all *foma* – meaningless lies. Contrasts two human concepts, religion, and science, to determine their significance to the world and humanity. Vonnegut describes science as a means of unravelling the truth, and religion as a construct built on lies and deception for the greater good. The thought that science is a tool that is misused by humanity for financial gains and the destruction of the universe, while religion is the pursuit of meaning in life from the lies it has created. This paper attempts to identify the role of religion in a world dominated by science and its discoveries and answers the question how religion could find a place in science.

**Keywords:**-Bokonism, religion, science fiction, ice-nine, untruth

## Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., (1922-2007) is a classic example of one of the most prolific of the 20<sup>th</sup> century American novelists. Having lived during the World War II and the civil wars in the US, Vonnegut was tossed between the impact of science and technology in the lives of modern man. Vonnegut wrote it in the wake of the Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis, amid growing concern about the American role in international relations and the ability of the world's greatest powers to destroy nations with the click of a button. *Cat's Cradle* centers on this worry, with the main plot involving one of the developers of the atomic bomb and a deadly substance called ice-nine. It also tells the story of John's failed attempt to write his book and of his discovery of a fictitious religion, 'Bokononism', which provides him with a unique perspective on his own life and human history in general. As a Bokononist he looks back at his previous life as a nominal Christian with an ironic detachment. *Cat's Cradle*, warns readers that science can devise many ways of ending the world, but it shows that human ingenuity can also make life worth living for millions of human beings who currently live in poverty and despair.

## Definition of Science Fiction (SF)

Science Fiction (SF) is a genre in English writing. Despite the genre's reliance on technology, and despite the many brilliant effects that machines and tools can achieve within the aesthetic framework of an SF text, there remains a certain bias. 'The novel of ideas' has traditionally been privileged over the instrumental novel of the machine, in the same way that 'real fiction' (meaning a particular sub-genre of 'mainstream, literary fiction') is privileged over science fiction by the literary establishment. It is only relatively recently, in philosophical terms, that discourses have been developed to allow us to challenge this prejudice. Looking into the definitions of Science Fiction, Suvin calls SF

A literary genre or verbal construct whose necessary and sufficient conditions  
Are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main  
Device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. (Suvin, p. 37)

Suvin's 'cognitive estrangement' balances radical alterity and a familiar sameness, such that 'by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective' (Roberts, 2006). Science fiction questions the role, relevance, costs, and benefits of current and future technologies, and presents ideas that can influence public opinion. It is also claimed that science fiction could determine the worldview of individuals, by the modification of attitudes to the significance of current and future science and technology. (Menadue and Karen Diane, 2006)

## Cat's Cradle

The title of the book is derived from the string game- Cat's Cradle. The original title of Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle*, is "Science Fiction, Thought, and Ethics." Perhaps it would be better to say "Science's Fiction." In a sense science is fiction. As Thomas Kuhn in "The Structure of Scientific Revolution" points out, "Science is another existential attempt to make meaning out of meaninglessness". It invents explanations or fictions for empirical data.( ) Vonnegut introduces the "cat's cradle" as a metaphor for different interpretations of life. "A cat's cradle is nothing more than a bunch of X's between somebody's hands" (165) says Newt, who had been traumatized as a child by the sight of his father dangling such "tangles of string" (165) in his face.

Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle" asserts that our attitudes—as well as the behaviour that stems from them—toward the implications of scientific innovation impact the decisions we make. In doing so, he provokes the reader to investigate the potential repercussions of viewing science as a holy grail of sorts, following it as if it is a religion. The individuals in the novel who rely solely on the acquisition of knowledge are those who contribute to the end of the world, a result that is meant to highlight the dangers of not looking past objective facts. The writer looks at the negative role of science and technology and its power of destroying the human race. This tendency to undermine the importance of anything but science is apparent in the behaviours of many of the novel's characters, the first of which is Felix Hoenikker, a man instrumental in creating the atomic bomb and also one who does not contemplate how his work might affect the world. As an individual who "just [i]sn't interested in people" (Vonnegut 13), he routinely fails to relate what he does as a scientist to the moral implications that his work has on society at large.

The novel discusses not only the war time experience of the soldiers during World War II but also examines the failure of both science and also modern religion. The belief that the earth functions as a self-regulating entity into which human can bring dangerous imbalance runs through the novel. However, the human beings have an obligation to protect it from destruction, may be the type of fama that will make us brave and kind and happy and healthy, as opposed to the idea that science is pure knowledge unconnected to humanity or to the non-human earth.

