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Ethical Implications Of Science And Human's Faith In Kurt Vonnegut Cat's Cradle

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This paper aims to demonstrate how humanity's unquestioning belief in the advantages of scientific advancements, without considering their ethical ramifications, can result in catastrophe. On the other hand, concentrating on our better nature frequently improves human relations and may even be preferable, even though such idealistic views may not always match reality in Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle (1963). The novel appears to be based on the long-standing conflict between religion and science. The novel's primary symbol of man's fundamental purpose is a straightforward children's game. He finds himself in an arbitrary, constantly shifting system of meaningless strings that man must define as meaningful by the exercise of his creative imagination. Like the man in the novel, he will die of nihilism if he is unable to accomplish it, that is, if he is unable to create a meaning that cannot be found. However, if he grounds his understanding of the self and the world in the cruel facts of science, he will be far worse off than if he based his creative meaning-making on the useful lies of religion.

Keywords: Mankind, Religion, Science, Inhumane, Faith.

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the rare grandmasters of contemporary American letters. His perspective on our philosophy of life is distinct. He claims that religion is a better choice for most people and that humanists, who are largely well-educated, comfortably middle-class individuals with fulfilling lives like mine, find enough joy in secular knowledge and optimism. What distinguishes his fiction is the moral and spiritual depth with which he shapes his characters and their surroundings. His writings have received accolades for their exquisite depictions of human condition and place. He is more interested in exploring the negative emotional undercurrents that make up the darker side of human nature and underpin man's inhumanity towards other humans than he is in defining the outward occurrences.

The main theme of Cat's Cradle is epistemology; the narrator, John, realises that life is a lot like the child's game of cat's cradle as he struggles to distinguish between what is real and what is illusory. He, a freelance writer, narrates the novel:

> Call me Jonah.
> My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John.

> Jonah-John-if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah … Jonah was there. (13)

Richard Giannone, in Vonnegut: A Preface to His Novels, claims that "Jonah is not a character in the customary sense … he is a reduction to narrative expedient" (61). This is because Jonah/John never gives himself a last name and has a vague, provisional air to him.

In Cat's Cradle there are, in a sense, three writers at work. There is the author Vonnegut, Jonah in the world he constructs, and Bokonon creating his books in the narrative he tells. John tries to write one book at the start of the book and writes about another incident at the end. When a man becomes a writer, he takes on a sacred duty to generate beauty, enlightenment, and comfort at top speed, he argues, defending the writer's profession. John has been writing a book that will tell the narrative of the day an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and be titled The Day the World Ended. John is interested in learning what transpired in the home of the late Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the fathers of the bomb, on that day to use it as material for his work. He thus writes to Newton (Newt) Hoenikker, one of the scientist's three children. In response, Newt writes lengthy letters that show the father was not really interested in the explosion that day or in his children in general.

John is introduced to Felix's three children: Angela, the eldest child who was too tall and ugly to be a mother to her brothers; Frank, the scheming, reputedly deceased gangster; and Newt, the appropriately called midget who corresponds with him. In order to learn more about what transpired in the family on the day the bomb was detonated, John writes a letter to Newt. Newt's subsequent response to the letter clearly shows that Felix was more concerned with playing cat's cradle than with understanding the disastrous consequences of the bomb's detonation.

Felix was a scientist with no morals who was more interested in creating the doomsday gadget, ice-nine, than raising typical children. Although he became the father of three children, he was never truly their father. Social, political, and parental factors altered the children's emotions and even their bodies. Felix's existence was more like that of a robot than a typical person. Critics have also argued that Felix is winsomely innocent. The bomb itself was created by Felix in innocent play. His lab is stocked with toys and devices that pique his curiosity and are pursued for the sole purpose of doing research. He suddenly develops an interest in dime-store turtles while working on the bomb during the war: "Do their spines buckle on contract when they pull in their heads?" he asks himself.'" (23) and forgets all about his atomic project. Despite these amusing episodes, it is not funny that the horrors of atomic war were brought about by Felix's charming entertainment, which seemed to have no real aim.

