

ABSTRACT

Getting the Joke: The Efficacy of Science Fiction for Social Satire
in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*—with Perspective Gained from
Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Ren Osouli

Director: Lynne Hinojosa, Ph.D.

Since the start of his literary career, Kurt Vonnegut's novels have been characterized, and stigmatized, as science fiction. This thesis sets out to vindicate Vonnegut from the "hack" genre that has limited his reception, contextualizing *Cat's Cradle* within the real moral and social concerns relative to the author's own life. Vonnegut masterfully imbues this novel with satirical commentary on contemporary society, especially its increasing reliance on science and technology. I analyze his novel *Cat's Cradle* in light of the work of lauded American author, Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." Evincing the parallels in social commentary and satire that place Vonnegut's piece on par with Melville's, I argue that *Cat's Cradle* not only transcends the genre of science fiction in its moral commentary but also that this tale of apocalypse accentuates Vonnegut's optimistic humor and approach to life. Ultimately, Kurt Vonnegut's narrative functions on an ethical level which Melville's neglects, such that *Cat's Cradle* is able to give a vision beyond the black humor present in both pieces.

APPROVED BY DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

Dr. Lynne Hinojosa, Honors Program

APPROVED BY THE HONORS PROGRAM:

Dr. Elizabeth Corey, Director

DATE: _____

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GAINED FROM HERMAN MELVILLE'S "BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER"

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By
Ren Osouli

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Hi-ho.

—Kurt Vonnegut

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘science fiction’ ever since, and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal.”

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon* (1974)

I. Introduction to Kurt Vonnegut: Science Fiction and Reality

American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, “the man who’d been afraid of becoming a neglected science-fiction hack,” challenged the literary and artistic world for decades. Beginning in 1950 with his first published short story, he “ended his long career as a widely admired writer” (Freese 1). He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, where he first started grasping his command of writing—at school—and humor—at home. When he died in 2007, his oeuvre encapsulated fourteen novels—many of which include his own original illustrations and poems—sixteen collections of fiction and nonfiction pieces, seven plays, ninety individual short stories, over one hundred individual articles, and two published interviews: Kurt Vonnegut was brilliant, enigmatic, and inimitable. Peter Freese describes the author’s career as “unique,” like his extensive works, in that he was “a guru of rebellious youth, celebrity writer and public spokesman, subject of academic controversies and author of novels taught in schools and universities across the country and translated into many languages” (1). However, Vonnegut’s fear of a failed career and forsaken works was not unprecedented, for he was not always a recipient of such high praise. In fact, his work was largely marginalized for the first half of his writing career within the hack genre of science fiction.

In *A Man Without a Country*, which, as the *Los Angeles Times* informs on its print cover, “may be as close as Vonnegut ever comes to a memoir,” Vonnegut shares:

Most of our critics are products of English departments and are very suspicious of anyone who takes an interest in technology. So, anyway, I was a chemistry major, but I’m always winding up as a teacher in English departments, so I’ve brought scientific thinking to literature. There’s been very little gratitude for this. (16)

The dearth of gratitude to which Vonnegut is referring has to do with the status of science fiction’s reputation as a literary genre during the time. Mary Lazar’s article, “Sam Johnson on Grub Street, Early Science Fiction Pulps, and Vonnegut,” introduces the advent of the genre “as it developed in American pulp magazines in the 1930s,” beginning its “slow progress from hack work to literary respectability” (236). Throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, inclusion in the cultural niche of science fiction precluded an author from being considered as an artist of merit, *de facto*, because no one who wanted to be taken seriously as a writer published in this genre.

By the time Vonnegut published his first novel in 1952, *Player Piano*, there was still no progress in this regard, and Freese points to this novel as what “led to [Vonnegut’s] classification as a science-fiction writer” and reiterates the sentiment, “which in those days implied a second-rate status and the denial of literary quality” (2).

Perturbed by this appellation throughout his career, Vonnegut reflects:

I became a so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I’d offended that I would not get credit for being a serious writer. I decided that it was because I wrote about technology, and most fine American writers know nothing about technology [. . .] I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex. (*A Man Without a Country* 16-17)

This passage is important in understanding his work, for as Lazar introduces Vonnegut as one “who probably would not respond to an invitation to speak before the Annual

Convention of Science Fiction Writers,” he did not intend his narratives as works of science fiction but as representations of reality (246).

Subsequently, Vonnegut did not think that his completed work belonged within the genre, beginning with *Player Piano*, which was about Schenectady, New York. For Kurt Vonnegut, scientific inquiry was always very much associated with reality not fantasy, so the speculative science in his novels—an attributive indicator of science fiction—involves his creativity mingled with the actuality of the scientific experimentation in which his life was immersed:

There are huge factories in Schenectady and nothing else. [We] were engineers, physicists, chemists, and mathematicians. And when I wrote about the General Electric Company and Schenectady, it seemed a fantasy of the future to critics who had never seen the place. (*A Man Without a Country* 16)

In 1966, however, he had impressed literary critic Robert Scholes, who praised the author’s existing works—namely, *Mother Night* (1961) and *Cat’s Cradle* (1963)—calling his style “deceptively simple, suggestive of the ordinary,” while claiming that “the apparent simplicity and ordinariness of his writing masks its efficient power” (qtd. in Freese 2). I want to reinforce Scholes’ statement by reiterating that Vonnegut’s works *do* suggest the ordinary in the sense that they are records of a reality to which many are not privy, the scientific community. This intensifies the poignancy of his prophetic narratives as they suggest the potential, impending darkness pursuant to the state of the ordinary.

Yet, it was not until the publication of his famous World War II novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)—subtitled, *The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*—that he indelibly commanded the attention of the literary world, precipitating scholarly debate “for seeing Kurt Vonnegut as *the* representative post-World War II American writer” (Freese 5). Widely considered the author’s canonical masterpiece,

causing Vonnegut's rapid rise "from neglect and obscurity to fame and wealth," his "breakthrough book" to "front-page attention, raves, celebration, praise throughout the nation" is almost exclusively autobiography (Freese 4). Vonnegut reconstructs his own experiences as an infantry scout in the United States Army during World War II, culminating in the Allied firebombing of Dresden, during which Vonnegut—along with the German guards and other Prisoners of War—took shelter in an abandoned slaughterhouse. That "it was pure nonsense, pointless destruction" is Vonnegut's indictment of the bombing that imposed tragic consequences on Dresden and its inhabitants (17). Thus, noting this particular book in relation to his new literary status is vital, for it reiterates the very essence of Vonnegut's literary charisma as a reporter of experience, reality, and truth.

Vonnegut admits that he originally "was going to write a hack book about Dresden," which for years he could never carry to fruition (18). He was not able to reminisce with his old war buddy, Bernard O'Hare, for long before Bernard's wife, Mary, "blew her stack" and indignantly interjected, "You were nothing but babies then," as they attempted to invoke romanticized, cinematic sentiments of the War (19). Vonnegut concurs, "And realizing that was the key, I was finally free to tell the truth. We were children [. . .] what Mary O'Hare was saying, in effect, was 'Why don't you tell the truth for a change?'" (19). This honesty, in conjunction with its momentous subject, enabled the novel to be taken seriously as a topic for debate despite its science fiction attributes. Along with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five* portrayed the counter-cultural depiction of war, abandoning the romantic in favor of the reality, and Vonnegut, along with Heller, was granted serious attention in this novelistic endeavor because he lived

through the famous events in question. In one of his many interviews, Vonnegut candidly, and humorously remarks, referring to himself and fellow author Lee Stringer:

We have written out of our own lives, and being writers was easier for us because we had something to write about. Thank God I was in Dresden when it was burned down. [Laughter] Joe Heller said to me one time that if it weren't for World War II he'd be in the dry-cleaning business. I'm not sure what business I would have been in. (*Like Shaking Hands With God*, 15)

This passage is classic Vonnegut, and it is important because it points to the theme of autobiography that was present in his previous novels but overlooked—and still, I think, are forgotten—until the subject matter of World War II gripped the attention of his readers.