The novel brings in certain phases of the contemporary scene as they relate to the war time experiences of the soldiers during the Word War II. The novelist narrates the incidents as a war veteran who has seen the traumatic scenes of inhumanity like the dropping of atom bombs on the two cities. The most popular book about the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima was John Hersey's 1946 book *Hiroshima*, first published as a complete issue of the *New Yorker* magazine. In *Cat's Cradle*, the novelist comments on John Hersey's book, which uses all the tricks of the novel: irony, cliff hangers, suspense, understatement, drama, vivid descriptions, heroes and heroines. Hersey follows the lives of six survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima from the night before the bomb was dropped to several months later. He switches back and forth from story to story, interspersing information, describing their emotions and struggles. In other words, it has all the entertainment of a well-written novel.

On the other hand, Vonnegut in the first page of *Cat's Cradle* narrates his past experiences. When the novelist was young he "collected material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*." The book was to be "factual" and tells what "important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic

bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan” (Vonnegut, 1998, p. 1). This is a clear reference to John Hersey’s book. But Vonnegut is also making a point: while discussing the ethical implications of dropping the bomb on Hiroshima, one should not only look at the victims, but also at those who were involved in developing such a bomb and their government.

### **The Science Narrative in *Cat’s Cradle***

*Cat’s Cradle*, being a science fiction narrates facts and incidents. It tells the story of Felix Hoenniker, one of the fathers of the atomic bomb and his new invention ice-nine, which brings the earth as a functioning ecosystem, leaving an inert surface and ravaging tornadoes in the sky. The story follows a writer who begins a book on what famous Americans were doing on the day in 1945 when the bomb was dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On that fatal day when his bomb was dropped, Felix takes the cat's cradle string from an unread manuscript which states that a bomb wipes out the world. Felix not only stopped with the atom bomb but also inverted the Ice Nine.

Another scientific discovery of Felix which Vonnegut speaks of is Ice-Nine. “Ice 9” is a fictional form of solid water that is stable at ordinary atmospheric pressure and temperatures below 45.8C. It has the property of being a seed crystal, and when it comes into contact with ordinary water it causes that water to freeze into more Ice 9. John learns of the speculative substance called “ice-nine,” which Felix is approached to produce for military purposes. It would reconfigure the structure of water to freeze at room temperature. This application would help troopers whining of being ‘stalled’ in mud while in battle. Maybe the purpose was to do good to the soldiers fighting in the battlefield.

Felix, the scientist did not stop after his invention, but continued conducting science experiments without moral regard. His lack of affection toward his children is projected throughout their childhoods. He paid so little attention to them that when Newt was six and his father showed him the cat’s cradle, Newt was terrified because “not only had [Felix] never played with [him] before; he had hardly ever even spoken to him” (Vonnegut 12). The lack of love and familial support that his children received led them to trade away their ice-nine crystals: Angela used it to “buy [her] self a tomcat husband”, Frank used it to “buy [him] self a job”, and Newt used it to “buy himself a week on Cape Cod with a Russian midget” Ice-nine ends up having been really created by Felix, and was the reason for his own incidental demise. The rest of the ice-nine was chipped, separated and partitioned by his youngsters as their “legacy.” For each situation, the development spells fate for them and the world itself as ice-pleasant is unintentionally dropped into vast water in the last snapshots of the novel, making the whole world freeze over.

*Cat’s Cradle* utilizes ice-nine to uncover what Vonnegut feels are the moral reasons for the destruction of Hiroshima. Not only human lives were lost but nationalism, elitism, and religious determinism were also attacked. Xenophobia, hatred of people of other race was eminent during the war. But the tool for the world’s destruction is produced by science. Science is an incredible secret of which a great many people know nothing. At the point when Jonah, the anecdotal author of *Cat’s Cradle*, visits the General Forge and Foundry Company to talk with its chief about Felix Hoenikker, he meets the secretary of one of the exploration researchers. As the novelist writes:” something that’s going to turn everything upside-down and inside-out like the atom bomb.”

