

# Kurt Vonnegut's Postmodern Peace Strategy in *Cat's Cradle*

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## 1. Preface

*Cat's Cradle* (1963) is supposed to have been written by a narrator-writer who originally intended to write a book about the day when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and name it *The Day the World Ended*. Instead he described how the world ended with another scientific invention, *ice-nine*. This apocalyptic setting might reflect an impending crisis during the cold war in the 1950s and impress us with Vonnegut's pessimistic view of the world. Yet it was actually during the Kennedy administration and the Khrushchev Thaw that the book was published. The important image of a cat's cradle as a long played children's game and the playful tone even of the cynical aphorisms given by Bokonon, the religious leader, also suggest that the book should convey a more constructive message than the pessimistic view suggested by the apocalyptic setting.

Vonnegut actually uses fantastic or even absurd elements or settings not as absolute facts but as his postmodern artifice to create a self-deconstructing narrative. Mary Sue Schribner analyzes Vonnegut's third novel, *Mother Night* (1961) and the subsequent *Cat's Cradle* and explains, "They [*Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle*] claim first that novels cannot be founded on fact because novelists cannot discover facts, or truth if defined as fact. Moreover, they claim that harmless untruths, or fiction, fend off depravity" (177). In fact, Eliot Rosewater asserts to Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), "I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful *new* lies, or people just aren't going to want to go on living" (101), and Vonnegut makes the most of his sense of humor fully to utilize "harmless untruths, or fiction," in order to keep a good humane balance against a cynical, often unbearable reality.

An apocalyptic setting like the one in *Cat's Cradle* also allows Vonnegut to underline what he warns against while maintaining human possibilities in the fictitiousness of the setting. Vonnegut uses it as his favorite and inspiring fictive setting for his novels repeatedly, as in *Slapstick* (1976) and *Galápagos* (1985).

In this essay, therefore, I will carefully analyze how Vonnegut's imagination in the apocalyptic setting of *Cat's Cradle* works and how his postmodern artifice deconstructs that apocalyptic ending and its pessimistic view of the world, so that I can clarify his postmodern peace strategy as well as his role as a writer at the end.

## 2. The Deconstruction of Science by a Cat's Cradle

In the interview with William Rodney Allen, Vonnegut refers to his disillusionment with modern science at the sight of the devastating catastrophes caused by the bombing of Dresden and the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima: "I was sickened by this use of the technology that I had such great hopes for . . . It was a spiritual horror of that sort which I still carry today" (232). His fear of modern science can be easily recognized in any of his novels since his first novel, *Player Piano* (1952), and it is also true with *Cat's Cradle*.

Dr. Breed is one of the executive members of the General Forge and Foundry Company, where Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the fathers of the atomic bomb, developed atomic bombs. Dr. Breed glorifies science and says that "if everybody would study science more, there wouldn't be all the trouble there was" (24). But *ice-nine*, which Dr. Breed praises in terms of "the extraordinary novelty of the ways in which Felix was likely to approach an old problem" (48-49), brings the final catastrophe in this book. What was wrong with Dr. Hoenikker is intimated when Miss Naomi Faust, Dr. Breed's secretary, confesses to the narrator-writer, "Dr. Breed keeps telling me the main thing with Dr. Hoenikker was truth . . . I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person" (54). Todd Davis rightly analyzes this trouble of Miss Faust's: "Hoenikker represents Vonnegut's greatest fears: a man who has a mind so brilliant that he can find the means to destroy the world, but who has no conception of right or wrong, of moral value" (64).

The modern science in *Cat's Cradle* is thus treated as an apparent threat to human beings, and the image of a cat's cradle is undoubtedly related to it when Dr. Hoenikker makes a cat's cradle in the same casual manner that he makes his scientific inventions without showing much concern either about the devastating result of the atomic bomb or with the result of his cat's cradle. He tries to play it with his youngest child, Newt, on the very day when the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, singing, "when the wind blows, the cray-dull will rock. If the bough breaks, the cray-dull will fall. Down will come cray-dull, catsy, and all" (12). The song is the original version of the Mother Goose rhyme, "Rock-a-Bye Baby." In its recent version, the last line is changed: "But mama will catch you, cradle and all," so that the cruelty of the wind will be dispelled. Nevertheless, Dr. Hoenikker casually uses the original version, revealing his indifference and irresponsibility towards human lives.

