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The Philosophy of the Absurd and the Narrative Function of *Foma* in *Cat's*

Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is a masterwork of apocalyptic satire that confronts the terrifying intersections of scientific rationalism, Cold War geopolitics, and human vulnerability. At the heart of the novel's philosophy is the fictional religion of Bokononism, which is based solely on the idea of *foma*, "harmless", comforting untruths. In this paper, it is examined how *foma* serves epistemological and narrative purposes within the text; the "lies" used by Vonnegut are a crucial means of survival from the paralyzing philosophy of the absurd. Through the comparison of the amoral, objective truth of science with empathetic, fabricated truths of Bokononism, Vonnegut reveals that the search for absolute truth is a quest that can only be doomed to end in death. The study examines the central metaphor of the cat's cradle and how it reveals man's inclination to impose meaning on meaningless forms with reference to Albert Camus' work on the Absurd and the idea of metafiction of postmodern theory. Moreover, the paper presents the argument that *foma* is a metafictional legitimation of literature as such, and that Vonnegut's novel, like Bokononism, is thus a necessary lie, created to give people the courage to meet the indifferent, mechanized universe. In the end, *Cat's Cradle* suggests that in an absurd world that can be engineered to annihilate man, humanistic fiction is not an escape from reality but the only moral way to survive it.

Keywords: Bokononism, *foma*, science and ethics, Cold War, literature,

Introduction:

"Nothing in this book is true," Kurt Vonnegut warns the reader, in the opening epigraph of *Cat's Cradle*. Vonnegut sets about from the beginning to violate the normal pact



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between reader and book, creating a world in which no fact is ever given to the reader without being challenged. Written during the very apex of Cold War paranoia and just after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the novel, written in 1963, is an expression of deep cultural fear for the survival of the human species. By the time of the industrialized slaughter of the Second World War, culminating in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Enlightenment conviction that the march of science necessarily brings moral and social progress had clearly been proved wrong. In its wake, a fearsome truth: that Humankind had become smarter than Human, that Human had become capable of orchestrating his own species' own death.

Vonnegut knew that classical realism was inherently lacking in conveying the surreal terror of this historical moment. The Cold War was fundamentally irrational, and a world on the brink of thermonuclear annihilation cannot be adequately represented in logical, linear narratives. As such, *Cat's Cradle* is an apocalyptic satire that calls into question the nature of truth and belief itself. This paper explores the philosophical structure of the novel and how Vonnegut applies Albert Camus' philosophy of the absurd and the invented religion of Bokononism as a means to explore the atomic age trauma. Vonnegut builds up a radical epistemology through the *foma*, which, as the book defines them, are harmless untruths that make the believer brave, kind, and healthy. This study presents a view of *Cat's Cradle* as a stark contrast of the amoral search for objective truth, as in science, that results in the creation of Ice-nine, and the empathetic and narrative-motivated mythologizing inherent in religion and literature. In a bizarre world of global freezing brought on by pursuing the ultimate truth, Vonnegut suggests that fiction's comforting lies are the ultimate refuge of human dignity.

Literature Review:

The scholarship on Kurt Vonnegut's fiction has always focused on the paradox of his highly playful postmodern modes and his seriously ethical preoccupations. In the early years, Vonnegut's novels were often described as cynical science fiction, with the lightness of content and form suggesting that his writing was more about accessibility than depth. But underweight scholars such as Jerome Klinkowitz have been able to re-establish Vonnegut as a major player of the American postmodernism. Klinkowitz proposes that the most important literary contribution of Vonnegut's work is his undermining of the novel's formal conventions, and that in this way he involves the reader directly in the moral creation of meaning. Vonnegut's abandonment of mimetic realism in *Cat's Cradle* isn't a throwback to a nihilistic perspective, Klinkowitz argues, but an essential approach to the problem of mid-century American cultural myths, which were already artificial.

