

Cat's Cradle: Vonnegut's Jonah and the Modern World

Toshiya Kobayashi

Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin ;
but now you say, 'We see ;' your sin remains. (John 9 :41)

I

By 1963 eleven years had elapsed since Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, was published. Although he had published *The Sirens of Titan* in 1959 and *Mother Night* in 1961, both of which now are acknowledged with proper academic attention, he still had not won the kind of reputation as a serious writer that he thought he deserved. His financial circumstances were as gloomy as the worlds he created in his works. The situation was so bad that "between 1959 and 1963 Vonnegut came the closest ever to being Trout himself."¹ Trout is a science fiction writer who frequently appears in Vonnegut's works and seems to be his alter ego. Vonnegut once confessed that "Kilgore Trout is the lonesome and unappreciated writer I thought I might become."² Vonnegut, however, never became Kilgore Trout.

His fourth major novel, *Cat's Cradle*, was published in 1963 as a hardcover original. This was quite a radical change for the better considering that the previous three works were all published as paperback originals. As a result of the publication of *Cat's Cradle* he finally began "to receive attention for his novels."³ He was treated at first very superficially because he was labeled as a science fiction writer. To the widespread belief that any novel that includes science or technology cannot be dealt with seriously, Vonnegut's response is that so much of the contemporary world is science that a work with undue neglect of science would not be fit to describe reality. He puts it quite concisely: "Any twentieth-century novel reflecting life as it is lived now must have an awful lot of machinery."⁴

Vonnegut's dominant interest is always in man. John R. May neatly summarizes Vonnegut's treatment of man:

The norm for judging our actions is whether they reflect a genuine sensitivity to man. Man is sacred, and he must be loved simply because he is a man. And since we are what we pretend to be, Vonnegut seems to be saying, we must be very careful about our hopes and expectations for ourselves and others. We must realize our infinite capacity for harming others, and so our approach to others must always be characterized by respect for their human dignity.⁵

Likewise in *Cat's Cradle* the following is the work's position toward man:

“What is sacred to Boknonists?” I asked after a while.

“Not even God, as near as I can tell.”

“Nothing?”

“Just one thing.”

I made some guesses. “The ocean? The sun?”

“Man,” said Frank. “That's all. Just man.” (143)*

Thus Vonnegut is keenly concerned with how man can live purposefully and hopefully in today's society in which science and technology have become an indispensable part of our living. In this respect it is no mystery that Vonnegut employs Jonah, a commonplace freelance writer who, in a sense, is the representative for mankind, and puts him in a world headed for final destruction by *ice-nine*.

The name Jonah at the same time brings to mind its possible connection with *Jonah* from the Old Testament. In analysing *Cat's Cradle* one can detect some undeniable parallels with the Old Testament story of *Jonah*. Therefore, in this paper I will show how Jonah in *Cat's Cradle*, the modern-time prophet, fulfills his mission in a world whose own existence is at stake due to man's blind faith in science and technology.

II

Cat's Cradle opens with a narration by the work's protagonist: “Call me Jonah,” (11) which clearly implies the story's allusion both to the biblical story of Jonah, and *Moby Dick*, former of which I shall investigate in this paper. Jonah has been working on a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*. The book deals with what important Americans did on the day when Hiroshima was atom bombed. In need of material for the book, he writes to Newton (“Newt”) Hoenikker, the young-

* Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *Cat's Cradle*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963.

est of the three children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, "one of the so-called 'Fathers' of the first atomic bomb." (14) Jonah senses that Newt is a member of his *karass*, a team that does "God's will without ever discovering what they are doing." (11) In his reply to Jonah Newt tells him that on that day his father was playing with a loop of string making the figure called a "cat's cradle."

About a year later, Jonah receives a chance to go to Ilium, New York for more information on the Hoenikkers. In Ilium is the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company, for which Dr. Hoenikker had worked and spent virtually his entire professional career. Jonah learns that Newt's older brother Frank was extremely interested in science but was absolutely unable to deal with people. Because of this inability, he was called Secret Agent X—9 by his schoolmates. He had not been seen by anybody since he left town immediately after his father's funeral. Newt's sister, Angela, very unattractive and over six feet tall, was practically the wife and mother to Dr. Hoenikker, and Frank and Newt respectively. Although she had never dated, she married a strikingly handsome man Harrison C. Connors, President of Fabri-Tek, a company which chiefly did secret government work.

