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Postmodern realities and challenging grand narratives in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Kurt Vonnegut uses metaliterature, metareligion and fictional language to challenge the grand narratives of American Culture in *Cat's Cradle*. The argument centers around the beliefs of postmodernism, which distrust in absolute truth and objective reality. There is particularly three grand narratives *Cat's Cradle* challenges: objective reality, science and religion. There is evidence in the language Vonnegut has created for the religion Bokononism that language is constantly developing and constructed, which makes the grand narrative of objective reality flawed. This is due to the lack of possibility for objectivism, if there is no objective language to establish and describe reality. Furthermore, nuclear bombs and ice-nine shows that not all scientific progress is helpful to evolve society in a positive manner, which challenges the grand narrative in American Culture which claims that science is the way to a better life. Finally, the grand narrative that religion must be truthful to be useful is challenged through the invention of Bokononism. These three elements takes a postmodernist stance against the grand narratives of American culture.

Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut is a postmodern reaction to modernism's grand narratives and absolute truths. Postmodernism evolved as a reaction to modernism, which sought absolute truths. The belief in an external authoritative system of order heavily influenced modernist's ideas about grand narratives. This thesis argues that Vonnegut struggled against the grand narratives in American culture and introduces smaller and temporary narratives as an alternative to these grand narratives. The first grand narrative that Vonnegut challenges is objective reality. Patricia Waugh argues that there can not be any perspective without language, as language is the way humanity perceives things. The constant invention of new language, along with Waugh's argument, works against the grand narrative of an objective reality. This is satirized through the fictional language in *Cat's Cradle*. The constructiveness of language debunks the modernist idea that language can be objective. Another grand narrative Vonnegut works against, is the idea that scientific and technological advances are means to a better life for humanity. As a veteran of war, Vonnegut naturally criticized the mass destruction weapons in his novels, especially in *Cat's Cradle*. The nuclear bomb and ice-nine are examples of destructive products of science. Both weapons can create massive destruction, painting the image of scientific advancement as cataclysmic, as opposed to beneficial. This is substantiated by the characters Felix Hoenikker and Dr. Breed in *Cat's Cradle* being depicted as ignorant of the potential negative consequences of scientific advancement. The third grand narrative being challenged is religion. Vonnegut demonstrates that a religion can merely be useful, and not necessarily truthful, by using the metareligion Bokononism as an example. By working against three major grand narratives of American culture, Vonnegut establishes himself as a postmodern writer who believes in a subjective reality.

The foundation of modernism was the view that reason, science and technological development was the path to progress in society (Petchu 29). As a reaction to modernity,

postmodernism was developed. Waugh explains that postmodernism exhibits “the same sense of crisis and loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order as that which prompted modernism” (21). The postmodernists challenged the rationalist and empiricist foundations for knowledge (Petchu 29). As a part of this, the postmodernists questioned whether a person can truly be objective and was therefore generally critical of grand narratives. The argument against human objectivity essentially claims that a person can not be truly objective, as the person is the product of the stories they are being told, and the realities that they have accepted as objective reality in their life (Petchu 29).

In turn, the question of who can determine what an objective reality truly is, arises. Who can objectively determine what is real and what is not, if the product of their assessment is also the product of their own subjective reality? Carmen Petchu points out that reality is ‘sublime’, and no expression can put the sublime to words, therefore making it impossible for language to re-create reality (33). With this problem in mind, postmodernists were inclined to believe that all reality was subjective, and rather relative, and therefore, abandoned foundationalism regarding knowledge (Petchu 29). As a result of the belief that reality must be subjective, American postmodernists turned critical of religion and science, along with other grand narratives. In turn, much of American postmodernist literature are attempts to try to rewrite the grand narrative. Adding to this, many smaller and temporary narratives were written as an alternative to grand narratives, equally as subjective and relative (Petchu 30; Sage 373).

