

Quest for Civic Engagement in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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ABSTRACT

Kurt Vonnegut (1922 – 2007) is considered as one of the greatest writers of postwar America. Besides, he is fondly remembered for the dark humour in his works, through which he opposed totalitarian regimes across the world. This paper is an attempt to probe the institutions of science and religion in his celebrated novel, *Cat's Cradle*. Vonnegut's personal war experiences make him reject all forms of ideology which claim absolute truth in his novels. In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut conceals a complex texture beneath a deceptively simple surface using parody and the dehumanization projected in the novel.

Keywords:

subversion; humor; culture; religion; technology

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) is an archetypal post-war novelist who concerns himself with the inexplicable, sordid and often nightmarish aspects of modern American life. Branded categorically as a pulp writer and then as a black humorist, he was left in obscurity for about twenty years. But from there he shot into fame and popularity to become “the most talked about American novelist since Ernest Hemingway” (Klinkowitz, 33); he became a truly representative post-war novelist highlighting the sterility and hypocrisy of middle class life, and inveighing against the dehumanized socio-economic system in America. By the 1970s he had become the most widely read novelist in America, and Jerome Klinkowitz reports that by 1974

Vonnegut was the leading candidate for the Nobel Prize (192). His unique vision and his role as a relentless critic of the American life have endeared him to his readers. Vonnegut has acknowledged that he was greatly influenced by his American experience: his own German-American background, the harrowing experience of the Depression, literary apprenticeship at school, his scientific education at college, the insanity and suicide of his mother, the traumatic experiences during the Second World War, and the shocking confrontation with technological reality during his work at General Electric in Schenectady.

The present essay examines how Vonnegut probes key issues of public concerns. In fact, ‘civic engagement’ has been

the primary subject in Kurt Vonnegut's works. His war experiences make him reject all forms of ideology which claim absolute truth. Living in an insensitive social milieu, consequent to the war, he describes himself as a "total pessimist," asserting that humankind is inherently self-destructive and everything ends only with death (Seymour, 147). Despite his ravaging war experience, Vonnegut always tempers his commentary with compassion for his characters, suggesting that human's ability to love may partially compensate for the destructive tendencies we find in the people at large. In Vonnegut's novels the characters are described variously, like 'comic, pathetic pieces, juggled about by some inexplicable faith, like puppets' (Ranly, 494). In this regard, Weales opines that 'they (characters) answer summons from some source they do not recognize, carry out the task they do not understand to end in the darkness they do not want to think about' (237-238).

Vonnegut debunks the institutions of science and religion through the characters of his most celebrated novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963). The novel has story-writers and narrators as characters, and has a subtitle, *Cat's Cradle – The Day the World Ended*. Vonnegut conceals a complex texture beneath a deceptively simple surface using parody and the dehumanization projected in

the novel. Religion and science are the major themes in *Cat's Cradle*. Vonnegut invents religion "Bokononism" which is based on untruths. The novel suggests that religion has greater flexibility in suggesting purposes and for making man feel better for his lack of purpose. Vonnegut does not believe in the omniscience of God. His satiric approach to religion and science on which people base their daily existence and to which they surrender their will, challenges the readers' faith. Vonnegut's hypothesis is that as people search for a deeper meaning in life, they become more confused and get more entwined in the cat's cradle of life, a metaphor for the American society of the times. The game of cat's cradle serves as a symbol of a meaninglessness to which people attribute a meaning. The debasement of science and religion leads to dehumanization and parody of the established constructs. As A.R.N Hanuman notes, "Vonnegut presents religion as more useful and less dangerous than science, despite its paradoxes and shortcomings ... Both science and religion show that improving human condition is futile" (5).

Cat's Cradle is entirely reduced to Vonnegut's desire to be entertaining. He does more than 'poke fun' at serious ideas. The humour is present to further the serious themes. Apart from the themes of science and religion, a third theme, whether

individuals have any control over their destiny emerges as a concern. The themes of religion and science are simultaneously in opposition and in equipoise to each other. Vonnegut uses the fictional religion of Bokononism as his primary weapon in skewering the many targets he wishes to satirize in the novel. The idea of being able to determine our own destiny does, after all, hinge on the assumption that we live in a sensible, predictable, meaningful universe. But do we? Or are we living in absurdity and constantly creating our own meanings? According to Leonard Mustanzza, an idea central to Bokononism is that “man [is] the one who has always been responsible for giving life meaning, lacking inherent meaning as it does, and so the possibility of happiness exists in his world if only we give life the ‘right’ meanings” (86). But by the end of the novel, as stated earlier, the reader has no firm idea about whether ‘right meanings’ are possible. This is summarized by John’s discovery of the Bokononist paradox, “the heartbreaking necessity to lie about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it” (229); that there is no ‘true’ or ‘tight’ answer to humanity’s lack of a sense of purpose in the unpredictable nuclear age. Except perhaps as Voltaire and Kant have suggested in ‘hope, sleep and laughter’ (201).

To a generation of young people who felt their own country had forsaken them,

Kurt Vonnegut offered examples of common decency and cultural idealism. Vonnegut captured the absurdity of the Dresden War and questioned the advances of Science Religion and War in most of his Novels. The bombing of Dresden resulted in a death toll of over a hundred thousand defenseless civilians in a matter of hours and the scene of senseless misery and mass destruction that followed played a key role in shaping Vonnegut’s pacifist views. Vonnegut uses parody as a weapon and conceals a complex texture beneath a deceptively simple surface of everyday life. Although Vonnegut is aware of the absurd nature of existence, he goes beyond the wasteland and offers the readers a hope. He is aware of the unchangeable nature of fate, but he believes that man is not necessarily bound to a pre-determined future. He has faith in the will and courage of man to make a better future. As a satirist Vonnegut is not negative. His message is positive that a better future is possible.

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