Jonah also pays a visit to Dr. Asa Breed, Vice-president in charge of the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company. A prostitute Jonah comes across says everybody in Ilium knows that Breed had been in love with Felix Hoenikker's wife and most people think that he may be the father of the three Hoenikker children. At any rate, upon meeting Dr. Breed Jonah is informed that Dr. Hoenikker had been involved in a project to invent a new form of ice, called *ice-nine*. It would be as solid as a desk and would freeze at higher temperatures. *Ice-nine*, if put to use, could change all the water on earth into ice, thus bringing about the end of the world.

One day, shortly after his visit to Ilium, Jonah finds in the supplement to the New York *Sunday Times* that Frank Hoenikker, now twenty-six years old, is alive. Frank, according to the *Times*, is now Minister of Science and Progress in the Republic of San Lorenzo, a small nation in the Caribbean Islands. Jonah is also startled by looking at the picture of beautiful Mona Aamons Monzano, the adopted daughter of the dictator of San Lorenzo, with whom he immediately falls in love.

Assigned by a magazine to do a story on Julian Castle, an American sugar mil-

lionaire who had founded a free hospital, the House of Hope and Mercy in the Jungle, in San Lorenzo, Jonah flies to the Republic. In flight he meets Horlick Minton, the new American Ambassador to San Lorenzo, and his wife, Claire. He also meets a Midwestern couple, Hazel and H. Lowe Crosby, who are planning to set up a bicycle factory in San Lorenzo. Jonah becomes absorbed in the book that Minton hands him. The book, *San Lorenzo: The Land, the History, the People*, written by Julian Castle's son Philip, falls open to the section on the island's outlawed holy man Bokonon. Bokonon, a black from Tobago, after having gone through a series of strange travellings, had encountered a Marine deserter Earl McCabe. The two eventually had reached the shores of San Lorenzo, where Bokonon had become a religious leader and McCabe the political head of state. Both had agreed to outlaw Bokonon and his Bokononism in accordance with the theory of "Dynamic Tension." The idea is that "good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times." (74)

The plane lands in Bolivar, Capital of San Lorenzo, after stopping briefly in San Juan, where Newt and Angela Hoenikker come aboard. They are to attend the wedding for Frank Hoenikker and Mona, which terribly dissappoints Jonah.

The Americans are welcomed at the airport by President Miguel "Papa" Monzano who had succeeded McCabe. However, while delivering a welcome speech, "Papa" collapses. At the hotel where Jonah is to stay, he meets Philip Castle, owner of the hotel, working on a huge mosaic in the lobby. The telephone rings and Jonah is asked by Frank to come to his house. Jonah arrives at the house, and finds Newt present and his sister Angela and Julian Castle later come in. Late in the night Frank finally appears and asks Jonah to succeed the dying "Papa" as President in his place. Frank also adds that whoever becomes President will marry Mona. Frank brings in Mona. Jonah almost loses her by demanding her complete love for him. Mona believes it is sinful that "a man... wants all of somebody's love." (141)

That Jonah is to become the next President of San Lorenzo is to be announced the next day at the ceremonies in commemoration of the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy, who voluntarily had joined the American forces immediately after Pearl Harbor. About the same time, in order to end his unbearable pain, "Papa" swallows the contents of a cylinder which he has hanging around his neck. His body turns into ice, and Jonah realizes that what "Papa" had taken is *ice-nine*.

While the ceremonies are still in progress, with an air display by six airplanes, one of the planes suddenly goes down in flames into the cliff below "Papa's" castle. There is a rockslide and the castle collapses. The Mintons, hand in hand, disappears into the ocean. "Papa's" frozen body also is washed onto the sea. The sea freezes and the sky is filled with tornadoes. Mona and Jonah escapes into an oubliette, where they spend seven days. They go out of their hiding and find many Bokononists who had committed suicide by putting *ice-nine* on their lips. Suddenly Mona also kills herself with *ice-nine*. Jonah, weeping, discovers that the Crosbys and Newt are also alive. They begin a new life and they call themselves "The Swiss Family Robinson." One day Jonah finds Bokonon sitting by the side of a road, writing. Bokonon is producing the final sentence for *The Books of Bokonon*.

III

The biblical story of Jonah centers around the consequences of Jonah's being commissioned by the Lord. In other words, this is "a story about a prophet rather than a book of prophetic utterances,..."⁶ Then, what is a prophet? As far as the biblical Hebrew is concerned, it is hypothesized that the Hebrew root means "in an active sense... 'an announcer,' or 'the one who announces' the purpose and activity of God..."⁷ and in a passive sense "the recipient of the announcement of God..."⁸ or "one who is called..."⁹ In the story of Jonah the term prophet is usually given the passive sense. Thus one can say that "Jonah is the recipient of a *commission, directly from Jehovah,...*"¹⁰ In *Cat's Cradle* Jonah is given strikingly similar characteristics :

Jonah-John-if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still-not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizzar, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there. (11)

It is ostensibly clear that Jonah senses that some power beyond perception is controlling his life or compelling his actions, hence displaying his solid prophetic nature.