American grand narratives can be defined as the totalizing truths in American society; a type of dogmatic claim to truth, often “coated in the form of ideologies” (Baebei & Yahya 235) which Americans are expected to attune to. In other words, they are significant narratives that upholds the structure of American culture. The term is based on Jean-Francois Lyotard’s account of postmodernism in “The Postmodern Condition”, which critiques

totalizing theories and systems of thought (“Grand Narratives”; Given). Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* struggles against these grand narratives of American culture.

Todd F. Davis argues that Vonnegut recognizes no essential truths in the narratives we choose to tell, as a result of language being the only way to obtain knowledge about reality (58). Through fictional language such as *foma* and *karass* in *The Book of Bokkonon*, Vonnegut exposes language as constructed. As Davis has established, language is the only way to understand reality, and language itself is constructed. Accordingly, reality can be equally as constructed. Even though *Cat’s Cradle* is a novel that critiques grand narratives, it can not be said that it discards the importance of narratives entirely. Rather, narratives are extremely important to American culture. However, the emphasis on narratives should be on the content and effect, instead of focusing on whether the narrative is true or not. The emphasis on narrative is simply that one must be aware that the novel is a narrative. Davis also argues that Vonnegut’s novel has the intentions to lead the reader to discover relativism as opposed to absolutism (58). In other words, Vonnegut offers inevitably provisional answers to questions concerning reality. Grand narratives which offer absolute truths are challenged in *Cat’s Cradle*. The main grand narratives that the novel challenges are the frames of objective reality, the belief that progress in science must lead to a better way of life, and religion, which shall all be considered in this article.

Cat’s Cradle systematically confronts the grand narrative of an objective reality with the use of fictional language and metafiction. The metafiction and fictional language throughout the novel systematically makes the reader aware of the novel’s status as an artifact. Waugh defines metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). This is indeed the purpose of metafiction in *Cat’s Cradle*, to draw the reader’s attention to the novel itself as a narrative.

The Day the World Ended and *The Book of Bokonan* are the two pieces of metafiction in *Cat's Cradle* that most clearly demonstrate how the grand narrative of an objective reality is challenged.

Religions such as Christianity and Judaism claims to be truthful. *The Book of Bokonan* is the metaliterature in *Cat's Cradle* which the religion Bokononism is built on. It is written by Bokonon and is also the first piece of metafiction the reader of *Cat's Cradle* is introduced to. In *The Book of Bokonan*, Bokononism reveals itself to be built on lies and absurdity. In fact, it encourages us to "Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (Vonnegut 5). *Foma* is a fictional word which means harmful untruths. Even though the followers of Bokononism know that their religion is built on *foma*, it is still a part of their reality. As a result of the metafiction *The Book of Bokonon*, and the resulting realities the population of San Lorenzo perceives, it is apparent that reality can not be objective. By creating their own reality, the people of San Lorenzo challenges the grand narrative that reality is objective. *The Book of Bokonan* is the metafictional religious text in *Cat's Cradle*, made by hand and forever changing. The religious text is the first example of one of the smaller, temporary narratives of *Cat's Cradle*, a common practice of postmodernists. It works as a part of an alternative to grand narratives such as religion and Christianity.

The author of *The Book of Bokonon*, Bokonon, adds new things to the book every day, meaning that there are essentially no finished copy of the book (Vonnegut 150). The very fact that the book is added to every day, yet the people of San Lorenzo still follow its rituals and teachings, makes it a great example of how metafiction is a narrative technique that challenges grand narratives. The people of San Lorenze do not see value in absolute truths. Their reason for following Bokononism, even knowing that it is built on lies and absurdity, is that religion does not have to be truthful to be useful. It is a substitute for theory and truth. *The Book of Bokonon* is incomplete, fragmented and without a clear beginning or end (Davis

63). The book is a mirror to what postmodernists refers to as the grand narrative of objective reality. Postmodernist view on the modern belief that there is such a thing as objective reality is well represented here. Postmodernists, such as Vonnegut, view the idea of objective reality as incomplete, fragmented and without a clear beginning or end. Since there, according to postmodernists, can not be an objective reality, reality must be subjective. The *Book of Bokonon* has accepted that reality is subjective and chooses therefore its own reality. Bokononism itself deals only with smaller narratives, rather local than universal (Davis 63). This is the result of a made up postmodern religion. San Lorenzo is therefore a fictional paradise for the postmodernist, in that the people of it does not seek absolute truths but accept relativity.