One year after the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in 1970, Leslie A. Fiedler referred to Kurt Vonnegut as “a test case for the critics” due to the author’s thematic combining of “high” and “low” with his weighty subject matter packaged in his pithy prose (qtd in Freese 3). His works contain profundities about and acquired by his travels through the mundane, ordinary world and unveil unpalatable truths journalistically and satirically. Commenting on this debate, two years after its publication, Scholes’ article was reprinted in 1971 with an “‘Afterword’ in which he extolled the ‘range of attitudes [Vonnegut] brings to bear on modern life’”:

Serious critics have shown some reluctance to acknowledge that Vonnegut is among the best writers of his generation. He is, I suspect, both too funny and too intelligible for many, who confuse muddled earnestness with profundity. Vonnegut is not confused. He sees all too clearly. (qtd. in Freese 2)

Furthermore, Freese references American author John Irving—“confronted with similar allegations”—who published an essay in 1979, “The Aesthetics of Accessibility: Kurt Vonnegut and His Critics,” wherein he “refuted the recurring reproach that books which are easy to understand can’t be good” (Freese 2-3). Irving positively characterizes

Vonnegut's prose as having a "childlike availability [. . .] fast and easy to read surfaces, that [seem] to be so troublesome to Vonnegut's critics" (Irving 14). Ultimately, Vonnegut's Hemingway-esque prose in combination with his unconventional science fiction narratives left some critics blinded to the power of his ability to portray and comment on the headaches of humanity in his other, autobiographically inspired novels. While his experience in World War II certainly served as a titanic topic that was able to mediate Vonnegut's typically unappreciated science fiction narrative style in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in his previous novels, such as *Cat's Cradle*, the prevailing stigma surrounding science fiction deterred readers, still, from his records of the everyday and contemporary societal events. One of the goals of this thesis is to explore the thematic depth and literary brilliance of *Cat's Cradle* in order to show how Vonnegut's work is so much more than the "science fiction" label might suggest.

Vonnegut wrote about his own reality; this reality was contemporaneous with the paradigm shift—World War II—that ushered in for many the notion of postmodernity; and this reality was one in which humor played an integral role. Though it did not receive much attention until later in his career, one of Vonnegut's earliest novels, *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is the culmination of the author's journalistic narrative style, acute satirical eye, and sympathetic sense of humor as he contends with the postmodern world through writing satire. Robert Scholes, in reference to this novel, grants Vonnegut entry into the group of "writers whom we read 'to keep our humanity in shape, to exercise our consciences and keep them vigorous, free, and growing'" (qtd. in Freese 2). Indeed, *Cat's Cradle* "created a religion and a language that have now been incorporated into our national vocabulary," and has a unique variety of topics and ideas at work that will later

come to characterize the rest of his art: science, fiction, humor, and his prognoses about the health of the postmodern world (Freese 2). I have chosen to examine *Cat's Cradle* as the novel that aptly represents Vonnegut's "science fiction" because his treatment of science is a means to a satirical social commentary and cultural critique, which is contemporary to the advent of science and technology's integral role in society. The novel also demonstrates Vonnegut's ability to integrate messages of hope and inspiration through humor.

II. Kurt Vonnegut and Herman Melville

In this thesis I will analyze the interplay of satire and comedy in *Cat's Cradle* in order to qualify its inclusion in the genre of science fiction by demonstrating its relationship to societal realities contemporary to its publication. This context will reveal Vonnegut's science fiction to be an apt vehicle for social commentary and his comedy to be an apt response to postmodernism. To bolster my claim, I will connect Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* to Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" and argue for Melville's significance for Vonnegut as an author. Herman Melville, a lauded nineteenth century author, is predominantly known for his canonical novel, *Moby Dick* (1851), and this is the novel that scholar Robert Tally connects to *Cat's Cradle* in his book, *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography*:

Like his predecessors in this endeavor, such as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Ernest Hemingway, Vonnegut attempts to grasp the plentitude of America in the novel form, trying to register the nation's shifting and evanescent identity, and discovers the "great American novel" to be an ungraspable phantom. (xii)

Tally expands on this concept later, highlighting the echoes of *Moby Dick* heard in *Cat's Cradle* to reveal aspects of Vonnegut's narrative purpose. Though my thesis will focus on

a different Melville piece, I will refer to Tally's connections as they mark significant points in *Cat's Cradle* wherein Vonnegut overtly aligns his narrative with *Moby Dick*, positing his own novel to be on par with the acclaimed excellence of Melville's work. Even more, however, the connections I make between *Cat's Cradle* and "Bartleby," show how Vonnegut identified his work with the reality of American society, just as Melville did, and confirm that his writing lies outside the genre of fantastical science fiction.

Tally covers Vonnegut's fourteen novels to argue that the author and his works are representative of "A Postmodern Iconography." He combines *Cat's Cradle* with *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and spends minimal time on the former's relationship to Melville's *Moby Dick*. Aside from Tally, other scholars have connected Kurt Vonnegut and Herman Melville through their novels' apocalyptic endings. Martin Procházka, in 2005 does so in reference to *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Moby Dick* in conjunction with the works of other American authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne. Likewise, David Ketterer, in 1974, diagnoses the apocalyptic link in American literature between these novels of Vonnegut and Melville in addition to Edgar Allan Poe and Samuel Clemens, best known as Mark Twain. My thesis differs from this past scholarship not only in its sole focus on Vonnegut and Melville but also in its reference to "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" rather than *Moby Dick*. Furthermore, in scholarship connecting Vonnegut's work to *Moby Dick*, apocalypse is the addressed theme. Here, although the aspect of apocalypse will remain relevant, I will guide my thesis to reveal a more significant contrast in the works' culminations.

Writing over a century apart, both Herman Melville and Kurt Vonnegut were grappling with paradigmatic shifts in contemporary culture and society and are valid

representatives of their time periods, for both Melville's (1819-1891) and Vonnegut's (1922-2007) lifetimes spanned nearly the extent of their respective centuries. This is important because both writers were born early and lived long enough to be familiar with the societies both before and after instruments of change set in. For Melville during the nineteenth century, the emergence of Wall Street and the growing capitalist economy precipitated a changing attitude in humanity; for Vonnegut, during the twentieth century, it was the advent of science and technology that forever altered humanity and the notion of warfare during World War II. Both shifts in "Bartleby the Scrivener" and *Cat's Cradle* call into question the aspect of identity for the individual as he tries to assimilate into the new system, to understand the changed cultural attitude, and to find meaning in life. Ultimately, I will argue that the serious concerns for humanity raised by Melville during one of the major periods in America's "shifting and evanescent identity" crises is experienced, mirrored, *and* answered by Vonnegut a century and a decade later in *Cat's Cradle*, emphasizing the literary merit of the former in light of the renowned merit of the latter. Like Melville, Vonnegut was recording an American reality in order to call attention to its perceived ills. In Chapter Two I will provide a close reading of "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" in order to establish the thematic foundations in Melville's piece with which to compare—and significantly contrast—Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*.