Vonnegut himself often speaks of his ideas of ~~prophets~~^{prophets}. Discussing H. G. Wells he says :

Yes. Well, he wasn't a bad prophet, either, and it's helpful to have prophets. It would be helpful to have politicians who would listen to them.¹¹

His canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts also implies prophetism. It is when he talks about writers and their roles in society that he mentions the theory :

Writers are specialized cells doing whatever we do, and we're expressions of the entire society—just as the sensory cells on the surface of your body are in the service of your body as a whole. And when a society is in great danger, we're likely to sound the alarms. I have the canary-bird-in-the-coal-mine theory of the arts. You know, coal miners used to take birds down into the mines with them to detect gas before men got sick. The artists certainly did that in the case of Vietnam. They chirped and keeled over. But it made no difference whatsoever. Nobody important cared. But I continued to think that artists—all artists—should be treasured as alarm systems.¹²

It is not impossible to replace “writers” with “prophets” in the theory. The canary being depicted as more or less a fragile creature does not seem to well represent Jonah. The canary is a more suitable image for Vonnegut's later character, Billy Pilgrim, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Nevertheless, if the prophetic aspect of the canary theory is considered independently, the theory will suffice to include Jonah. Furthermore, on Vonnegut and prophets, Robert Scholes comments that : “As the scientist finds the truth that kills, the prophet looks for a saving lie.”¹³

IV

The prophet Jonah begins fulfilling his mission by collecting material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*, which also happens to be the title for chapter one of *Cat's Cradle*. By using this title for chapter one, Vonnegut successfully prepares the setting which calls for the appearance of a prophet and sets the almost apocalyptic tone for the novel. The very motive that prompted the writing of *The Day the World Ended* is the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. This book then, opens *Cat's Cradle*, a story of Jonah's unusual journeys. The biblical story of Jonah, on the other hand, begins with Jonah being given the Lord's summons : “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”¹⁴ Accordingly, the cause for the two books is quite similar : man's wrong deeds or sins.

Thus far two important similarities between the two stories have been shown ; that each of them is written *about* a prophet and that each work is clearly motivated by what may be called man's sin.

The factual details of the two stories are vastly different ; The biblical Jonah, after given the Lord's mission to go to Nineveh, boards a ship for Tarshish at Joppa to escape from Yahweh. However, Yahweh causes a great storm and endangers the ship greatly. Asked by the crew, Jonah throws himself into the sea in the hope that doing so might calm the storm. The storm instantly subsides. God provides a great fish, into which Jonah is swallowd alive. Thus Jonah is denied his hope for escaping the mission through death. After three days in the belly of the fish, it spits Jonah ashore. For the second time, Yahweh gives him His mission and this time Jonah obeys. He enters Nineveh and is greeted by mass conversions. Upon seeing all this, God "relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*."¹⁵ This greatly displeases Jonah. However, God causes Jonah to have compassion for a plant which he is using as a shade from the burning sun. God, in His final lesson for Jonah, asks if it is not also natural to have compassion on a city of 120,000 people.

The two stories, as were summarized, have completely dissimilar outlines as far as minute particulars are concerned. And yet, the two still possess corresponding overall structures and factors aside from the two mentioned earlier.

V

In the world of the Old Testament, as was touched upon earlier, a prophet is the receipient of the announcement of God. Moreover, upon receiving His words, he must relay them to the people. The prophet quite naturally is expected to speak what is true and right. This can be seen, for instance, in *Isaiah* where those who ask the prophets to prophesy illusions are called a rebellious people and false sons :

For this is a rebellious people, false sons,
Sons who refuse to listen
To the instruction of the Lord ;
Who say to the seers, "You must not see *visions*";
And to the prophets, "You must not prophesy to us what is right,"
Speak to us pleasant words,
Prophesy illusions.¹⁶

But in ~~the~~ *Cat's Cradle* Vonnegut does not speak what is true or right through the prophet Jonah :

The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this :

“All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.”

My Bokononist warning is this :

Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either.