The second piece of metafiction the reader of *Cat's Cradle* is introduced to is *The Day the World Ended*, written by John, the narrator of *Cat's Cradle*. John had originally envisioned a factual, Christian account of what important people in America were doing on the day of the nuclear bomb attack on Hiroshima for his book *The Day the World Ended* (Vonnegut 13). When the reader finds out that the final result of *The Day the World Ended* is indeed the text of *Cat's Cradle*, with metafiction revealing itself as fiction in the real world, they learn that John was able to finish the book he set out to write in the beginning of *Cat's Cradle* (16). With this information, it is apparent that even though *The Day the World Ended* was supposed to be a factual, Christian book, it turns out to be the story of the Hoenikker children and John's conversion to Bokononism. This is proof in the metaliterature that shows the reader of *Cat's Cradle* that the reality John had envisioned at the beginning of the writing process did not turn out to be the reality that John experienced.

This is in large part because he did not know of Bokononism and did not have the language to describe the religion. After learning about his *karass* and acknowledging *foma* as an important part of his reality, he is able to write about a new reality. This is further evidence

that language can not shape reality, as not all language is yet known or invented. After learning about, and converting to Bokononism, John accepts that reality is subjective, and that each person chooses their own reality. This is evidence that reality can not be objective, it must be subjective. At the beginning of *Cat's Cradle*, John subscribes to the grand narratives of American culture. When he learns that narratives about scientific and technological progress may not be the only way to a better life, he abandons the grand narratives in favor of a happy life on San Lorenzo. The metafictional novel John writes called *The Day the World Ended* systematically dispels grand narratives as absolute truths, and opens up the possibility for smaller, temporary narratives, in addition to insinuating that relativity must be a factor when defining what reality is.

In addition to the systematic exhibition of the novel as artifice and dispelling absolute truths as a means to a better life, *Cat's Cradle* follows the post-modern tradition of blurring story frames (Waugh 28). The metafiction in *Cat's Cradle* draws attention to this, by comparing the real world to the fictional world. Both reality and fiction are generally constructed through frames of what is commonly accepted as truth, which is what this text reference as grand narratives, and what is accepted as fictional. Through challenging the grand narratives of science, absolute truths, and religion, Vonnegut thinks outside of these frames. By deconstructing and rationalizing ideas of religion and science, he inevitably brings awareness to the reader that not all absolute truths are neither relevant nor moral, and that society may need more *foma*.

By using fictional language, and making up Bokonanist phrases, Vonnegut proves that language is as constructed as Bokononism. *Cat's Cradle* contains several uses of fictional language such as *karass*, *foma*, *granfalloon*. As mentioned earlier, the argument that reality is sublime makes it impossible for language to re-create reality. In using constructed words, Vonnegut establishes that language itself is constructed. Waugh points out that language

“dictates and circumscribes what can be said and therefore what can be perceived” (25).

When language dictates what can be perceived, perception is restrained by what is already known. Modernism strives to find absolute truths, and consequently discovers new phenomena through scientific advances. With scientific inventions and scientific knowledge new words emerge with every advance. This is true in most fields of research. And so, language is ever evolving. How is it then possible to determine what objective reality is, if humanity may not have the language to express it yet? Words such as *karass* is a good example of how language in *Cat's Cradle* challenges the concept of objective reality. *Karass* is a word used to describe teams meant to do God's will without necessarily knowing what they are doing (Vonnegut 14). The term *karass* emerges in *The Book of Bokonon*, a piece of metaliterature in *Cat's Cradle*. The term *karass* is a fictional word, and was created to explain a phenomenon of Bokononism. In short, this is a part of a new language, made to explain a fictitious religion. Vonnegut creates language, and therefore proves that language is constructed and ever evolving. The metafictional writer is aware of this, and therefore uses the metafiction to dictate what can, and is, perceived. As a result, language can not be objective, which in turns renders the grand narrative of absolute truths to be severely flawed, and can not be accepted by a postmodernist.