Building on the geopolitical aspects of Vonnegut's writing, Robert T. Tally Jr. places Vonnegut in the anxieties of the nuclear age. Tally focuses on the space and time shifting as ways of extending a criticism of the American military-industrial complex and the American exceptionalism in *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography*. Tally



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labels Vonnegut a “cartographer” of a fractured cultural landscape, with the grand, totalizing stories of scientific progress and divine providence catastrophically falling apart in the shadow of the atomic bomb.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Crusade; Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism* provides the important structure provided by Todd F. Davis that connects the postmodern form with moral philosophy. As Davis persuasively demonstrates, Vonnegut's use of the deconstructive features of postmodernism, including metafiction, fragmentation, and irony, is a loyal service to a traditional, secular humanism. Davis suggests that Vonnegut employs postmodernism as a means to dismantle harmful ideologies (such as nationalism and unbounded scientific positivism) so that there can be a place for simple, humane human interactions. In addition, Peter Freese has examined in detail the epistemological revolt at the centre of *Cat's Cradle*, which views Bokononism as the logical, necessary philosophical counterweight to the destructive and cold positivism of Dr. Felix Hoenikker and the scientific community.

There has been much scholarship done on Vonnegut's postmodern humanism and critique of science; however, there is still potential for synthesizing these observations more directly with existentialist philosophy and narrative theory. This paper addresses the critical work of Klinkowitz, Tally, Davis and Freese; however, intending to intervene by mapping Albert Camus's particular theories of the absurd more directly onto the narrative structure of *foma*. In this way, this study will attempt to prove that *foma* is not just a subject in the novel, but its actual “metafictional” motor; that, in fact, *foma* is Vonnegut's defense of literature.

The Philosophy of the Absurd in the Nuclear Era

It is important to first provide some background on the philosophical emptiness that gives rise to the need for *foma*. The universe of *Cat's Cradle* is strongly influenced by the philosophical ideas of absurdism, especially as developed by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The absurd, according to Camus, is the struggle between the human desire to find value, meaning and order in the world and the deaf, cold, irrational and meaningless world that utterly denies us. It is this confrontation that gives birth to the absurd: the universe is brutally indifferent to human suffering and to morality.

So, Vonnegut brings existential angst to the planet level through the lens of the nuclear age. The novel's theme is that the universe's coldness is turned into weaponry by human scientific achievement. John, a journalist who prefers to call himself Jonah (harking back to the biblical character who was swallowed by a whale), embarks on a quest to investigate the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima to see what important Americans were doing. Through his investigation, he discovers the family of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, a fictionalized combination of Manhattan Project scientists. What Jonah finds is that the men with the power to destroy the world are not underpinned by anything moral or



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grand philosophically. They're just building blocks of the universe and have no idea of the horrific implications of their findings.

This absurdist worldview reaches its climax with the catastrophic events of the novel—first the freezing of the world's oceans, then all the rivers, and finally all life by the novel's fictional form of the isotope Ice-nine. The apocalypse in *Cat's Cradle* doesn't come about through a big, bad plan, the struggle of opposing viewpoints, or divine retribution. Rather, the world comes to an end one tiny accident at a time, one miscommunication at a time, one irrational thing at a time, with some miserable and flawed individuals. Papa Monzano, the ruler of San Lorenzo, takes Ice-nine to alleviate the pain of his terminal cancer, a plane crashes into his castle, his frozen body falls into the sea and in a matter of seconds, the world itself is frozen into a permanent, deadly frost. The apocalypse contains no moral takeaway; there is no great struggle between good and evil. The world ends simply because humankind has a lethal mix of technological genius and emotional stupidity. The human mind is thrown into a paralyzing terror by this ludicrous reality and needs some defense mechanism to keep it from going completely off the deep end. Foma is a Defense mechanism.

The Pathology of Pure Rationality: The Tragedy of Felix Hoenikker

The character of Dr. Felix Hoenikker is the objective, unadorned force of truth, while foma is the life-sustaining force of the lie. Hoenikker is an unspoiled and uncompromising scientist. His view of the universe is that it's a puzzle to be solved, with no ethical or emotional considerations, no human connection or empathy. The coldness is pathologized; his inability to connect with his own children is the same as with isotopes and chemical reactions. The morning that the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, incinerating tens of thousands of civilians, Hoenikker is not at all bothered by the moral weight of his creation. Rather, he is captivated by a length of string and engaged in a game of "cat's cradle."

Hoenikker is the vehicle for a biting attack on the idolization of science in the mid 20th century by Vonnegut. In the Cold War era, objective scientific truth often superseded humanistic investigation and was proclaimed to be the final means of human salvation and national security. But without moral purpose, objective truth is ultimately destructive, as Vonnegut shows. The purpose of the creation of Ice-nine is not to take over the world or to give any army an edge militarily; it's merely the result of an eccentric general asking Hoenikker whether it is possible to remove mud from the battlefield. He just makes it up as a puzzle to pass the time as a way to freeze the whole planet.