So be it. (13—4)

Glenn Meeter comments on the theme in *Cat's Cradle* :

The theme is truth and fiction, truth *against* fiction. The forces of science and government are shown together on the side of “truth,” and art and religion are shown together on the side of “fiction.”¹⁷

His grouping of science with “truth,” and art and religion with “fiction,” is quite correct. It can be furthermore pointed out that people or even prophets can be categorized on the side of fiction. Therefore, it must be made clear that in *Cat's Cradle* the prophet does not side with truth but with fiction or lies. The work's underlying stance on truth and fiction is explained by Julian Castle, founder of the House of Hope and Mercy :

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.(118)

The prime reason for this radical reverse of the meaning in truth and fiction can be found in Vonnegut's childhood during the Depression :

For Vonnegut, reality was something impermanent and essentially unreal, since the basic facts of life could be changed by circumstances of birth, or by the whims of national economics even after one was half grown. But while other writers might find such conditions to be the roots of a pessimistic and even hopeless determinism, Vonnegut used his ingenuity to turn them around as the components of man's true freedom. If reality is indeed relative and arbitrary, then it is all the easier to change ; man need not suffer an unhappy destiny, but can instead invent a new reality better suited to his needs.¹⁸

Hence in *Cat's Cradle* the prophet Jonah's most important task is to “invent a new reality better suited to man's needs” based on the teaching of Bokonon. This “new

reality," of course, in Bokonon's term is "better lies."

VI

As I quoted earlier Scholes says that "...the scientist finds the truth that kills, the prophet looks for a saving lie."¹³ In *Cat's Cradle* the contrast between science and man or prophet is stupendous. Science or truth that kills, first of all, produced the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima. And the same science also helps to produce *ice-nine* which even threatens the existence of the entire world. The idea of contrasting truth and fiction gives birth to the theory of "Dynamic Tension;"

It was the belief of Bokonon that good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times. (74)

The representative figure on the scientific side is Dr. Felix Hoenikker. He is a man whose interests are abnormally limited to science :

Father, . . . spent practically his whole professional life working for the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company in Ilium. (15)

I don't think he ever read a novel or even a short story in his whole life, or at least not since he was a little boy. He didn't read his mail or magazines or newspapers, either. I suppose he read a lot of technical journals, but to tell you the truth, I can't remember my father reading anything. (16—7)

He was one of the best-protected human beings who ever lived. People couldn't get at him because he just wasn't interested in people. I remember one time, about a year before he died, I tried to get him to tell me something about my mother. He couldn't remember anything about her. (18—9)

People weren't his specialty. (21)

For those who have absolute faith in science, it is a power almighty :

. . . . science is going to discover the basic secret of life someday. . . . (26)

Science—you have science. Science is the strongest thing there is. (102)

The chief objective of science, "the antithesis of magic," (33) lies in the process of discovering, and yet "In the autobiographical section of *The Books of Bokonon* he writes a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand." (13) Man's stupidity in pretending to understand or to see is best illustrated by the "cat's cradle incident." On the day of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima Newt remembers his

father, Dr. Hoenikker, playing with a loop of string :

Anyway, Father looked at that loop of string for a while, and then his fingers started playing with it. His fingers made the string figure called a 'cat's cradle.' . . . Making the cat's cradle was the closest I ever saw my father come to playing what anybody else would call a game. (17)

"No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's. . . ."

"And?"

"*No damn cat, and no damn cradle.*" (114)

This is, the modern time prophet Jonah seems to be saying, the greatest tragedy facing the world today. Many people, not only scientists, consciously or unconsciously pretend that they can understand what they really cannot and that they can see what they in fact cannot. Jonah, in addition, warns man that there are situations where "It means whatever it means." (115), and strongly instructs man to have the courage to say so when he sees that "there is no damn cat, no damn cradle."

Ⅶ

In *Cat's Cradle* one can find science on one end of the line and man on the other. In Bokononism as well as in *Cat's Cradle* man is given the utmost significance :

"What *is* sacred to Bokononists?" I asked after a while.

"Not even God, as near as I can tell."

"Nothing?"

"Just one thing."

I made some guesses. "The ocean? The sun?"