The second grand narrative that *Cat's Cradle* challenges is science. In the grand narrative of how useful the truth and science are believed to be, is the belief that science can create a better life (Miller). Vonnegut parodies this by questioning the progress of the pursuit of truth, as well as the positive impact of science. A common belief in modernism is that society is bettered “through obtaining empirical, scientific data about the world around us” (Miller). As an opposition to modernist beliefs Vonnegut follows the tradition of postmodernism, and presents the flaws in the belief system of Modernism. According to John's narrative of Felix Hoenikker, the scientist called “one of the fathers of the nuclear

bomb” (Vonnegut 16), Felix had little to no sense of the consequences of science. As a result, he did little to prevent the destruction of humanity, being more concerned with discovering truths than to prevent disasters which may result from his research. The first example of this is in the nuclear bomb. History has shown the devastating tragedies which followed the inventions of the nuclear bomb. Vonnegut himself lived through World War II and saw the destruction that the nuclear bomb attacks in Japan created (Tally 18). After Felix Hoenikker had finished his work with the nuclear bomb, he invented ice-nine. Ice-nine is the latest fictional scientific discovery in *Cat’s Cradle*, which has the power to freeze all the water on the Earth’s surface within seconds (Vonnegut 46). Ice-nine can be very useful for the military but may be fatal in the hands of the wrong person. The creation of this substance reflects humanities desire for absolutism (Davis 63). Felix Hoenikker’s total inability to see the consequences of his own inventions is a slightly exaggerated parody of how the American population views science, as they are indoctrinated by grand narratives.

The obsession with science and technological advancement is portrayed by Papa Monzano, the ruling dictator when John arrives at the island. When Papa Monzano dies, his final words are to Frank Hoenikker, one of the children of Felix Hoenikker. Papa Monzano’s words were the following: “”You” he said to Frank hoarsely, “you - Franklin Hoenikker – you will be the next president of San Lorenzo. Science – you have science. Science is the strongest thing there is.” (Vonnegut 123) Frank Hoenikker, along with the two other children of Felix Hoenikker, is in possession of ice-nine. Because Frank is in possession of the icenine, Papa Monzano believes he should be president of San Lorenzo. Papa Monzano must have been a modernist, in believing that the person with the newest scientific advancement should be the one which holds all the power of a country.

The narratives of Felix Hoenikker and Papa Monzano are satirical narratives reflecting postmodernist views on scientists. Mahtab Entezam and PyeaamAbbasi substantiates this by

arguing that “the scientificists of Vonnegut’s novel are blind to moral basis” (2) The hunger for scientific progress as a way to a better life in accordance with the beliefs of Modernism (Miller). The character of Dr. Breed attempts to clear up the misunderstanding of what the monetary value of scientific data is when John comes to visit him in his office: “New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become” (Vonnegut 43). Dr. Breed is one of the people that knew Felix Hoenikker personally, and helps John out at the beginning of *Cat’s Cradle* when making a literary portrait of Dr. Hoenikker. As we can tell, Dr. Breed is clearly of the modernist mindset, where absolute truth is the goal of research. He shows little regret with regard to the destruction the weapons produced in that the lab has done to the world, or what destruction is to ensue.