In Chapters Three and Four I will then call attention to these same issues in *Cat's Cradle*, elucidating Vonnegut's often-misunderstood work of science fiction and trace the development of science fiction and comedy present in *Cat's Cradle* through Vonnegut's life, providing the biographical context for his relationship to science and the historical

context of the postmodern age in which he was writing. Ultimately, the author's own interest in science lends itself to the "science fiction" that permeates the novel, and his malaise toward the contemporary culture of postmodernity renders his satirical humor. However, the most significant contrast is found in comparing the ending of Melville's short story and Vonnegut's novel. Vonnegut grapples with similar ideological issues as Melville and is able to surpass the realm of black humor, in which the fate of Bartleby leaves the reader, by providing an answer for the human being faced with meaninglessness. Vonnegut's answer lies in the two ultimate, endorsed systems for meaning in the pursuit of knowledge—religion and creation—both of which necessitate the inclusion of humor.

CHAPTER TWO

A Close Reading of Wall Street in “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

“See the cat? [. . .] See the cradle?”
—Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*

“I would prefer not to”
—Herman Melville, “Bartleby”

Set in New York City during the mid-nineteenth century, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” is Herman Melville’s earliest short story masterpiece. Tracing the tale of an elderly lawyer’s previous scrivener, Melville’s tale is saturated with social commentary, lending his portrayal of contemporary American society to elements of satire and, at times, black humor. However, the crucial question about Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” involves identifying Melville’s satirical commentary, for the character of Bartley has kept scholarly and academic interpretative debates open since the late nineteenth century. That it is a masterpiece of ambiguity and subjectivity is revealed immediately in its title through the juxtaposition of “Bartleby,” the social anomaly in every respect, and “Wall Street,” the representative of the normative social mindset. According to Sheila Post-Lauria, disregarding the binary nature of this story “unnecessarily restricts the hermeneutic possibilities that the author suggests in his double title,” and this is critical in understanding the levels of commentary in motion throughout the piece (197).

Yet, several years after Post-Lauria, scholar Barbara Foley continues to call attention to this issue arguing that Melville’s story “has to this point been exempted from

a thorough-going historical recontextualization; its subtitle remains to be fully explained” (87). It is common to interpret the story of Bartleby as the negative, extremist embodiment of the Emersonian notion of the self-reliant individual—one who abstains from subscribing to social norms, implementing a sense of hyperbolic individualism. Typical of such a character is to purposefully stand out, perhaps simply for the sake of it, from the streamline social order. Despite the strengths of this interpretive line, it is also important to consider the “Story of Wall Street” as an equally negative commentary on society itself which, ultimately, facilitates the precipitation of Bartleby’s death. One cannot criticize Bartleby outside of society, for its very ills warrant his character: Bartleby’s characterization is such that he is the perfectly crafted vehicle through which Melville reveals the shortcomings of his counterparts in the “Story of Wall-Street.”

This chapter will provide a close reading of “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,” analyzing the story of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” within the larger framework of the “Story of Wall-Street.” Though this interpretation will draw from scholarly criticism of both Bartleby and Wall-Street, mine will synthesize these aspects to reveal Melville’s critique of the latter through the lawyer’s perspective in the narrative rendition of the former. Demonstrating this will establish a new lens through which to view Vonnegut’s novel *Cat’s Cradle* as a furtherance of the issues at hand in Melville’s piece, and it will reveal Vonnegut’s postmodern novel as a work with profound optimistic implications relative to Melville’s modern “Bartleby.” Melville critiques the new world of Wall Street by lending the narrative to the lawyer’s “Wall-Street” perspective, through which he delivers the significance of appellative identities in relating to those around him; describes the enigmatic character of Bartleby and attempts to solve it; and discloses

the futility of his systematic, social programming in both averting and comprehending the final outcome.

Blanka Maderová delves into the notion of identity, providing the American cultural and ideological context: “the American self has always been, according to many thinkers, closely related to individualism, self-reliance and rhetoric” (55). She focuses strongly on the Bartleby side of this story, highlighting his dearth of discourse within the text as a means of “[decomposing] rather than [composing] the setting and the character itself,” and placing this in opposition with Emerson’s notions of “an independent, self-creative self” through oration and discourse (65). However, she neglects the binary nature of the story through her neglect of the narrator, who holds the power over the discourse of this story, and, subsequently, over the portrayal of identity. Through him, Bartleby’s character and scant, succinct statements are portrayed to the reader, and these should be taken in context of the world which the narrator constructs; in him, Melville creates a caricature of the “Wall-Street” mentality to gauge the normative social responses to the problems posed by Bartleby’s atypical behavior.

Melville’s narrator never introduces himself by name, opening the narrative with the first-person pronoun appositional to himself: “I am a rather elderly man,” closely pursued by mention of his “avocations” (1483). The narrator initially disregards any necessity for explanatory remarks about his own identity for a significant portion of the narrative’s inception in order to immediately introduce the impetus for his report: “Bartleby, who was a scrivener the strangest [he] ever saw or heard of” (1483). Here, the narrator appears to be justifying his narrative, avowing that he has known many scriveners—“professionally and privately”—of whom he would not write but that the

anomalous story of Bartleby is too compelling in its mystery to ignore. This introduction, I argue, sets the framework for understanding the very narrative to follow as the narrator's own "Story of Wall-Street" attempt to elicit meaning from his experiences with "Bartleby, the Scrivener." It is, essentially, an epistemological endeavor through narrative to cope with the events it will delineate, yet bound within the "Wall Street" ideology.

In light of this, the narrator goes on to give his interpretation of its rigid Wall Street-esque contextual structure, mentioning himself and his employees along with his "business," "chambers," and "general surroundings" (1484). This groups the people with the physical aspects of the setting, foreshadowing the disregard for the individual's worth that will come up later in the story, "because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of [Bartleby]" (1484). He admits: "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best," revealing his uninspired disposition and the far-reaching roots of his ingrained stance on life (1484). Pursuing this way of life, in the context of Wall Street, the "eminently *safe* man," doubling as our narrator, fulfills the typical professional role of lawyer, the head of the office. In the interest of safety, he is

one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. (1484)

He proudly cites John Jacob Astor's opinion of him, wherein Astor posited the lawyer's "first grand point to be prudence" and his next "method," indicating his mechanized sense of security (1484). The significance of this is twofold: first, it is made clear that there is nothing exceptional about this narrator in his personal or professional life, much like the numerous scriveners' stories that he disregards.

Second, he interestingly provides Astor's full name when no other character is granted this dignity throughout his narrative:

I do not speak in vanity, but simply record the fact, that I was not unemployed by the late John Jacob Astor; a name which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion. I will freely add, that I was not insensible to the late John Jacob Astor's good opinion. (1484)

Significantly, John Jacob Astor IV is an historical figure, a businessman who "had made one of the largest fortunes of his era." Alluding to him by name, Melville sets him apart from the narrator's portrait of Wall Street, elevating Astor above it in order to emphasize the narrator's run-of-the-mill, working-class status that symbolizes the typical, unglamorous reality of Wall Street. He uses Astor's name three times, clearly expressing his esteem for the man without overtly referencing his professional identity; in the context of the narrative, he can take for granted that his audience will recognize this important name, which carries a pleasing completeness for the narrator, and he compares it to "bullion," which denotes gold or silver. With this, the stage is set for the role that identity plays within this "Story of Wall Street," for revealing the narrator's status completes his social context and leaves him ready to betray its role within the physical setting.