Later, Newt paints a gruesome picture with many black scratches and asserts, "A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands" (165-66). X's represent all the lives crossed out by the atomic bomb which his father made with his hands. A bunch of X's also reminds us of a molecular structure, not only of the atomic bomb but also of *ice-nine*, another scientific invention which Dr.

Hoenikker created “[i]n his playful way” (43), too. The image of a cat’s cradle is thus generalized into any ferocious or fatal scientific power and expresses Vonnegut’s warning of the danger of modern science in general.

Though the negative image of a cat’s cradle cannot be neglected, it should not be overlooked, either, that it is originally a children’s game played over many generations. John L. Simons pays attention to this historical role of a cat’s cradle and offers an interesting interpretation besides the first-hand nihilistic warning over modern science:

What Newt fails to understand is that cat’s cradles are not meant to be “real” in a scientific or factual sense. Rather they are games for us to play with and to act upon. They are useful fictions.  
(38)

Simons stresses that if one pulls a wrong string and loses a cat’s cradle, one can still keep a loop and make another pattern. According to Simons, if the rhyme Dr. Hoenikker sings to his son, Newt, ends with the loss of a cat’s cradle and a pussycat in it, there will be another cat’s cradle. This altering perpetuity suggests that *Cat’s Cradle’s* ending with the destruction of the world by *ice-nine* can be retold in another way.

With his playful writing style as well as an originally innocent image of a cat’s cradle, Vonnegut invites the reader to play with this apocalyptic story. Modern science can end the world as the book warns us but that is not all that the book was intended to describe for us. While representing the danger of modern science, Vonnegut uses the image of a cat’s cradle to induce us to reconsider how we should cope with modern science lest we should have such a catastrophe. He uses the image of a cat’s cradle to deconstruct the danger of modern science as his postmodern peace strategy open for the reader and the future. And because of this peace strategy, the book maintains humanistic hope in spite of its apocalyptic ending and pessimistic view of the world.

### **3. The Deconstruction of a Religion by Bokonomism**

The same postmodern peace strategy will be observed in Vonnegut’s dealing with Bokonomism. Bokonomism is the religion believed in by the people in the island called San Lorenzo, and stands for the opposite point of view to modern science as is suggested by the circumstances of its creation, which Julian Castle, one of the old islanders, explains:

Bokonon, cynically and playfully, invented a new religion . . . . Well, when it became evident that no governmental or economic reform was going to make the people much less miserable, the

religion became the one real instrument of hope. 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. (172)

Bokononism started where all efforts for modernization failed. Modernization includes modern science and its pursuit of truth so that Bokononism heads in the opposite direction — for the religion based on lies. Both modern science and his religion are equally supposed to make people happy but ironically, they equally fail in realizing their purpose. This is because Bokonon's cynical and playful manner in his religion is fundamentally the same as Dr. Hoenikker's playful and irresponsible manner in science. Both of them lack proper respect for men — a basic necessity of humanism.

Vonnegut coined humorous terms and jocular phrases for Bokononism so that Bokonon's cynical view of the world and ironical manners would be impressed. Because Vonnegut's purpose is clear, these terms and phrases can be easily classified into three groups.

The first group is related to Bokonon's thoroughly cynical definition of reality. Bokonon claims that reality is governed by an arbitrary power beyond men and that if something unbearable happens or if circumstances turn out to be outrageous, men cannot do anything about it: for example, *karass* [a team of people organized to “do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing” (2)], *duprass* [“a *karass* composed of only two persons” (86)], *granfalloon* [a false *karass*], *wampeter* [“the pivot of a *karass*” (52) and “the members of its *karass* revolve about it in the majestic chaos of a spiral nebula” (52)], *kan-kan* [an instrument which brings one into one's particular *karass*], *wrang-wrang* [“a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line . . . to an absurdity” (78)], *zah-mah-ki-bo* [“Fate — inevitable destiny” (184)], *vin-dit* [“a sudden, very personal shove in the direction of Bokononism” (69)]. What is more, Bokononists whisper, “*Busy, busy, busy,*” (65) “whenever we think of how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is” (66). They would also say, “[a]s it was *supposed* to happen” (84), in the place of “[a]s it happened” (84), for everything is after all predestined by Fate, which is beyond men's control and understanding. And Fate is sometimes so ferocious that they call it *pool-pah*, which will be translated as a “shit storm” (244) or “wrath of God” (244). The meanings of those coined words and phrases in this group emphasize the strong power of Fate beyond men's control though their funny sound and expression are taunting enough to undermine their original meanings.