Felix was so focused on his personal goals that he pulled his daughter, Angela, out of her sophomore year of high school to work as his cleaner. When a lovely man named Harrison C. Connors proposed her to marry him in exchange for her half of her father's death-dealing ice-nine, Angela, who had been denied the typical experiences of a typical young girl, desired happiness so desperately that she did not hesitate. Given that her father and mentor were immoral, Angela had no moral reservations about such a deed.

Felix, cut off from nearly all human interaction, engaged in the same kind of play with his friends as a toddler does with his toys. He created the bomb as carelessly as he would have made a cat's cradle out of string, and it appears that he was ignorant of the ethical ramifications of his research for all of humanity. One of Vonnegut's major topics from the start of his career

was the moral irresponsibility of scientists. He described in an interview how his experiences during World War II left him feeling deeply disillusioned.

Felix's second child, Frank, is a more complex illustration of how his father's love and unwavering commitment to science shaped his children into grotesques. Frank worked at Jack's Hobby Shop as a young man, and Jack, the shop's proprietor, notes that although the boy "didn't have any home life" (69), he accepted the store as his true home. Frank looked for affection from an older woman who would lessen his feelings of rejection and inadequacy as he was unable to receive any love from his cold, uninterested father at home. He started having sex with Jack's wife, who was his close buddy. This kind of living obviously was not enough since Frank quickly started looking for a better, more modern world to live in. Creating a magnificent tiny plywood country, an island as precisely rectangular as a Kansas township, was one way he dealt with his inability to adapt to the actual world. But the youngster could not immerse himself in such a little universe.

Frank started to emulate his father, possibly as a coping strategy to help him avoid suffering any longer. After all, the only way to live pain-free was to be as aloof and uncaring towards the rest of humanity as possible. It appears that Newt, Felix's youngest child, is an even more depressing case than Frank. At a very young age, his father inflicted bodily harm on him after deciding to play with him for an inexplicable purpose. However, the boy screamed in horror when he came up to show him a cat's cradle. When Newt looked closely at his father, he noticed that "His pores looked as big as craters on the moon." He had a lot of hair in his nose and ears. He smelt like the mouth of Hell from the cigar smoke. "My father was the most repulsive creature I had ever seen up close. I constantly dream about it" (21). Newt claims that this experience, a disturbing episode that clearly had a significant impact on him, continues to recur in his dreams. By enrolling the midget-sized Newt in a "special school for grotesque children," (228) his father exacerbated his son's anguish and this wound.

Felix, who was so preoccupied with science that everything else in life was of secondary significance, probably never realised that Newt needed to be made to feel different. Consequently, Stanley Schatt notes in Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. that "Vonnegut, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, scorns those who sin against the human heart" (59). Because his renowned father raised him out of scientific curiosity rather than affection, every Hoenikker offspring is a Grotesque. Newton's paintings sarcastically portray life's meaninglessness. When Julian Castle tosses Newt's painting down a waterfall, it demonstrates that the law of gravity still applies. Newt's paintings are named after Sir Isaac Newton. Named after Benjamin Franklin, Frank is a morally bankrupt technician who would rather work on an electrical generator that would have captivated his namesake than take responsibility for his portion of ice-nine. Due to her father's selfishness, Angela is a homely woman who is deprived of the typical joys of puberty.

Felix's children search for happiness after his death. Newt picks a stunning Russian dancer; the modest Angela picks a charming husband; and Frank gains the fame and authority he has always craved by taking up the role of Minister of Science and Progress on San Lorenzo. John is shocked when Newt tells him that his sister Angela gave her share of ice-nine to her husband in exchange for marrying her and that the two are not happy together. In San Lorenzo, Frank does not truly command the respect he so fervently craves. Newt is also destined to be let down when, with the same level of sincerity as his brother, he barters his share of ice-nine

to a Russian midget in exchange for her promises of love and loyalty. At forty-two, she is a Russian spy old enough to be his mother.

Felix had conducted the most of his study at the General Forge and Foundry Company, which John visits in Ilium, New York. There, he finds out that Felix had been developing a method for crystallising ice called "ice-nine" to save the Marines from fighting in the mud. "This is the ultimate threat in an Absurd Universe: not even the physical world is stable," (29) writes Clark Mayo in Kurt Vonnegut: The Gospel from Outer Space. When employed, ice-nine would cause a chain reaction that would turn all the water on Earth to ice, which is the nightmare feature that haunts John.