Before introducing his employees, the narrator binds his own identity with the landscape in which the others will exist, highlighting both his irrevocable association—that makes him almost metonymic—with Wall Street and the interchangeability of his employees within the landscape, as he addresses them out of sequence with his previous list of subjects. This is seen in a paradoxically superficial description of his office, the place where he spends the majority of his time, that reveals a sense of profound lack:

This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call “life.” But if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. (1484)

This passing statement is significant in that it provides a subconscious, notional assent to the fact that there is something about the essence of life fulfilled that is absent in this place of his existence, while confirming his refusal or inability to consider this further: it is the normative. As unambitious as his surroundings, he quickly undermines this observation by claiming contentment in the trivial consolation of viewing his office from a different side, thus, taking the easy, passive way out of careful consideration. Clark Davis explains that the narrator’s “assiduously maintained innocence blinds him to the inadequacy of the notions he needs in order to keep his illusions,” for he is a conformed member of society who possesses no unique or original qualities (49). Thus, Melville allows the narrator no individual identifier, such as a name, by which to distinguish him from the larger Wall Street.

Regressing in his list, the narrator returns to the promise to describe his employees and introduces the reader to the first two: Turkey and Nippers are the two copyists in the office who are only productive at their jobs for half of each workday. Their names having been “deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters,” Turkey is “apt to be altogether too energetic,” causing his copying to be blotted and messy, whereas Nippers experiences restlessness, discontent, and indigestion that distract him from working productively (1485). Fortunately, the narrator “never had to do with their eccentricities at one time,” for “their fits relieved each other like guards [. . .] when Nippers was on, Turkey was off; [. . .] this was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances” (1488). While the narrator, as we have seen, is known to exude prudence,

he is also self-avowed to be unambitious; therefore, although having two employees doing one job appears impractical and nonsensical, let alone uneconomical, his complacency in underachieving permits this arrangement to continue. He recounts his one attempt to dismiss Turkey from his employment: the narrator fails to exert any authority and allows Turkey's "intolerably fervid" response to null his grievance, merely "resolving, nevertheless, to see to it, that during the afternoon he had only to do with [the narrator's] less important papers" (1486).

Under the surface this is an instance wherein Melville's satirical humor is accessible, for the narrator's passivity which allows him to perceive this union as an acceptable compromise, in the midst of a competitive financial culture, comically portrays the desensitization of this society toward not only the individual but also, by extension, its very own values. Functioning as part of the landscape, in suit with the character of the narrator, Turkey and Nippers are unexceptional, unambitious individuals, and, independent of each other, they are rendered useless *as* individuals yet are paid individually to perform one job. The narrator identifies these two men with silly nicknames—"the like of which are not usually found in the Directory"—that highlight their personality quirks that keep them from working, setting himself up to appear foolish since they are both only useful in conjunction with each other (1484). Thus, their true names are meaningless as identifiers in this system, and their nicknames reveal a perceived meaninglessness in both men's lives, but, shockingly, like Astor, they have monetary value.

Regarding Ginger Nut, however, the appellation ascribed to him carries a bit more weight. He is only twelve years old and is working in the office "as student at law, errand

boy, and cleaner and sweeper” at the request of his father (1488). Ginger Nut is marginalized in this narrative, and this is because of the narrator’s perception of his ultimate insignificance, which is evidenced in the meaning behind his name:

Not least among the employments of Ginger Nut, as well as one which he discharged with the most alacrity, was his duty as cake and apple purveyor for Turkey and Nippers [. . .] they set Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake [. . .] after which he had been named by them. (1488)

The narrator refers to his fetching cakes as a “duty,” which has implications of deep, internal obligations that intertwine with one’s identity. Thus, his appellation is straightforward in an explicit reference to his identifying purpose in the office, unlike the nicknames for Turkey and Nippers, whose individual appellations are less direct because they are functionally incomplete in serving their office purposes individually. Ginger Nut’s identity is associated with the obligation of retrieving this candy snack, a task he readily and cheerfully completes, which shows the pervasiveness of this institution not only in the way that others unthinkingly devalue his worth but also in his own sense of self. In this case Melville’s satirical humor is progressively blackening: Ginger Nut is fully functional according to their standards, but his function is meaningless. Through the narrator’s presentation of these appellative identities, Melville is satirizing the “Story of Wall-Street,” with aspects of both light and black humor, by establishing the provinciality of its own worth and the worth it posits on individuals.

Maderová, though focused on *Bartleby*, states in passing that “criticism of institutions and ideologies can be found [in Emerson’s work]” that are “not surprisingly already in the work of Herman Melville” (56). This is a key connection to analyzing Melville’s “Story of Wall-Street” through the Emersonian lens, even though her article does not expand on this idea (56). Emerson’s essay entitled “Self-Reliance,” the work

that is generally applied to analyzing “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” contains this mutual critique of institutions and ideologies that Maderová references:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (Emerson, 261)

Though he holds the oratory power to identify and create, the narrator upholds this social conformist mindset, perpetuated by the desensitization that facilitates his complacency, and mechanically allocates identities based on societal roles and functions rather than portraying whole persons. This Emersonian reading renders the narrator, rather than Bartleby, in a negative light as he limits the human being’s existence to the economic sphere defined by his job. His depiction of society affirms the grounds for Melville’s social commentary on the narrator’s “Wall-Street” and provides context for Bartleby, the anomaly.

With the setting in place, the narrator finally arrives at “the chief character” of his story (1484). Hardly adequate and by no means satisfactory, the narrator’s understanding, or lack thereof, of Bartleby spans the rest of the story. When Bartleby becomes a copyist for the narrator, he is introduced as such: “it was Bartleby” (Melville, 1488). He is described outside of categorization, and his name is never explained as connoting a behavioral quirk or defining role: he simply appears as “a motionless young man” in the narrator’s office (1488). This is significant because it immediately sets him apart—he is neither nameless like the narrator nor nicknamed like the other employees, yet he is not given a full name like Astor—and shows his sense of apathetic neutrality. Attributing a charge to Bartleby, positive or negative, is problematic because he simply *is*. This trait

enables the character of Bartleby to represent the essence of subjectivity in the story because he is never definite; he constantly confounds reason: “Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small” (1483). This allows him to struggle in opposition to the objectivity characteristic of the Wall Street mentality.

The reasons or meanings behind Bartleby are unattainable, and this further antagonizes the narrator when confronted with Bartleby’s famous repetition of his “I prefer not to” response to each of his requests. In opposition with the attitude of Ginger Nut, Bartleby feels no pressure or pleasure in being called to “come forth and do [his] duty” when his employer finally attempts to exert and express authority (1491). Bartleby cannot be compartmentalized into a social box labeled after his job, and this noncommittal, non-confrontational refusal to comply begins to disrupt the office. This is commonly perceived as the extreme embodiment of Emerson’s notion of self-reliance, for he posits the idea that “whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist,” and Bartleby is seen as the danger of taking this too far (Emerson, 261). However, the narrator’s reactions to Bartleby’s behavior are significant in considering the social critique at play in the “Story of Wall Street,” for he shows the weaknesses of this institution in its inability to respond to and cope with the atypical.