While the first group is related to the cruel reality beyond men's control, the second group describes men's inner world. *Boko-maru*, “the mingling of awareness” (158), is the most important relationship for Bokononists. And for its practice, Bokononists touch their feet, sole to sole, to experience an empathy, soul to soul. The pun and the particular posture of *boko-maru* make this relationship look farcical. Moreover,

they emphasize sexless pure innocent mingling without restriction so much that Mona calls the narrator-writer “A *sin-wat*” (208), meaning “A man who wants all of somebody’s love” (208), just because he wants her to love him alone as his wife to be. Accordingly, however humane it may look, Bokononists’ ideal of men’s pure inner relationship is depicted as too absurdly extreme to be taken seriously.

Both Bokononists’ cynical view of reality and their ideal humane inner relationship are so extreme that there is a big gap between them. How to bridge this gap is the most fundamental issue in Bokononism and the third group of terms and phrases represent it well. For example, Bokonon claims, “a really good religion / Is a form of treason” (173) and advises “Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy” (preface, no page). As *foma* is noted as “[h]armless untruths” (preface, no page), it seems to be good and meaningful to live by lies. The word *foma* also appears in this book again and again and impresses us with its importance in our lives. Yet, Bokonon warns about his own claims and his *foma* in the very first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon*: “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies” (5). His religion is not supposed to be believed in as it is, at all, from the very beginning.

Vonnegut’s coined words and aphoristic phrases are so fabulously impressive that he succeeds in presenting his fictional idea of Bokononism with his fictional people in San Lorenzo very vividly. On the other hand, those words and phrases are playful enough to make everything related to them just a joke. Moreover, *foma* are not always “harmless untruths.” When the end of the world is impending, for example, Bokonon tells the survivors of the first catastrophe, “God was surely trying to kill them, possibly because He was through with them, and that they should have the good manners to die” (273) and the survivors all commit suicide. The narrator-writer gasps at the sight, “What a cynic!” (273) but it is not Bokonon who is to blame but people who believe in Bokonon without thinking for themselves to distinguish good lies from bad ones or to discern how to use Bokonon’s lies (*foma*) for their better life and future.

As nothing in this book should be taken at face value, *The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon* should not be taken as it is, either. The book is titled “What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?” (245) and it consists of only one word, “Nothing” (245). This book seems perfectly to correspond to the catastrophic ending of this novel. However, as we have already discussed, this ending of the novel is only one result of a cat’s cradle. In another situation, a thoughtful man may hope for more for mankind on earth and may bring out a more constructive ending.

Likewise, the final scene of *Cat’s Cradle* promoted by what Bokonon presents to the narrator-writer as his final sentence for *The Books of Bokonon* should not be taken at face value:

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. (287)

Bokonon's final scenario is cynical and helpless even if he makes himself a statue of resistance to God's inhumanity because committing suicide is after all nothing but taking a human life away. However, its subjective mood suggests that Bokonon will not do what he describes. And nobody, including the narrator-writer and the reader, is expected to do so, either. As the narrator-writer interprets *The Books of Bokonon* and warns that "[a]nyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either" (5-6), whatever Bokonon tells are Vonnegut's well-calculated white lies and the reader is only expected to deconstruct them for his own better life and future.

In fact, Vonnegut directly warns, too, in the very preface of *Cat's Cradle*, "Nothing in this book is true" (preface, no page). Just as *The Books of Bokonon* is not supposed to be believed in, Vonnegut's wonderfully imaginative world and story in *Cat's Cradle* should not be appreciated at face value. This is why Jerome Klinkowitz explains; "meaning lies not in the content of a novel or the materials of a religion, but rather in the business of dealing with them" (54). What Vonnegut writes are, after all, what Eliot Rosewater calls "wonderful *new* lies." The image of a cat's cradle invites the reader to deconstruct the apocalyptic setting of this book and reconstruct a new ending for himself. Bokononism with its enthusiastic but treacherous words and phrases similarly induces the reader to deconstruct the religion and reconsider those words and phrases to enrich his own life and future.

#### 4. Vonnegut's Hope in the Role of the Narrator-Writer

In his own life, Vonnegut experienced many sudden irrational deaths, such as his mother's committing suicide, his sister's early death from cancer soon after her husband's death in a traffic accident, besides the terrifying experience of the bombing of Dresden during World War II. Such experiences must have sometimes driven him into the necessity of inventing "wonderful *new* lies" to cope with the reality and continue leading a good life. Yet those "*new* lies" cannot be final solution to real problems. This is the reason why "the conclusions to Vonnegut's novels develop out of, and preserve, a complex awareness of the interplay between imagination and death" (166), as Robert Uphaus notes.