The novel argues that the uncompromising search for truth is a sickness because truths of the universe are deadly for human beings. Science is the investigation of the fundamental mechanisms of the universe, and in doing so, it exposes the illusions of life that make it possible to live and work. After the successful testing of the atomic bomb, one of his colleagues says to Hoenikker, "Well, now, for the first time, science has known sin. When a



fellow scientist tells him, after the successful testing of the atomic bomb, "Well, now, for the first time, science has known sin," Hoenikker responds with chilling sincerity, "What is sin? This complete lack of moral language shows the problem with a completely empirical worldview. Perseverance in uncovering atomic structures and chemical bonds has unwittingly left humankind on the verge of obsolescence. Ice-nine is a cold, hard and fatal objective reality of the universe. Humanity must turn away from the empirical truth if it is to survive.

Bokononism: The Theology of Harmless Untruths

Bokononism is the fictional religion of the people on the poor island nation of San Lorenzo, a religion that directly conflicts with the truths of science, which sees death. A religion which begins with absolute theological transparency is totally new and founded by a cynical, but also very empathetic, intellectual called Lionel Boyd Johnson, who changes his name to Bokonon. Bokononism is a religion that is different from the traditional ones in that it declares itself to be a set of lies. The opening lines of the Books of Bokonon are as direct and metafictional as can be: "All the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." The epistemology of Bokononism is based on the foma: the comfortable lies that are used to comfort, give courage and a sense of community for people who are oppressed under the burden of poverty, disease, and political persecution. Having so much empirical truth could not be borne by the people of San Lorenzo and Bokonon decided to give them the objective truth: The ground is barren, the people are hungry, the government is brutally corrupt. He assembled instead a complicated system of religious ceremonies, vocabulary and cosmologies to project a fiction of linear narrative onto a world that is actually quite chaotic, but that can be made very comfortable.

What makes Bokononism so brilliant is the complicated and playful vocabulary that allows it to break down the dangerous ideologies of the real world. In Bokonon, the idea of the karass is introduced (a group of people who are "cosmically bound" together to perform God's will "without ever knowing what God's will is"). This idea gives believers a sense of purpose and belonging: they are a cog in a big, God-moving machine and, whether they understand what it does or not, they are vital to it. On the other hand, Bokonon condemns the granfalloon, a "false karass," or a random group of people without any real spiritual bond. Vonnegut names countries, parties and corporations as *granfalloons*. The granfalloon is a sort of withering attack on nationalism and tribalism – the very ideology that is driving the Cold War. Bokononism undermines the idea of the nation-state as an artificial, meaningless division: it implies that humans are part of invisible, compassionate networks that ignore man-made boundaries.

Moreover, Bokononism is based on physical contact and oneness in the community by applying the least of one's bare soles to the bare soles of a different individual. Boko-Maru is an extreme expression of human tenderness in a world of people who are cold and



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mechanical, like Felix Hoenikker, and violent and dictatorial like Papa Monzano. It's a physical expression of empathy, a transient catharsis of joy for the folks of San Lorenzo in an objective world of their own miseries.

The Metaphor of the *Cat's Cradle*: Deconstructing the Illusion of Meaning

The novel's central metaphor, the game of cat's cradle, is the ultimate indictment of mankind's desperate attempts to impose meaning on the universe that is nothing more than a ravaging force. The game is played by looping a string between the fingers, forming a geometric pattern. On the day of the atomic bombing, Felix Hoenikker tries to play this game with his little boy, Newt. Years ago, cynical, dwarf painter Newt paints a dark, abstracted cat's cradle. Outraged, Newt points out the absurdity of the game: "A *cat's cradle* is a bunch of X's between two people's hands: little kids look and look and look at all the X's... And? *No damn cat and no damn cradle.*

It is this realization that is the epistemological heart of the novel and devastating in its effect. Cat's cradle is a metaphor for every human system of significance, whether it's a political ideology, a scientific theory, a religious dogma, or a national identity. Humanity weaves elaborate and intricate patterns from the thread of human experience and clings to the illusion that it is a pattern of reality, of divinity, or of fundamental truth. However, the structures are completely devoid when closely and objectively examined. The universe has no meaning; there isn't even a cat and there isn't even a cradle.

