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Collision between Science and Religion: A Critical Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the intuitive intimacy of human in the novel, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), of Vonnegut. It also seeks to show that mankind's blind faith in the benefits of scientific discoveries, without taking into consideration the ethical implications of these discoveries, can lead to disaster and that, in contrast, the practice of focusing on our better nature leads, more often than not, to better human relations and, therefore, may be preferable, in spite of the fact that such optimistic perceptions may differ from reality. Vonnegut's primary interest is not so much in the delineation of external events as in the exploration of those negative emotional undercurrents which constitute the darker side of human nature and underlie man's inhumanity to man.

Keywords: Intimacy, Human, Reality, Faith, Science, Inhumanity

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Kurt Vonnegut, one of the most famous twentieth century American writers, combines satiric social commentary and black comedy with surrealist and science fiction elements in his novels. Known for his outspoken political opinions, Vonnegut also produces a host of essays, articles, and short stories. A number of his works have been translated into television or film. He is also a graphic artist, and illustrated a number of his works himself. He seeks to show is that mankind's blind faith in the benefits of scientific discoveries, without taking into consideration the ethical implications of these discoveries, can lead to disaster and that, in contrast, the practice of focusing on our better nature leads, more often than not, to better human relations and the fact that such optimistic perceptions may differ from reality. In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut hit full stride for the first time. In this jazzy, meta-fictional, Zen-influenced, mock-apocalyptic tour de force, he combines the tight control over his material afforded by the first-person point of view, which he has discovered in *Mother Night,* with the spectacular, zany inventiveness that distinguished *The Sirens of Titan.* The result is something new.

The major focus of the novel is on epistemology: the narrator John, who finds it increasingly difficult to determine what is real and what is illusory discovers that life is very much like the children's game of cat's cradle. In *Cat's Cradle* there are, in a sense, three writers at work. The novel begins with John's attempt to write one book and ends with his having written about another incident. However, he defends the writer's job: "When a man becomes a writer, I think he takes on a sacred obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed" (189). John has been working on a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*, the story of August 6, 1945, the day an atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima. As material for his work, John wants to find out what went on in the household of the late Dr.

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Felix Hoenikker, one of the fathers of the bomb, that day. Accordingly, he writes to Newton ("Newt") Hoenikker, one of the three children of the scientist. Newt writes long letters in reply which reveal that the father had little interest neither in the bomb that day, nor in his children on any day. Thus John becomes connected with Felix's three children: Newt, the aptly-named midget who writes him letters; Frank, the secretive, reputed gangster, who is supposedly dead; and Angela, the too-tall, ugly, eldest child who acted as mother to her brothers.

John writes a letter to Newt seeking information about what happened in the family on the day the bomb is dropped. The following reply which Newt gives to the letter amply demonstrates that Felix Hoenikker is more interested in playing cat's cradle than in knowing about the devastating result of the dropping of the bomb. Dr. Hoenikker is an amoral scientist who is more concerned with developing the doomsday device, ice-nine, than with bringing up normal children. He becomes a father of three children but never is he their father in the true sense of the term. The children are distorted emotionally and even physically by social, political, and parental forces.

In fact, Hoenikker's life is like that of a robot than that of a normal human being. Another view expressed by critics is that Hoenikker is winsomely innocent. Hoenikker's invention of the bomb itself is an act of innocent play. His lab is filled with toys and gadgets, passing fancies which spark his interest and which he pursues in the name of pure research. In the midst of his wartime work on the bomb, he suddenly becomes interested in dime-store turtles: "'When they pull in their heads,' he ponders, 'do their spines buckle on contract?'" (23) and forgets his atomic project completely. However, in spite of such funny incidents, it is not so funny that Hoenikker's winsome play, ostensibly for no real purpose, produced the horrors of atomic war. With a single-minded devotion to his own interests, Felix Hoenikker

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removed his daughter Angela from high school in her sophomore year to serve as his housekeeper.