Davis comments on this, warranting the idea that Melville was probably aware of “the deep incompatibility of individualism with theories of social improvement and social mobilization” in his characterization of Bartleby; however, Davis applies an interpretation to the narrator’s mindset as well: “remarkably, Melville does not condemn his self-reliant character for passivity but instead fixes his critical eye on a comfortable

man of society who fails to see the inadequacy of his goodwill” (Davis, 49). The narrator’s goodwill lies in his attempts to help Bartleby, interpreting his anomalous behavior as an indicator of a pitiable condition of illness or melancholy:

Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. (1492)

The narrator thinks of Bartleby as a type of project, the completion of which will look good on the résumé of his life, yet he is unable to fulfill this altruistic endeavor because he is too easily vexed by Bartleby: “nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance” (1492). Regardless of the pity he feels for him, he cannot help requesting Bartleby’s help in matters of work, which never ends positively for the lawyer. This exemplifies Melville’s critique of the narrator’s striving to apply his “Story of Wall-Street” to the problem of “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” for attempting to understand the latter through the former is fundamentally futile: Wall Street has no jurisdiction over Bartleby and is powerless to solve this problem.

Post-Lauria presents another aspect of duality in this two-fold story that helps explain the complicated dynamic between the narrator and Bartleby:

The narrator’s relation in his double role as lawyer and as narrator to both his literal and his narrative subject, Bartleby, portrays a double story: the tale of the lawyer’s involvement with his employee Bartleby and the tale of the narrator’s relation to his subject. (Post-Lauria, 200)

In the predominant role of the lawyer, he is Bartleby’s boss yet wields no authority over him; Davis’ article refers to this as “the narrative’s superbly held tension,” which “issues directly from its primary relationship, which is between a very odd copyist and his employer” (Davis, 48). When Bartleby responds to his employer’s requests, he never definitively states a refusal to comply, yet the lawyer can never contend with his

statement, “I *prefer* not,” or his lack of response. This is seemingly incredible, since the lawyer, according to his understanding of the world through social norms, holds the superior position, yet Melville uses this to point out an unexpected flaw in this system: it only works if everyone subscribes to it, and Bartleby subverts it entirely with detached diction and tacit disregard.

Todd Giles attempts to explain this phenomenon, tying their inability to communicate effectively back to the notion of identity as it is bound up in the use of language in defining and recognizing societal common ground:

Bartleby’s silence establishes distance, while at the same time inviting the desire for proximity [. . .] this is exasperated at the moment of silence’s reiteration; when Bartleby speaks, he highlights his silence. [. . .] at this moment language calls attention to itself by acknowledging its absence, and at this same moment, too, others want to turn to language to describe the silence, as if silence were a removal of language, rather than language a supplement of silence. (Giles, 89)

The fact that he is so passively able to derail the conventional, calm atmosphere of this office with such dispassionate language is indicative of a social order that necessitates the idea of a “correct” response in this environment. In addition, his “silence” lies both in the fact that he occasionally neglects to speak and in the fact that, when he does, the things he says might as well be silence since they hold no interpretive meaning for the lawyer. Maderová explains that his response “is not a statement, it is indeterminate” and “its inconclusiveness means that one cannot say anything decisive” (Maderová, 66). The distance mentioned by Giles keeps the professional relationship of the lawyer and Bartleby at an impasse but evokes the want for proximity between the narrator and Bartleby in the sense of the possession of an understanding. Bartleby essentially beguiles the narrator, for the latter can recognize the former’s language but is thwarted by Bartleby’s extreme, subjectively derived autonomy: the narrator’s Wall Street-esque

social programming demands an objective, correct response and cannot compute the exact meaning of Bartleby, sending his system into a frenzy.

This sentiment is epitomized in the story when the narrator introduces the scene wherein Bartleby refuses to write. “Why, how now? what next? [. . .], do no more writing?”, the narrator inquires, to which Bartleby responds, “no more,” and the narrator rejoins: “And what is the reason?” (1498). The narrative presentation of Bartleby’s final response is highly significant: ““Do you not see the reason for yourself,’ he indifferently replied” (1498). Melville leaves the absence of a question mark ambiguous: Bartleby’s crucial question is rhetorical, thus lacking a question mark that would indicate a necessity for an answer, for his point is, essentially, that there is no point to or meaning behind life in this “Story of Wall-Street,” and the knowledge of this causes his extreme, debilitating indifference to the world around him. The narrator, however, in not granting Bartleby’s language the defining punctuation denoting a question, seems to afford himself the option to be remiss in his own response, once again missing the “point” of Bartleby. Here, Melville is satirizing the attempt to impose the objective on the subjective and has the narrator, comically, chalk Bartleby’s demeanor up to the only rational response: “instantly it occurred to me, that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision” (1498). Needless to say, Bartleby is not blind, nor does he resume his copying.

Therefore, the lawyer can no longer maintain Bartleby as an employee when “necessities connected with [his] business tyrannized over all other considerations,” (Melville 1499). The narrator cannot see past his financial institution and socially driven mentality to thrive in his shallow, sympathetic sphere. Preferring not to work at all,

Bartleby is fired but does not leave the office, and the narrator tolerates his lingering until he can no longer face “the unsolicited and uncharitable remarks obtruded upon [him] by [his] professional friends who visited the rooms” (1502). His hyperbolic solution to this problem is the culmination of Melville’s subtle black humor which has been underlying the narrative. The narrator’s “Story of Wall-Street” comes to a stalemate and is wholly incapable of incorporating or ousting Bartleby; therefore, exasperated by Bartleby’s presence and powerless to directly confront his notion of the absurd, the narrating lawyer moves his entire practice out of the office. This reveals the extent to which the Wall Street mentality is ill equipped to combat the infectiously apathetic aura of Bartleby, which, ultimately, stands to discredit all that the members of this society hold sacred as a source of life-sustaining purpose.

It is not long before the narrator is comically called back to the scene of his old office to deal with Bartleby when others hold the narrator accountable for Bartleby’s lurking presence on the banister. The exchange that occurs between the two men as narrator to subject, rather than employer to employee, is far softer: the narrator sincerely tries to aid Bartleby in the only way he knows how, offering him employment and lodging. These are the only desirable resources within the narrator’s frame of reference that he has to offer. Davis calls to attention that “not only does [Bartleby] decline his employer’s repeated offers of help but also the economy of charity and rational betterment presupposed by those offers” (48). This leaves the lawyer exasperated and unable to discern how to get through to Bartleby, since he has no interest in anything the narrator believes to be of value. Here, Melville is revealing the provincial mindset of economically driven motives and morals in coping with this outlier. Throughout this

time, the narrator still does not seem able to grasp the essence of Bartleby, which Davis explains as “the presence of one who will not be transformed into a problem susceptible of solution” (50). This is a critical component of Melville’s satire, for after everything has happened, precipitating the narrator’s transportation of his business to an entirely different venue, he still holds no interpretive ground on the “Bartleby, the Scrivener” story that he is trying to relay.

Though Bartleby continually rejects the narrator’s ventures to help, the latter refuses to resign his cause, even when Bartleby is arrested and imprisoned. Promptly visiting him in “the Tombs,” the narrator continues to machinate ways to aid Bartleby: “slipping some silver into the grub-man’s hands,” the narrator tells “the grub-man” to “give particular attention to [Bartleby]” and to “let him have the best dinner [he] can get” (1507). Meanwhile, Bartleby continues to reject every offer of sustenance attempted by the narrator, refusing to eat the food provided to him. The narrator’s understanding of reality still cannot compete with Bartleby’s, this time, to save his life. What Bartleby requires for survival, which the narrator cannot provide, is not money, food, shelter, or any of the elements of the narrator’s system: he needs a purpose, to find a reason to continue. Ironically, the narrator, in persistently offering Bartleby the motivating forces from his own culture, cannot conceive that Bartleby finds these meaningless, pushing him further into his isolation through his inability to espouse the narrator’s system.