In his work, Vonnegut employs his imagination to offer wonderful *new* lies to cope with the cruel reality filled with so many irrational deaths. In this way, he clearly demonstrates the reality we have to meet and yet, with the help of the humanity of his imaginative *new* lies, he does not scare the reader away from it. Still, what Vonnegut presents is only the material with which the reader is supposed to work out a future

unlike the one at the end of this novel. Our final solution is left for us.

This book works, therefore, as a canary in the mineshaft and raises an alarm over our danger so that men can correct their mistakes in time. And this role of the book is suggested by the narrator-writer, who is supposed to have written this book, with the opening sentence, "Call me Jonah" (1). This sentence doubtlessly echoes the famous first line of Melville's *Moby Dick*, "Call me Ishmael." John Tomedi recognizes Jonah's role as a survivor like Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, who "tells his own message of the inscrutable workings of the universe" (45), but he also focuses on the difference between Ishmael's role and Jonah's in the Bible and points out Jonah's role of "saving the town of Nineveh through preaching" (46). He claims that *The Book of Jonah* "shows the prophet in action; it shows the people of Nineveh changing their ways" (46).

In *The Holy Bible*, God first made Jonah proclaim to the people in Nineveh about the destruction of the city with his fierce anger at them, but later decided not to destroy Nineveh because its people changed their attitudes with deep regret. When "Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry" (Jonah 4:1), God told Jonah, "Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:11). The narrator-writer's calling himself Jonah thus suggests Vonnegut's humanistic hope.

In *The Books of Bokonon*, one of the Calypsos goes:

Someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end,  
 And our God will take things back that He to us did lend.  
 And if, on that sad day, you want to scold our God,  
 Why go right ahead and scold Him.  
 He'll just smile and nod. (270)

Unlike the God of *The Holy Bible*, Bokonon's God lacks any caring feeling toward men. Yet, *The Books of Bokonon* are treated as *foma* from the very beginning. As they are a false bible, their god is also a false one. In his postmodern artifice to deconstruct Bokononism, Vonnegut allows the reader to hope that God in our actual world will be concerned about us like God in *The Holy Bible* and that his book, *Cat's Cradle*, can work like Jonah's prophet so that we can still save this world in time if only we can rightly correct our behaviors.

Vonnegut's unyielding hope against his pessimistic view is also observed in the narrator-writer's announcement that he will keep writing under any disadvantage: "When a man becomes a writer, I think he takes on a sacred obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed" (231). He does

not think that a writer has a right to strike and keeps writing even at the sight of the catastrophe caused by *ice-nine*. The narrator-writer's perpetual efforts to be a writer must represent Vonnegut's declaration of his own attitudes as a writer and affirm that neither the miserable ending of the book caused by *ice-nine* or the one described by Bokonon is Vonnegut's final ending.

## 5. Vonnegut's Postmodern Peace Strategy in the 1960s

In 1947, the Doomsday Clock was hung on The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' office in the University of Chicago and its still announces how many minutes are left before the hypothetical global catastrophe. So far, the smallest number of minutes was two in 1953, when the United States and the Soviet Union accelerated their nuclear arms race with their thermonuclear devices. In the late 1950s, the world was considerably threatened with an impending nuclear war and the annihilation of the human race caused by the spreading radioactive contamination as its result. It is well embodied in *On the Beach*, a 1957 post-apocalyptic novel to describe the final days on the earth after the nuclear war. The novel was then filmed in 1959 and received a great response from all over the world.

Vonnegut must have been conscious of this danger when he wrote *Cat's Cradle*. In this book, the final catastrophe is caused by a piece of *ice-nine* which Dr. Hoenikker's elder son, Frank, handed to "Papa" Monzano, President of the Republic of San Lorenzo, in exchange for the position of Minister of Science and Progress. Yet Dr. Hoenikker's other children, Angela and Newt handed their pieces to the United States and the Soviet Union respectively for their lovers. In another game of political cat's cradle, therefore, one of these other pieces of *ice-nine* in the United States and the Soviet Union may cause doomsday.