Denied the normal experiences of a normal young girl, Angela sought happiness so desperately that she did not feel any qualms when a handsome man, Harrison C. Connors, asked her to marry him in return for her share of her father's death dealing ice-nine. It is quite apparent that Angela does not feel any moral doubts about such an action because her father and mentor are amoral. Divorced from almost all human contact, Dr. Hoenikker plays with ideas as a child plays with his companions. He produces the bomb as casually as he used to make a cat's cradle out of string, and seems to have been absolutely unaware of the moral consequences for all mankind of his research. This moral irresponsibility of scientists is one of Vonnegut's great themes from the beginning of his career. He explains how his experiences in Second World War are a profound disillusionment.

Frank, Hoenikker's second child, is a more complicated example of how his father's amorality and complete devotion to science distorted his children into grotesques. Jack, the owner of Jack's Hobby Shop where Frank works as a young man, explains that the boy "didn't have any home life" (69), but accepts the shop as his real home. Unable to find any love at home from his detached, disinterested father, Frank sought love from an older woman, one who would ameliorate his feelings of inferiority and rejection. He begins having sexual relationships with the wife of his good friend, Jack. Evidently, this lifestyle proves unsatisfactory because Frank soon begins to seek a newer, better world to live in. One solution to his inability to adjust to the real world is to create a fantastic little country built of plywood, an island as perfectly rectangular as a township in Kansas. But such a world is too small for the boy to lose himself in. Perhaps as a defence mechanism that would enable him to avoid any more pain, Frank begins to model himself after his father; for only by being as

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coldly detached and indifferent to the rest of humanity is it possible to live without feeling any pain.

Hoenikker's youngest child, Newt, seems to be an even sadder case than Frank. He is physically wounded at a very early age by his father, who, for some unexplainable reason, had decided one day to play with his son. When he approached Newt in order to show him a cat's cradle, however, the child screamed in horror at what he saw. Looking at his father at close range, Newt observes that "His pores looked as big as craters on the moon. His ears and nostrils are stuffed with hair. Cigar smoke made him smell like the mouth of Hell. So close up, my father is the ugliest thing I had even seen. I dream about it all the time" (21). Newt says that he still dreams about this incident - a disquieting episode that obviously had a profound effect upon him. His father increases his son's discomfort and deepened this wound by sending the midget-sized Newt to a "special school for grotesque children" (228). The very last thing Newt needed is to be made to feel different, but this realization probably never occurred to Felix Hoenikker, who is so engrossed with science that anything else in life is of secondary importance. Newton draws paintings which cynically depict the meaninglessness of life. Named after Sir Isaac Newton, Newt's paintings prove the law of gravity still is operative when Julian Castle throws Newt's picture down a waterfall. Frank, a morally irresponsible technician named after Benjamin Franklin, refuses to accept responsibility for his share of ice-nine and prefers to work on an electrical generator that would have fascinated his namesake. Angela is a homely woman denied the normal pleasures of adolescence by her selfish father.

After Felix Hoenikker dies, his children try to find happiness. The homely Angela chooses a handsome husband; Frank finds the glory and power he has always desired by assuming the position of Minister of Science and Progress on San Lorenzo; and Newt selects a beautiful Russian dancer. When Newt reveals to John that his sister Angela gave her portion

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of ice-nine to her husband in return for marrying her and that the two are not happily married, John is astonished. Frank does not really command the respect in San Lorenzo that he so earnestly seeks. When Newt, with the same degree of earnestness as his brother, barters his portion of ice-nine to a Russian midget in return for her assurances of love and devotion, he too is doomed to be disappointed. In reality, she is a Russian spy who, at forty-two, is old enough to be his mother. John goes to Ilium, New York, to visit the General Forge and Foundry Company, where Felix has done most of his research. There he learns that Felix had been working on ice-nine, a process for crystallizing ice, to keep the Marines from having to fight in the mud.

In *Kurt Vonnegut: The Gospel from Outer Space,* Clark Mayo observes, "Here is the ultimate threat in an Absurd Universe: not even the physical world is stable."(29) The nightmare quality of ice-nine which haunts John is that once used, it would start a chain reaction which would turn all of the world's water to ice. Soon afterwards, "As it is supposed to happen" (76), John sees a newspaper supplement on the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo. Two things strike him about this: first, the photograph of Mona Aamons Monzano, a heartbreakingly beautiful blonde mulatto who is the adopted daughter of the island's president; second, the revelation that the Republic's Minister of Science and Progress is none other than the long vanished Frank Hoenikker. He is then assigned to do a magazine article on San Lorenzo, again "As it is supposed to happen" (77), and while flying there meets on the plane the new ambassador to San Lorenzo, Horlick Minton, and his wife Claire; along with H. Lowe and Hazel Crosby on their way to San Lorenzo to build a bike factory; and Newt and Angela, who are going to Frank's wedding with Mona.