Perishing in prison, Bartleby affects the narrator until the latter can come to a satisfactory explanation of the former. He supplements his narrative with a rumor containing the closest information he has come across regarding the origin of Bartleby:

Upon what basis it rested, I could never ascertain; and hence, how true it is I cannot now tell. [. . .] The report was this: that Bartleby had been a subordinate

clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington [. . .] When I think over this rumor, I cannot adequately express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? (Melville, 1509)

Peter Smith points out that the narrator's inclusion of this rumor "indicates how vital he feels this 'item' has been to his understanding of Bartleby" (Smith 157). Yet, just as Bartleby was never to be definitively categorized in life, so in his death there is uncertainty even in this apparent answer. Giles offers the connection that "Bartleby, like the rumor of the dead-letter office, is that which never arrives in any form of quantifiable totality," for Melville lends him wholly over to subjectivity (Giles 90). The absence of Bartleby presents the narrator with the opportunity to finally posit his interpretation of Bartleby, for it can now sit uncontested without the source from which to seek affirmation. The narrator no longer requires meeting Bartleby on the terms of a consensual reality—in which Bartleby, alive, always took no part—and thus enables him to conclude his narrative of "Bartleby, the Scrivener."

Moreover, Bartleby stands, neither negatively nor positively, for the futility and meaninglessness of life, which the narrator seems to sense by the end of his story, lamenting that "on errands of life, these letters speed to death," and his exclamatory "ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" is the best he can do to relay his emotional response to these ideas (Melville 1509). "Bartleby does not operate as a closed rhetorical model," continues Gains, "he calls into question the nature of writing and existence, exposing [the reader] to something beyond, [. . .] in the realm of the undecidable," and, therefore, his effects on the narrator cannot be finite or conclusive (Gains 90). He is a neutral provocation of thought and individual interpretation, to which the Wall Street world of the lawyer denies access in order to protect its system reliant on mass conformity. This puts the burden of

the narrative itself on the lawyer, who takes on the task of writing the story of Bartleby, which has been provoked by his desire to find closure in these events that led to Bartleby's senseless death. With no authorities from which to draw on the life of Bartleby, besides the brief, rumored account mentioned, the narrator turns to art—subjective in nature—to satisfy his curiosity (1509).

However, even this is still flawed, trapped within the limiting scope of the “Story of Wall-Street,” for the narrator cannot entirely detach himself from his mentality of Wall Street, dependent upon facts and correctness, and approaches his narrative from the objective, biographical standpoint. He laments the mysteries of Bartleby, calling into question “who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led” before the narrator encountered him, that spark his curiosity which he is “wholly unable to gratify” (1509). Ultimately, Melville has presented his social commentary through the perspective of “Wall-Street,” critiquing the problematic aspects of it from within as it attempts to reconcile the social pariah to its system and fails gravely. Implementing the Wall Street ideology as a means for understanding, the narrator's perceptions are severely limited, and he is unturned to individual nuance or to the possibility of the other. This rigid societal structure affords no room for individuality, and this is what Melville is critiquing through the character and death of Bartleby. Melville's piece sees no avenue to survival within the “Story of Wall-Street” for the individual in the face of profound meaninglessness.

CHAPTER THREE

Science and Technology in *Cat's Cradle*

“She hated people who thought too much. At that moment, she struck me as an appropriate representative for almost all mankind.”

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (1963)

Set in upstate New York during the mid-twentieth century, *Cat's Cradle* is a meta-fictional narrative, wherein the narrator, Jonah, announces his presence as the novel's storyteller. Through Jonah's journalistic perspective, the novel is imbued with Vonnegut's social commentary and satirical account of contemporary American society. However, like Melville's "Wall-Street," *Cat's Cradle* addresses a segment of society, the scientific community, in order to take its pulse and diagnose the repercussions of its contagious condition. That it is an unconventional novel is evident in the first couple pages: *Cat's Cradle* is comprised of one-hundred-and-twenty-seven individual, and seemingly bizarre, chapters that immediately introduce the ideas of apocalypse, science, and religion. Despite its obvious science fiction, Vonnegut's fictional world remains faithful to reality. To dismiss *Cat's Cradle* as a mere inhabitant of this commercial genre is to foreclose on the novel's deep, prophetic implications for American society. According to John Coates, *Cat's Cradle*'s "easy conversational flow, with its flavour of well-bred gossip, belies the sharpness of what is said, and, even more, implied," and this is critical in understanding Vonnegut's satirical journey toward the ends of knowledge (34).

Mirroring Melville's "Bartleby," Vonnegut's implicit social commentary confronts an institution and the imposition of its ideology on an indomitable subject, as it "offers a worldly-wise insider's view of the social scene it describes, a vision which, at the same time, is informed by severe, even bleak, moral rigour" (Coates 34). Thus, in apposition to Melville's rendition of "Bartleby," who, independent of his social context, has immunity as a subject for critique, one cannot criticize Vonnegut's rendition of science outside the context of contemporary society, for its very ills warrant *Cat's Cradle's* science fiction. However, unlike "Bartleby," *Cat's Cradle* is, ultimately, a tale of the individual's propensity for triumph within the world of socially sanctioned apathy. In this chapter, I will analyze Vonnegut's satire in light of Melville's "Bartleby" in order to qualify the label of science fiction that Vonnegut's novel often receives. Vonnegut's uses of science and technology parallel the roles of institutions and ideologies in Melville's "Story of Wall-Street," providing a similar moral condemnation of humanity as whole by exposing the problematic, pervasive ethics of its constituents. This is evidenced in Vonnegut's nonfiction relationship to science, the ethical impetus behind his narrative, and his characterizations of science and technology in *Cat's Cradle*.

I. *Vonnegut, Science, and Journalism*

Heavily involved with his high school newspaper, "writer, wit, and mischief maker," Kurt Vonnegut Jr. decided that he "wanted to be a newspaperman" and managed, independently, to secure a job with the *Indianapolis Star*. However, this excitement was short-lived as his family pushed him toward a college education (Shields 34). His brother, Bernard Vonnegut, "had proved by example that [. . .] the 'arts were ornamental'"

through his graduate studies “in physics at MIT” during this pivotal time in Kurt’s young life (34). Advocating for Cornell University, Bernard “vetoed [Kurt’s] dreams, which were to become a writer,” for “no one in the family had made good by chasing after the Muses [. . .] humankind would be grateful to those who understood the natural and physical sciences” (34). Vonnegut, as quoted in Charles’ Shields’ biography, admits that he “enrolled in the sciences at Cornell only as a sop to [Bernard], no other reason” (35). Thus, Vonnegut was not a student of the arts in college. Entering Cornell in 1940, he “was a science major, instructed by his father not to ‘waste time or money on ‘frivolous’ courses, but to give full attention to practical studies, principally physics and chemistry and math”” (36).

However, Vonnegut’s *A Man Without a Country* contextualizes his family’s aversion to his artistic aspirations and elucidates the conjunction of the arts and sciences that later came to characterize his career:

I am from a family of artists. Here I am, making a living in the arts. It has not been a rebellion. It’s as though I had taken over the family Esso station [. . .] so I’m simply making my living in the customary family way [. . .] but my father, who was a painter and an architect, was so hurt by the Depression, when he was unable to make a living, that he thought I should have nothing to do with the arts [. . .] He told me I could go to college only if I studied something practical.
(Vonnegut 14-15)

He appeased his family with his practical studies in chemistry, yet he continued to foster his writing abilities as a staff member of the *Cornell Daily Sun* (Shields 38). Immersed in two connotatively different worlds, Vonnegut was compelled to view them in conjunction. Essentially, Vonnegut’s writing style was cultivated by the nonfiction, “journalistic style of short, punchy sentences, active verbs, and strong structure,” and his intellect had constant encounters with scientific reasoning and theoretical practice

(Shields 33). Vonnegut's report-style writing and scientific literacy, developed during college, were significantly formative for him, and this is apparent when he links these two outlooks in his creative fiction.