John soon notices a newspaper supplement about the Caribbean Island of San Lorenzo, "As it was supposed to happen" (76). He is struck by two things about this: first, the picture of Mona Aamons Monzano, the island's president's adopted daughter, a heartbreakingly gorgeous blonde mulatto; and second, the discovery that the long-lost Frank is the Republic's Minister of Science and Progress. After that, he is given the task of writing a magazine article on San Lorenzo, once more "As it was supposed to happen" (77). On the way there, he meets Horlick Minton, the new ambassador to San Lorenzo, and his wife Claire and H. Newt and Angela are travelling to Frank and Mona's wedding, while Lowe and Hazel Crosby are travelling to San Lorenzo to construct a bike factory. President Monzano greets the Americans as they arrive in Bolivar, the capital of San Lorenzo. The ceremony is cut short when "Papa" passes out, but John has time to watch Mona play an odd game of footsie with a fighter pilot. He quickly learns that this footplay is a part of the banned religion of "Bokononism."

John discovers that the "utopian" Republic was founded by two men: Lionel Boyd Johnson, who is Bokonon, the nation's religious leader, and Earl McCabe, "a brilliant, self-educated, idealistic Marine deserter" (93) who is now the Republic's president and known as "Papa" Monzano. According to them, the people's survival depends on "Dynamic Tension," or "the priceless equilibrium between good and evil" (89). Politics and religion must therefore be categorically opposed, and Papa will publicly hang any Bokonon believers he captures on the "Hook." In private, though, Papa is a Bokononist, just like everyone else in San Lorenzo. For religion to be significant and meaningful, it must pose a threat to itself. In addition, John encounters Julian and Philip Castle, who, aside from Bokonon, have a realistically funny perspective on the world.

Although John never finishes The Day the World Ended, the initial part of the book is devoted to his information-gathering efforts. Rather than continuing with his planned book on Felix and the bomb, the second section of the novel focusses on John's travel to the island of San-Lorenzo, where he discovers Bokononism. The failure of McCabe and Bokonon (Johnson) to produce noticeable improvements in life, which is predicated on the idea that everything is difficult and that it is impractical to think that man can significantly improve things, is the origin of Bokononism.

As the story progresses, Frank offers John a position at a magnificent $100,000 annually. Frank responds that the position is the presidency of San Lorenzo when John enquires about it. Frank understands that while he excels at technical tasks, he is completely lost when it comes to interacting with people. It takes a lot of convincing before John accepts the presidency. Additionally, because Bokonon has written that Mona will wed the next president of San Lorenzo, Frank invites John to pop the question to her. By pressing the soles of their feet together, Mona implies that she and John are soulmates. John had never had an

experience as profound as this one. Mona accepts John's proposal of marriage, provided he becomes a Bokononist. John agrees with pleasure. Before Papa Monzano passes away, Frank advises John to ask for his blessing on his succession. They pass a massive iron hook set aside for Bokonon on their route to the castle. John is determined to legalise bokononism as soon as possible. Papa Monzano is in excruciating pain as he awaits death's relief. While urging John to kill Bokonon, he also requests that someone perform his funeral rites and rejects Christian customs.

To parody military violence, materialism, American culture, and organised religion, a significant portion of the novel is devoted to contrasting traditional Christian and Bokonon perspectives on life. Bokononism is unconventional because its hymns are calypso songs about drug use, particularly marijuana smoking, and drunks. This strategy parodies conventional American values, which elevate self-determination to a religious concept and support militarism and greed while ostentatiously promoting equality and peace. Despite the unusual approach, many of Bokonon's teachings are much more in line with the original meaning of Christianity's message of acceptance and love than the doctrines of many contemporary churches.

John learns that Papa Monzano turned into cement right away after swallowing whatever was in the bottle around his neck. Monzano is the first guy to die of ice-nine, though John is not yet aware of this. Monzano said the classic Bokononist pre-suicide statement, "Now I will destroy the whole world," (193) prior to eating the lethal crystal. The deceased man's lips solidify as soon as the doctor runs his hands over them, goes to the washbasin to wash them and plunges them into the water. In one block, he raises the load out of the basin. As soon as his tongue contacts the blue-white mass, he instantly freezes and collapses to the ground.