Monzano's suicide with ice-nine raises important issues about who should have power. The most dangerous secret weapon the world possesses has fallen into the hands of an old, infirm, semi-invalid who is greedy and self-indulgent. Worse yet, the man are suicidal

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from extreme pain and terminally ill. The parallel with nuclear weapons is apparent. The implication is that only the most corrupt and cynical are likely to gain enough power to control weapons that could destroy the world. The fear that a single suicidal old man could launch an attack which would destroy the entire world is central to the nuclear era.

John drags all three Hoenikkers to the death chamber to show them what they have done. Newt narrates what happened on the fateful day when they discovered the fatal ice-nine their father had created. On the fateful Christmas Eve, walking along the beach, the boys entered the house, followed by a dog. Inside, Dr. Hoenikker had obviously been experimenting with his new invention. There are pots and pans full of water and solid ice-nine all over the kitchen. The doctor is resting in his favourite wicker chair in the living room. Following the boys in, the dog licked the pan full of ice-nine. He immediately froze, turning cement-like. The children realize that their father had invented something even more deadly than the hydrogen bomb. Running to tell him, they discovered Dr. Hoenikker dead in the living room. John learns that each of the three Hoenikker children got a piece of ice-nine after their father's death. Refusals of love are invariably hurtful and bring damaging results. All three children suffer psychologically from their father's indifference, and all three end up buying love or a place of belonging with ice-nine. One could almost say that the world ends because a father could not show his children love.

Newt gives over his ice-nine to a Russian agent, a midget Ukrainian ballerina who claims to love him; Angela marries a handsome industrialist who courts her only for the enormous profits ice-nine will bring him when he sells it to American government; and Frank buys his job on San Lorenzo by giving 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. But when the dying Papa commits suicide by swallowing ice-nine, and his body falls into the sea when a

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plane crashes into his castle, all the machinations of the characters for money, power, or love come to an end.

During the memorial ceremony, when bombs start exploding, John and Mona escape to a fall-out shelter, but they live in a nearly lifeless world where "It is winter, now and forever" (217). Then they realize that there have been mass suicides that God is tired of man, and is trying to kill him. While John is shocked, Mona points out that death have solved so many problems for so many people. She calmly touches the blue-white frost, puts her finger in mouth and dies, suggesting the failure of romantic love as a last defence against despair. John spends his last days penning a history of the end of the world, although not the book he first intended. However, this is a futile gesture, as there will soon be no one to read the history. In his speech at the memorial ceremony for Papa Monzano, Ambassador Minton makes a moving, dignified speech about the futility of war. The ambassador, who lost his son in Second World War, protests that all the men who die in the wars are just children. There is strong irony apparent in the juxtaposition of the memorial service with the imminent release of a secret weapon that will destroy all life on earth. Obviously, as much as man bemoans the loss of young lives in war, mankind is unable to avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly. Vonnegut devotedly believes that aggression, violence, greed and especially the inevitability of war are mankind's defining characteristics.

Cat's Cradle seems to be based on the old collision between science and religion. In the novel, it is the simple children's game that provides the central symbol of man's essential task. The universe he finds himself in is an arbitrary and ever-changing system of meaningless strings, which man, through an act of his creative imagination, has to define as meaningful. If he cannot do that, that is, if he proves unable to invent a meaning that cannot be discovered, he will succumb to the despair of nihilism like the character in the novel. But if he bases his imaginative creation of meaning on the helpful lies of religion, he will be

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much better off than if he grounds his understanding of the self and the world in the inhumane truths of science. This message, then, which made *Cat's Cradle* a cult book of the youthful counterculture of the sixties with its revolt against technocratic rationality, takes up and unfolds the concerns of Vonnegut's previous novels. To Vonnegut all religions are manmade myths or lies, but they provide the sense-making structures necessary for man's survival.

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