Though Vonnegut never became a career scientist, his studies in college, his relationship with Bernard, and his work at the General Electric Company in Schenectady, New York kept the sciences at the forefront of his creative writing. Shields writes that "Vonnegut's exposure to technology at one of the preeminent research facilities in the world might have led to a career writing nonfiction books about science, transportation, space exploration [. . .] but he was still determined to sell fiction" (101). This is critical in characterizing Vonnegut's novels—especially *Cat's Cradle*—for Shields points out both the nonfiction aspect of Vonnegut's immersion in the world of science and his chosen medium of fiction for conveying his world. His unique perspective and experiences, borne out of his journalistic relationship to humanity and his academic pursuits in science, permeate his writing:

It was a strange paradox to consider inside a corporate compound where there was a restaurant, fire department, clinic, outings, and an athletic club—all the trappings of community, togetherness, and belonging. Two forces were vying—technology and humanity—and General Electric was at the center of the contest. (103)

Vonnegut relays this observed dichotomy in *Cat's Cradle*, where science sets its technology up against humanity and the world, ending in the apocalypse. Vonnegut takes his journalistic knack for perceiving the world around him—in this case, the hub of scientific experimentation, General Electric—and couches his report within fictional narrative. In this setting, "there was no avoiding it," says Vonnegut, "since the General Electric Company *was* science fiction" (qtd in Shields 103).

II. *Vonnegut and Ethics: Technology and Humanity*

Thus, like Melville's contemporary critique of the Wall Street era, Vonnegut's is immersed in the world subject to his critique, and the roots for the narrative of *Cat's Cradle* extend back to Vonnegut's time at General Electric:

A story often repeated at the Schenectady plant concerned H. G. Wells's visit in the 1930s. The head scientist, Irving Langmuir, had proposed an idea to Wells for a story about a form of water that solidified at room temperature. Wells, the most famous science fiction writer of the day, expressed interest, but his novels, at their core, were parables about humanity—a scientific conundrum didn't interest him. (Shields 176)

This distinction is important: Wells, an asserted science fiction writer, was not interested in the reality aspect of this scenario; however, Vonnegut, previously a journalist and now a fiction writer, was fascinated by this thought-provoking idea: "taking the concept a step further, [Vonnegut] asked: what if water, the most common liquid on the planet, could be weaponized, the way that matter torn apart by nuclear fission had created the atom bomb?" (Shields 177). Though his question was answered in the negative by one of the scientists at General Electric, "his brother Bernard's cloud seeding experiments at General Electric convinced him that weather modification raised ethical issues more important than how water actually crystallizes" (Shields 177).

This ethical concern is an integral characteristic of Vonnegut's writing, and it directly correlates in *Cat's Cradle* with the instances of scientific experimentation occurring around him. An eyewitness to Bernard Vonnegut's 1962 climate experiments, which "took on shades of a scientist trying to shock nature into doing its bidding," Kurt Vonnegut found the impetus that would precipitate his publication of *Cat's Cradle* the following year:

On a signal, a 30,000-volt generator sent pulses of current through the wire, while Dr. [Bernard] Vonnegut and his team watched the skies for signs of rain. Nothing happened, except that his brother, the science fiction novelist, saw how attempts to distort nature were a scenario ripe for satire. (Shields 177)

Thus, the speculative aspects of science in *Cat's Cradle* that—inspired by the story that failed to inspire Wells—take Vonnegut's narrative into the genre of science fiction link the novel with the very real, nonfiction inspiration of this climate experiment. *Cat's Cradle* is a blend of Vonnegut's journalistic reporting on the scientific community and the hypothetical—in this sense, what could happen if technology is “weaponized.” Finding contempt for the scientific community's endeavors, Vonnegut's narrative is ultimately a thoughtful, satirical commentary.

Lazar groups Vonnegut within the “science popularizers” subdivision, “hackology,” that she uses to embrace “people like Heinlein, Herbert, Orwell, [and] Huxley” (237). Writing about their respective, surrounding worlds, the common denominator that “characterizes the entire spectrum of the science popularizers field is a conscious blending of empirical data with a sense of moral direction,” and this is precisely the premise for *Cat's Cradle* (238). The aspect of “empirical data” explicitly grounds the information in observable reality, and Vonnegut's subject of ethical interrogation, science, leads him toward speculative science fiction as he considers the subsequent, moral implications of knowledge on humanity. Undoubtedly, in this qualification of science fiction, Vonnegut would not have rejected Lazar's assessment of his writing or the influential authors with whom he shares such moral and ethical qualms.

However, unlike Orwell or Huxley, who couched critiques of totalitarian, governmental regimes within speculative scientific mechanisms for controlling citizens, Vonnegut is critiquing science itself. Comparative to Melville's using the atmosphere of

Wall Street as an apt medium for critiquing Wall Street itself, Vonnegut's vehicle for satirizing the scientific community and its behavior within the larger world, suitably, is science itself and its technologies. Daniel L. Zins sheds further light on Vonnegut's style of satire, qualifying his science fiction within its larger narrative:

In one of his earlier novels, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), Vonnegut also employs SF [science fiction] to help us stop and think about our most important problem, and the one we seem to have the most difficulty confronting: the increasing possibility of our destroying the world by our own stupidity and our deification of science and technology. (170)

In addition to Vonnegut's own reality closely connected with General Electric as inspiration for *Cat's Cradle*, Zins sharply captures Vonnegut's perception of and interest in the broader reality closely affected by science's technological developments. Merging his observations of scientific inquiry with the speculative realm, Vonnegut displays ethical concerns for human behavior and moral concerns for the health and future of humanity.

III. *Cat's Cradle and Science*

Cat's Cradle begins with a specific indictment of science, introducing Vonnegut's ethical and moral concerns from its very inception in two parts: the narrator's name and purpose. As Robert Tally divulges, the first three words—"call me Jonah"—"unmistakably [echo] that of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville's end-of-the-world masterpiece," wherein *Cat's Cradle's* apocalyptic outcome is foreshadowed, and Vonnegut places himself as a writer on par with Melville (1). Subsequently, Jonah informs the reader that he had been writing "a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*," that it "was to be factual," and that it "was to be an account of what important

Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan” (Vonnegut 1). Equating the use of the atom bomb with the end of the world, Vonnegut reveals his verdict: in utilizing this technological weaponry against one another, humans have not only killed one another but also have harmed the health of humanity as a whole. This ethical matter, brought to the forefront of his science fiction novel, is a real account of scientific destruction, grounded in the “factual” through its pairing with August 6, 1945. Its moral implications concern humanity through its focus on “important Americans” who would have been at the forefront of the scientific development of this technology. The atomic bomb radically changed the world as everyone previously knew it, and Vonnegut grounds his own speculative, destructive, fictional technology and apocalypse in the memory of this iconic event to invoke and maintain a sense of the realistic, perilous proportions scientific endeavors can have on the world.