Important questions concerning power dynamics are brought up by Monzano's ice-nine suicide. An old, ill, semi-invalid, self-indulgent, and greedy person has access to the world's most lethal secret weapon. Even worse, the man is terminally ill and suicidal due to excruciating agony. There is a strong analogy to nuclear weapons. The implication is that the only people who are likely to acquire sufficient authority to control weapons capable of destroying the planet are the most corrupt and cynical. The core of the nuclear period was the dread that one suicidal old man could attack and wipe out the entire globe.

The idea that while young men fight wars, it is old men who start them is another idea that Vonnegut's work alludes to. This idea was first put forth in the late 1960s. War was viewed as solely a male vocation because women were not allowed to serve in many military roles, including combat. Many individuals thought that war would end if women had more authority.

John shows the three Hoenikkers what they have done by dragging them to the death chamber. Newt tells the story of how they found the deadly ice-nine their father had made on that terrible day. While strolling down the shore on that fateful Christmas Eve, the boys came inside the home with a puppy in tow. Felix had clearly been playing about with his creation inside. The kitchen was filled with pots and pans filled with solid ice-nine and water. In the living room, the doctor was reclining in his favourite wicker chair. The dog licked the pan full of ice-nine as it followed the boys inside. He froze instantly, becoming as solid as cement. Their father had created something even more lethal than the atomic bomb, the children realised. They found Felix dead in the living room and ran to notify him. John finds out that following the death of their father, the three Hoenikker children each

received a piece of ice-nine. Love rejections are always painful and have negative effects. Due of their father's lack of concern, all three children experience psychological distress and ultimately use ice-nine to purchase love or a sense of acceptance. One could argue that a father's inability to love his children is the reason the world ends.

Frank buys his job on San Lorenzo by giving his ice-nine to Papa, who sees it as every petty dictator's dream - the ultimate weapon that can bring even the superpowers to their knees. Angela marries a handsome industrialist who courted her solely for the enormous profits ice-nine would bring him when he sold it to the US government. Newt gives his ice-nine to a Russian agent, a midget Ukrainian ballerina who claims to love him. However, all of the characters' schemes for wealth, power, or love end when the dying Papa swallows' ice-nine to terminate his life, and his body falls into the sea after a jet crashes into his castle.

John and Mona flee to a fallout shelter during the memorial ceremony when bombs begin to explode, but they are left in a largely lifeless world where "It was winter, now and forever" (217). They then learn that mass suicides have occurred in response to Bokonon's claim that God was trying to murder man because he was fed up with him. John is taken aback, but Mona points out that death has helped a lot of individuals with their difficulties. She suggests the failure of romantic love as a last resort against despair as she gently touches the blue-white frost, puts her finger in her mouth, and passes away. Though it is not the book he had originally planned, John spends his final days writing a history of the end of the world. But since no one will be around to read the history in the near future, this gesture is pointless.

Ambassador Minton gives a heartfelt, respectful address about the pointlessness of war during the Papa Monzano memorial service. "All the men who die in the wars are just children," screams the ambassador, who lost his son in World War II. The funeral service's timing and the impending release of a secret weapon that will wipe out all life on Earth are starkly ironic. Frank establishes an ant farm after discovering a few live ants. Ice-nine has been vanquished by the ants working together. A tiny piece of ice-nine will be surrounded by a big ant colony, which will produce enough heat to produce a few liquid water droplets. Half of the ants perish each time this process is repeated. The other half keeps living while cannibalising their bodies. "Who taught the ants to survive ice-nine?" asks Frank out loud. One sentence sums up the theme of the novel, Cat's Cradle: humans never learnt to cooperate like ants did.

As much as humanity laments the deaths of young people in conflict, it is evident that humans cannot stop making the same mistakes again and over again. Vonnegut was adamant that the hallmarks of humanity are violence, aggression, greed, and most importantly, the certainty of conflict. Because of his desire for goodness and his understanding of evil - technological, political, economic, and social - he creates mythical, nostalgic, and utopian fantasies which almost never turn out the way his characters believe they will. According to him, nothing else will improve the circumstances and standard of human life on Earth unless man does.

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