### **The Fiction in *Cat’s Cradle***

The scientific invention had not brought good, instead, only death and despair. The imaginative narrative of the story goes on to describe the aftermath of the invention of *Ice 9*, its impact on individuals and the world at large. The narrator and fictitious writer of *Cat’s Cradle*, is an ideal person whose moral outrage seems to be awakened only at the end of the story he is telling. The villains are quirky and banal. There is no dramatic tug of war between good and evil. The text seems simple, almost childish at times. But almost every line is ironic. Unfortunately, many fans and critics missed his most serious irony, which deals with ethical behaviour.

It is interesting, given “Papa” Monzano’s affinity toward science, that “[he is] a member of the Bokononist faith” (Vonnegut 218), a religion that is founded on lies, and to which the only thing that is sacred is “man” (Vonnegut 210). Papa Monzano, who was biting the dust in appalling torment, takes ice-nine and murders himself. Despite believing in Bokononism, he vehemently denounces it prior to his death, urging Frank to “kill [Bokonon] and teach [the people] truth”—the truth that he is referring to is science, what he also describes as “the magic that works” (Vonnegut 218).

Jonah, the essayist of the story, goes with Frank, Angela and Newt to tidy up the wreckage. Other than the solidified assemblage of Monzano, is the body of his primary care physician, who had solidified when he attempted to taste ice-nine and afterward tumbled to the floor. They tidy up the chaos and plan to consume Monzano's body. Before they could consume the body, a pilot, who has been performing for the festival of the One Hundred Martyrs for Freedom, collides with the castle with his consuming plane and Monzano's body slips into the ocean and all the water of the world gets frozen and the world transforms into a desert and the sky loads up with tornadoes. In the end, although “Papa” Monzano went through the last rites of Bokononism before he died, his choice to utilize science—in the form of ice-nine—to end his life, rather than letting things run their natural course, is what led to the end of the world. “In choosing belief in science over belief in man, “Papa” places importance on solitary happiness over societal success. He took ice-nine because it was a solution to ending his pain—the same pain that he carelessly inflicted on others by choosing to cease his own suffering”.

### **The New Religion in *Cat’s Cradle***

The question now arises: Why should there be a reference to religion in science fiction? Science has an unexplainable quality. The makers of science do not understand what they are typing or transcribing. They feel as if they have false consciousness about the world and therefore are not able to make ethical judgments about science. To them the key to life was in the article, "protein." The novelist fully trusts science's crazy case, but does not address whether science can truly respond to the philosophical inquiry of the mystery of life. He accepts that the secret of life is protein. Felix Hoenikker has the authority of God and so he is not accountable. As he is dying, Papa Monzano tells Jonah, who has quite recently been named leader of San Lorenzo, to show the individuals science... He says, “Science is magic that works (218). The statement both emphasizes the common feeling that science is miraculous and holy, and that it is incomprehensible. According to one critic, "Newt Hoenikker believes that human culture not only is a game but also a very dull one" (Shippey, 2005).

Vonnegut sees science’s role as the new religion and an obstacle to ethical action. Felix Hoenikker is treated as a god. John tells his story from the perspective of Bokononism, a frankly false religion invented by Lionel Boyd Johnson, a World War I veteran who, along with a U.S. Marines deserter named Earl McCabe, had been shipwrecked on the island of San Lorenzo. Simon Blackburn (2001) had stated about religion’s threat to ethics, “We have God’s authority for dominating nature, or for regarding them others different from ourselves as inferior, or even criminal”

McCabe takes control of the government, as *Bokonon* invents the new religion which is deeply fixed on lies. Bokonon and McCabe say that they have been 'called' by God to pronounce a religion since the island cannot exist without a religion. They create their own religion urging the individuals to come in fellowship with each other, so that they can know and identify the Truth. But, Truth is not the Truth what God speaks of, but what both Bokonon and McCabe deliver. They exploit the individuals who rush towards the religious establishment, so vehemently, yet blindly, As Vonnegut writes, “Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and better lies” (118)

Bokonon tells people that religion is the product of the final aim of God’s plan of salvation and it is not the salvation of all men but the salvation of people who have become part and parcel of Bokononism. He also tries to infuse more zest to the religious life of the people. It is easy to see how fake

the religion becomes with the cruel tyrant McCabe Bokonon has a theory of dynamics that talks about the balance between good and evil. Good societies could only survive by keeping the tension between these two things high at all times. The form and language of Bokonon's calypsos are good examples. . . "Bokonon, in his infinite wisdom knows not to take his own advice and the validity of it was null. There is no truth, there is no meaning, No damn cat, and no damn cradle." (66). On the title page of the first of the books of Bokonon, the Bible of this new religion is the abrupt warning. Vonnegut writes, "*Don't be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but foma! Foma, of course, are lies*" (265)