The belief that the more empirical, scientific data humanity obtains, the better off it is, is disproven here. Scientific data which result in mass destruction weapons, is, according to postmodernist views, better left undiscovered as it will eventually destroy humanity. This is exactly what happens with ice-nine at the end of *Cat’s Cradle*. Ice-nine destroys human life as we know it. Here, Vonnegut includes a warning, a small narrative, and a relative truth, as to what can happen if the modernist belief that science can make life better persists. With icenine being the end of the world in *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut’s point is proven that the more scientific society becomes, the closer society also becomes to being destroyed. Humanity has already seen this in real life with nuclear bombs. This debunks the grand narrative that the more scientific data we obtain, the better our life gets.

The third grand narrative *Cat’s Cradle* challenges is religion. Vonnegut identifies two new possible narratives of religion; religion can be founded on untruths, and can also be constructed with a purpose which is not divine. John declares early in *Cat’s Cradle* that “anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not

understand this book either” (16). The residents of San Lorenzo all follow a religion called Bokononism. Bokononism’s religious text is called *The Book of Bokonon*, which appoints religious rituals and ceremonies to the followers of the religion. *The Book of Bokonon* introduces *foma* as a term for harmless untruths (Vonnegut 5). John’s declaration, that a useful religion can be founded on lies is something the reader keeps in mind while reading *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut declares something the reader must keep in mind while reading this book, that religion can include *foma*. The residents of San Lorenzo follows the religion, knowingly opting out of the grand narratives of religion, choosing happiness and peace over truth.

Julian Castle explains that Bokononism is fabricated to John after he arrives on the island; “When Bokonan and McGabe took over this miserable country year’s age (...) they threw out the priests. And then Bokonon, cynically and playfully, invented a new religion.” (Vonnegut 142) The reader must therefore consider the importance of truth throughout the novel. A religion, albeit not scientifically rationalized, can still be useful to the followers. This narrative technique provides a critique of Bokononism’s method of construction (Baebei & Yahya 236). This is precisely one of the dangers offered in *Cat’s Cradle*, the traditional conflict between science and religion (Entezam & Abbasi 3). By criticizing the grand narrative of religion, Vonnegut follows the tradition within science fiction to contradict the legitimacy of religion with rationalism (Mendlesohn et al 265).

Vonnegut opens the possibility of real-life religious texts, such as the *Bible* or the *Koran*, can be as constructed as *The Book of Bokonon*. With this, Vonnegut uses Bokononism to portray religion as a phenomenon based on the need and usefulness of “a greater power” as a tool to achieve happiness. Vonnegut’s purpose is not to, as Robert T. Tally puts it “claim a desire to rid humanity of religion” (144), rather to demonstrate a necessary mean to “Make the people [of San Lorenzo] much less miserable” (143). In the end, John converts from

Christianity to Bokononism. The experiences of John parallels with the residents of San Lorenzo. Before Bokonan and McGabe arrived at the island, the residents had priests and followed Christianity, then converted to Bokononism after Bokonan arrives at the island (Vonnegut 108).

Vonnegut's use of metafiction, metareligion and fictional language counteracts three grand narratives established in American culture and provides smaller narratives as alternatives. Vonnegut reveals himself as a postmodernist writer by displaying a loss of belief in an external authoritative system of order. *Cat's Cradle* shows a skepticism towards three grand narratives: objective reality, religion and science. The fictional language in *The Book of Bokonon* exposes language as constructed. With language constructing perceptions of reality, reality can therefore not be objective, and must be subjective. The emphasis of narratives should be on the content and effect of the narrative, instead of the truthfulness of the narrative. Metafiction in the novel systematically makes the reader aware of the novel's status as an artifact. Bokononism offers an alternative to the grand narrative of religion by encouraging the reader to "Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (Vonnegut 5). Bokononism itself deals only with smaller narratives (Davis 63), as Vonnegut indirectly encourages the reader of *Cat's Cradle* to assimilate. Scientists are revealed as the villains of the world by not demonstrating a satisfactory amount of consequence-thinking, as demonstrated by Felix Hoenikker in *Cat's Cradle*. This postmodern novel opposes modernist thinking by demystifying grand narratives and offering smaller, alternate narratives.

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