"Man," said Frank. "That's all. Just man." (143)

Vonnegut himself is known as a downright humanist :

Vonnegut is the compassionate satirist who does not have to make us seem worse than we are to make us laugh at ourselves, and who, understanding us, reminds us that the proper study of mankind is still man. Vonnegut seems to be there in his fiction with a tolerant and reassuring irony to tell us that it is somehow all right, that humanity remains most worth caring about. No matter how evil, stupid, or inept we become as a culture or as a people, Vonnegut is there in his fiction reminding us not to give up on the human race. He is forever prompting

us to recall that common humanity, a sense of decency, and good manners are the basis of civilized behavior, and civilized behavior is within almost everybody's capabilities. At heart, therefore, to see Vonnegut as a humanist as well as a humorist is to see him in true relation to his times and his culture.¹⁹

Concerning man, furthermore, the writer is bestowed with significant distinction, because, by continuing to write fiction, he can create a countless number of lies about the true nature of man and the world:

When a man becomes a writer, I think he takes on a sacred obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed.... For the love of God, *both* of you, *please* keep writing! (156)

Among things that show affirmative attitudes toward humanity, love is a very prevailing issue. For instance, Newt, about to be married, says:

Actually, I am a very lucky person and I know it. I am about to marry a wonderful little girl. There is love enough in this world for everybody, if people will just look. I am proof of that. (22)

The concept of *duprass*, with the perfect example of Mr. Minton, the new American Ambassador to San Lorenzo, and his wife, also conveys the sentiment of love. A *duprass* is "a karass composed of only two persons." (64)

Mona's impartial love, which dismays Jonah considerably, is another sign of human love:

"A *sin-wat!*" she cried. "A man who wants all of somebody's love. That's very bad." (141)

One can even discover what may well be Vonnegut's idea of ideal community. After *ice-nine* destroys the earth, Jonah, the Crosbys and Newt survive and they embark on a new life which Hazel Crosby calls the Swiss Family Robinson. In this small society "Each person...had some specialty, something to give the rest." (185) Vonnegut himself talks about small communities:

It's a longing for community. This is a lonesome society that's been fragmented by the factory system.... People don't live in communities permanently anymore. But they should: Communities are very comforting to human beings.... We're lonesome.... For a community really to work, you shouldn't have to wonder what the person next to you is thinking. That is a primitive society.²⁰

Conclusion

Cat's Cradle is “normally seen as his most dark”²¹ work, as *The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon* indicates:

The Fourteenth Book is entitled, “What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?”

It doesn't take long to read *The Fourteenth Book*. It consists of one word and a period.

This is it:

“Nothing.”

However, this is not so true as it seems. As was just mentioned, there are a considerable amount of episodes that point to the affirmative aspects of humanity.

More important, the central key to the true understanding seems to lie in what Jerome Klinkowitz calls “a recognition of the finite for what it is.”²² He furthermore argues:

It is not a turning away at all, but rather an acceptance of the finite for what it is, as part of the whole truth.²³

This clearly bears some resemblance with the Bokononist definition of maturity:

“Maturity,” Bokonon tells us, “is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything.” (134)

It is quite interesting to note that *The Book of Jonah* ends with a question mark, which leaves the impression of incompleteness of the story. In *Cat's Cradle*, too, “At the conclusion there is no...denouement...”²⁴ Thus the most important lesson Bokonon bestows upon man through today's Jonah is that there is really no completeness to anything, and that man, science, lies and fiction are all only part of the whole truth. Bokonon strongly commands human beings to become mature in the sense that he defines it and only then can one say loudly, “no damn cat, no damn cradle,” not being bothered by his pretending to see and to understand what he does not see or understand.

Notes

- 1 Jerome Klinkowitz, *Vonnegut in America*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz, Donald L. Lawler (New York : Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), p. 20.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 John R. May, *Toward a New Earth*, (Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 198—9.
- 6 W. Neil, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 897.
- 7 B. D. Napier, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 897.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 William C. Graham, *The Abingdon Bible Commentary* (New York : Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1929), p. 787.
- 11 Robert Scholes, *The Vonnegut Statement*, ed. Jerome Klinkowitz, John Somer (New York : Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 104.
- 12 Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Playboy Interview," in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, (New York : Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), p. 238.
- 13 May, *Toward a New Earth*, pp. 195—6.
- 14 The Book of Jonah 1:2, (New American Standard Bible).
- 15 Jonah 3 : 10.
- 16 Isaiah 30 : 9—10.
- 17 Glenn Meeter, in *The Vonnegut Statement*, p. 209.
- 18 Klinkowitz, in *Vonnegut in America*, p. 30.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- 20 *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, pp. 241—3.
- 21 Lawler, in *Vonnegut in America*, p. 196.
- 22 Klinkowitz, in *The Vonnegut Statement*, p. 173.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 173—4.
- 24 Peter J. Reed, *Writers for the 70's : Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (New York : Warner Books, Inc., 1972), pp. 177—8.