Though it is undeniable that the book is influenced by the cold war, the playful image of a cat's cradle with many possible results shows that *Cat's Cradle* was actually published during the Kennedy years. John F. Kennedy was an overwhelmingly popular president among the young people and brought a strong anticipation of a better world. In fact, on June 3 and 4, 1961, soon after taking over the presidency, Kennedy had a summit meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna and in 1963, when *Cat's Cradle* was published, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty. As a result, the Doomsday Clock was set back to as much as twelve minutes to midnight.

The social optimism and the hopeful atmosphere of the Kennedy era are not only well reflected in the brightly playful images and tone of *Cat's Cradle*. The book's light-heartedness is supported by many good acts of the characters, too — for example, when Julian Castle and his son, Philip "had set out on foot for the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle to give whatever hope and mercy was theirs to give" (285) even when they knew the impending danger of *ice-nine*. The narrator-writer cheers for Angela, who "had picked up a clarinet . . . and had begun to play it at once, without concerning herself as to whether the



mouthpiece might be contaminated with *ice-nine*" (285), because playing her clarinet indicates that Angela tried to express her cordially humane emotions at the catastrophic sight. Hazel Crosby also demonstrates not only a great amount of motherly caring for other people but also practical courage and common sense about survival. If their attitudes are as helpless in relation to the destructive power of *ice-nine* as the jeer toward God that Bokonon describes in his final book, they are far sounder and healthier because, unlike Bokonon's negative insult, they decidedly embody positive humanity.

After Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, the Doomsday Clock was set back at two and a half minutes to midnight, the second shortest after 1953. Now the world is more dangerous than the United States in 1963, we are all the more urgently required to reconstruct *Cat's Cradle* in a wise way. Vonnegut highlights the dangers we should be careful of as well as how strong men can be even in such a desperate situation as the ending of the world by *ice-nine*. It is our obligation to find a proper answer.

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## Kurt Vonnegut's Postmodern Peace Strategy in *Cat's Cradle*

カート・ヴォネガットの『猫のゆりかご』におけるポストモダンの平和的戦略

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【キーワード】 ヴォネガット、猫のゆりかご、ポストモダン、平和文学、戦争文学、終末思想

カート・ヴォネガットの長編第四作『猫のゆりかご』（1963）において、作家である語り手は当初、広島に原爆が投下された日に関する本を書き、『世界が終わった日』と題して出版することを意図していた。ところが原爆開発に携わった科学者のひとり、フェリクス・ハイネッカー博士の行動を調べるうちに、博士が作り出したもうひとつの科学的発明、アイス＝ナインが世界を崩壊させる日を目撃し、それについての本を書くことになる。このように『猫のゆりかご』は終末思想を題材としているため、対ソ連の冷戦状態が悪化し、核戦争によって世界が終焉するという危機感が現実的脅威になっていた、1950年代の世界情勢や当時のアメリカ社会に対する、ヴォネガットの悲観的な見解を反映したものとして受けとめられがちである。

しかしながらヴォネガットはポストモダンの作家であり、彼の作品は決して見かけほど単純ではない。実際、終末論的な悲劇を描き出すヴォネガットの語り口は、一見おふざけと取れるほど明るいうえ、見開きには、「この本に書かれていることはすべて嘘である」と、その内容を言葉通り受けとめないようにという警告が記されている。これは作中で描かれるボコノン教の扱いにも窺えることで、「勇氣、親切心、健康、幸福をもたらす『嘘』によって生きるべし」と、「嘘」の重要性を説く端から、「良い宗教とは人を裏切るもの」と、自身の言葉の真実性を否定し、その脱構築を促す。さらに、原題に用いられる「猫のゆりかご（綾取り）」も相殺しあう、相反した性質を内包している。なぜなら、綾取りは綾を取り違えてゆりかごを壊しても、同じ紐で再度綾を取り、ゆりかごを作り直せるので、交差する黒い紐によって無数の死が象徴されるときも、アイス＝ナインが終末をもたらすこの物語を新たに語り直す可能性を示唆しているからである。

従って『猫のゆりかご』の題材に1950年代の冷戦を反映した終末思想が使用されていても、ヴォネガットのポストモダンの著作姿勢には、作品が発表された当時のアメリカ大統領、ジョン・F・ケネディがアメリカにもたらした肯定的な明るさや、未来に向けた視線が感じられるのである。そこで本論では、作品が扱う科学的発明とボコノン教、さらには「猫のゆりかご」の象徴を詳細に分析し、脱構築することで、ヴォネガットがこの作品で試みているポストモダンの平和的戦略を明らかにし、そのうえで現代という時代情勢に照らして作品を再評価した。