But what makes Vonnegut a genius is that he does not go along with the nihilism this realization suggests. Newt has a point that the empty string is empty, but as the novel keeps reminding us, objective truth is deadly. Bokomonism is aware of the empty string, but it says it is appropriate and good for us to play the game anyway. San Lorenzo's religious ceremonies are basically a group game of cat's cradle; they are elaborate, man-made patterns which the people choose to create in order to make life endurable. Vonnegut argues that the absurd must not be cause for despair but rather a "conscious and compassionate foma. Even though we know that the cat isn't in the cradle, we must build it, for in a cold universe, the building of the cradle is the only source of warmth.

Foma as Metafictional Justification: The Defense of Literature

Vonnegut takes the notion of the harmless untruth to a theological level, performing an extraordinary metafictional move in the process: *Cat's Cradle* can be read as a strong philosophical argument for the novelistic form itself. Postmodernity was not kind to fiction; critics decried the artificiality of the novel, suggesting that it was a bourgeois indulgence that couldn't capture the chaotic, disjointed reality of the late twentieth century. But Vonnegut avoids this criticism by fully accepting the artificiality of his work. The opening epigraph, "There is not a word in this book that is true," is a direct parallel to the first lines of *The Books*



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of *Bokonon*. Vonnegut makes it clear that writing fiction is a religion and that both are systems of foma, meant to give the reader a structure within which to survive.

Vonnegut says literature is the greatest foma. The novel is a complex fib, a series of events concocted for nonexistent characters—a series of events made up by an author who is playing God. But when Bokononism lies to its cast of characters, its lies make inhabitants of San Lorenzo brave and kind and healthy, and when fiction lies to you, its lies provide you with a psychological retreat. In this story, Vonnegut succeeds in tackling the most dreaded fears of the Cold War, nuclear destruction, government cronyism, and the inhumanity of technology, while not destroying the spirit of his readers. The black comedy that runs throughout the text acts as a kind of protective barrier, letting the reader experience the joy of narrative play while facing the apocalypse.

As the Bokononist that he is, Vonnegut understands that a book about human evil and the looming apocalypse, pure of "fact" and "objectivity," would only hasten the world's downward spiral into self-destruction. He provides a perfectly crafted lie, instead. The novel implies that the writer's foremost ethical duty is not to reflect a mirror back at the world's ugly objective reality, but to offer the "foma" that is needed to survive it. Fiction is not a flight from reality, but a constructive and compassionate fight against the immobilizing fear of the absurd.

Conclusion:

Cat's Cradle ends with a chilling, yet hugely defiant image. Ice-nine has frozen the world solid and nearly all of humankind has died in a silent, apocalyptic instant. The story's narrator, Jonah, finds Bokonon by the side of the road, finishing the last line of his holy books. Jonah inquires what he is writing, and Bokonon responds, "If I were a younger man, I'd write a history of human stupidity. Then he would go to the peak of the highest mountain, lie on his back with his history book as a pillow, and take out some of the Ice-nine and freeze himself into a statue that would thumb its nose at "You Know Who".

This is the last illogical act that encompasses the philosophical genius of the novel. Now confronted with the final, irrefutable absurdity, the actual freezing of the universe, which is an act of human folly, Bokonon does not seek forgiveness, nor does he give in to weeping despair. Instead, he has in mind one more showy act of rebellion. Rather than succumbing to the universe's misfortunes, he chooses to die as a self-aware, ironic victim in a Cosmic joke. *Cat's Cradle* is a systematic demolition of the modern faith in objective, empirical truth, and a proof that the naked truth of the universe is basically unfriendly to humankind. The novel tells the tragedy of Felix Hoenikker and the disastrous release of Ice-nine and thus warns that a society dedicated to empirical knowledge at the expense of human empathy is doomed to annihilation. Vonnegut's answer is Bokononism, a philosophy, and the epistemology of foma. Humanity can find a space of dignity in the void, through harmless lies, through knowing the



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insufficiency of our geopolitical systems, through valuing personal, human relationships more than knowledge. In the end, *Cat's Cradle* is a brilliant metafictional novel that argues for the need for literature. All this is to say, as Vonnegut says, you tell yourself stories, you tell yourself beautiful, big, elaborate stories, out of string, to keep warm in a world that conspires to freeze.

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