Kurt Vonnegut's main intension, through the presentation of Bokonian religion, is to point out how people are blindly dependent on religion. Bokonon is only happy misleading people into oblivion. As he confesses, "I wanted all things to seem to make some sense, so well all could be happy, yes, instead of tense. And I made up lies so that they all fit nice, and I made this sad world a par-a-dise" (127) hereafter referred to as CC]. The lines establish Bokonon, who is christened Lionel Boyd Johnson, and who discovered the religion called "Bokonism" is a down right cheat.

The first line of the Books of Bokonon states "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies," a statement which not only reveals the seeming honesty of the religion but also advances the blurring of truth and fiction, which are clearly blurred in the novel as well. Hoenikker's death on Christmas Eve may be another hint at Vonnegut's stance on religion and science, "God is coming and she is pissed" (Abel). The epigraph to Vonnegut's book reads this way. "Nothing in this book is there live by the foma that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (7)).

According to Newt's cradle metaphor, one sees what one wants to. "See the cat? See the cradle?" (179) Newt says in response to inquiries about his sister's seemingly perfect marriage and Jesus Christ, both of whom are not what they people may think they are. . . Miss Faust is content to believe in the Christian presumption that God is love without any physical proof "no matter what Dr. Hoenikker said" (55). Yet, if this belief makes Miss Faust all those things aforementioned, her religion can be said to be "useful." This is her "cat's cradle." She takes into account the nature of the world and interprets it in light of Christianity. Vonnegut later uses his fictitious religion to model how religion takes into account the nature of things, and interprets them based on assumptions

### Science and Religion in *Cat's Cradle*

Science and religion are juxtaposed in *Cat's Cradle*, he characterizes sciences as a form of discovering truth, while religion as a form of creating lies. Regardless of this negative portrayal of religion, most serious reactions are held for science and its objective of looking for and finding truth. Vonnegut assaults that reality is intrinsically alluring and great, considering it to be an inescapable faith in culture. It portrays a practical world where truth is utilized for material and individual addition without worry for the enduring impacts those facts will have on humankind. Vonnegut attacks the idea that truth is innately desirable and good, seeing it as a pervasive belief in culture. The novel portrays a reasonable world in which truth is utilized for material and individual increase without worry for the enduring impacts those realities will have on mankind. One of Bokononism's central ideas is that man has always been responsible for giving meaning to life. Thus, the possibility of happiness exists in this world if only man gives life the "right" meanings. Vonnegut also objects to the "science fiction" label because it is often used as a way of refusing to take writers seriously. Eventually, it is , known for his social criticism laced with his love of argument, a touch of robust humour and a unique taste for paradox, has been regarded as a unique artist, who still has the power to awaken the readers with the old forgotten battles.

The philosophy Vonnegut espouses throughout the novel is that people tend to see what they want to, and read into what is there in reality. Even religion is no exception to this. Vonnegut creates a religion in order to question the role of faith in society and the validity of traditional religious assumptions. He first questions absolutes during a dialogue between the scientist Felix Hoenikker and a secretary, Miss Faust. "God is love" (55) claims the latter. "What is God? What is love?" (55) Replies the former. According to the Books of Bokonon (the founder of Vonnegut's fictitious religion), one should "believe in the foma [harmless

untruths] that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy". Vonnegut concludes science as inscrutable pure knowledge unconnected to human reality, or as new religion one may surrender to its authority and cannot make ethical evaluations that lead to action. The meaning that, I have learned in this novel is "Live by the foma that make one brave and kind and healthy and happy". One may not be capable of knowing what the truth is, but would be able to make choices about what one believe about those choices.

## Conclusion

On the positive side, the novelist in *Cat's Cradle* comments "New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become" (Vonnegut, 41). His scepticism about science was evident in the comment "Just because someone can read and write and do a little math, that doesn't mean he deserves to conquer the Universe" (Vonnegut, 324). In juxtaposing belief in the truth of science with belief in the lies of Bokononism, Vonnegut asserts that while science may be the basis through which we earn knowledge and progress technologically, belief in man is what is truly of value.

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