Jonah’s composing this book leads him to an inquiry into the life of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, “one of the so-called ‘Fathers’ of the first atomic bomb,” the archetypal scientist (6). Dr. Hoenikker has since passed away, leaving behind a scientific legacy and three children. “The first of his heirs” whom Jonah encounters is Newton Hoenikker, the youngest of the Hoenikker trio (6). Writing to Newton, Jonah requests information about the day that the bomb was dropped, informing him that his book “is going to emphasize the *human* rather than the *technical* side of the bomb,” so Newton’s childhood “recollections of the day” will “fit in perfectly” (7). Through this, Vonnegut is attempting to delineate the human components of such an inhumane atrocity, maintaining the moral interest in humanity while investigating the ethical dilemma of science and technology in

dropping the atom bomb. However, Jonah soon finds that both sides to the bomb, associated with Dr. Hoenikker, are—as in the binary tale of “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”—“deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life’” (Melville 1484). This sets up Jonah’s familiarization with Dr. Hoenikker as both the father of the atomic bomb and the father of three children, revealing significant aspects of the scientist’s character—relative to his immediate world on the day of the atomic bomb—and, ultimately, Vonnegut’s characterization of science.

Significantly, the moniker consistently used in reference to Dr. Hoenikker by his children, first seen in Newton’s response, is simply “father,” which is the same appellation denoting the scientist’s relationship to the atom bomb (8). He gives an account of August 6, 1945, reminding Jonah that he “was only six years old when they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima” (8). Here, Newton’s language is detached from any identification with the bomb and its execution, which is seemingly strange in the context of his relationship to its creator. However, Dr. Hoenikker’s behavior, recounted by Newton, is even more problematically impervious to the same event:

I remember I was playing on the living-room carpet outside my father’s study door in Ilium, New York. The door was open, and I could see my father. He was wearing pajamas and a bathrobe. He was smoking a cigar. He was playing with a loop of string. Father was staying home from the laboratory in his pajamas all day that day. He stayed home whenever he wanted to. (8-9)

Absent, physically and mentally, from the events of the day, Dr. Hoenikker’s disinterest in the fruit of his professional labors is unsettling: “that was the way he was. Nobody could predict what he was going to be interested in next. On the day of the bomb it was string” (11). It is fitting, then, that Newton barely associates himself with the atom bomb, for his father was hardly invested in his own invention.

Dr. Hoenikker's disposition is further evidenced in his interactions with his present progeny on the day of the bomb. Newton writes that Dr. Hoenikker "must have surprised himself when he made a cat's cradle out of the string," for he entered the living-room, and "he tried to play with me. Not only had he never played with me before; he had hardly ever spoken to me" (11-12). This account accentuates Dr. Hoenikker's identity as a father:

[Father] went down on his knees on the carpet next to me, and he showed me his teeth, and he waved that tangle of string in my face. "See? See? See?" he asked. "Cat's cradle. See the cat's cradle? See where the nice pussycat sleeps? Meow. Meow." [. . .] And then he sang. "Rockabye catsy, in the tree top"; he sang, "when the wind blows, the cray-dull will rock. If the bough breaks [. . .]." (12)

A comical image of Dr. Hoenikker, Newton describes his father, "so close up," as "the ugliest thing [he] had ever seen," and this playful attempt—for the first time in Newton's six years—causes Newton to "burst into tears" and flee the house "as fast as [Newton] could go" (12). Thus, Dr. Hoenikker's inability to engage with his son speaks to his role as a father; he is more accustomed to intellectual interaction with his *technical* rather than *human* offspring. Furthermore, once the expert scientist's intellect has brought a project to fruition—the atom bomb or a cat's cradle—he is rendered incompetent to empathize with or assimilate into the larger world of humanity—Hiroshima or his family.

However, Dr. Hoenikker is not consciously heartless: for all his intelligence, he remains ignorant of and inscrutable to the world around him. As Zins writes, Newton's letter "limns a portrait of his father as a solipsistic and profoundly 'innocent' man" who is a genuinely curious and brilliant scientist, for he offers an anecdote about his father that sets up Jonah's familiarization with Dr. Hoenikker as both the man and the scientist—independent of his father-affiliated events of August 6, 1945 (171). Newton

explains that his sister, Angela, fulfilled the role of parental duties toward her two brothers and her father, “treating [them] exactly the same [. . .] only [Newt] was going to kindergarten; Frank [. . .] to junior high; and Father [. . .] to work on the atom bomb” (15). Relying on his twenty-two-year-old daughter as caretaker, the genius Dr. Hoenikker exists primarily in his own mental habitat—“people weren’t his specialty”—and does not acknowledge Angela’s struggling to start the car on the morning of Newt’s story (17). Instead, he absent-mindedly voices, “I wonder about turtles,” and subsequently was “so interested in turtles that he stopped working on the atom bomb” (16). Fundamentally, Dr. Hoenikker is motivated by his own whimsical interest in whatever scintillating puzzles happen to encounter his mind and win his attention.

Thus, Angela “was one of the unsung heroines of the atom bomb,” for Dr. Hoenikker himself found no investment in this invention aside from an opportunity to solve the puzzle of its creation:

Some people from the Manhattan Project finally came out to the house to ask Angela what to do. She told them to take away Father’s turtles [. . .] Father never said a word about the disappearance of his turtles. He just came to work the next day and looked for things to play with and think about, and everything there was to play with and think about had something to do with the bomb. (16-17)

The creation of technology was sustained by the ability of others to maintain Dr. Hoenikker’s intellectual intrigue and, thus, focus on the project. He is entirely disinterested in matters beyond the scope of captivating research, preventing his caring about or cognition of the missing turtles or the atom bomb outside of their immediate purposes as potential puzzles. The conclusion of Newton’s letter poignantly conveys this sentiment: “after the thing went off, and it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, ‘Science has now known

sin.’ And do you know what Father said? He said, ‘What is sin?’” (17). This demonstrates Dr. Hoenikker’s complete lack of identification with any ethical or moral issues in the technology he has just fathered, even when a fellow scientist recognizes and calls to attention the awful potential. Furthermore, this passage evidences Dr. Hoenikker’s semblance of awareness for the bomb’s potential, revealing further implications of his indifference in playing with string on the day his technology was utilized against humanity.

Just as Melville’s institutional representative of Wall Street is given the dual identity of narrator and lawyer, Vonnegut uses the dual father identity of Dr. Hoenikker as representative of the institution of science to facilitate his social commentary. In “Bartleby,” concerned with the financial and economic affairs, Melville’s narrator is in a position of power and status: he has control over both narrative and professional pursuits—he is in charge. This shapes his interactions with the binary tale of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and “A Story of Wall-Street.” In *Cat’s Cradle*, the representative’s roles as father connote a position of inherent responsibility and empathy: Dr. Hoenikker is directly responsible for a binary progeny—the “*technical*” and the “*human*”—and is detached from and neglectful of both. Both Melville and Vonnegut use their respective institutional representatives to satirize aspects of contemporary society by saturating their characters with the institutions’ failings. Whereas Melville’s critique of the institution of Wall Street negatively portrays its monetary priority and indifference to individual identities by immersing the narrative in “A Story of Wall-Street,” Vonnegut’s critique of the institution of science is couched within his portrayal of Dr. Hoenikker as a caricature

of science as an apathetic island—producing technology in a vacuum—cognizant only of its pursuit of research and knowledge and ignorant to humanity.

IV. Cat's Cradle *and Technology*

In meeting Dr. Asa Breed, the Vice-president of the Research Laboratory that housed Dr. Hoenikker's laboratory, Jonah is introduced to the culture of science in which the atom bomb, amongst other technologies, was researched and produced. Entering the Laboratory with Jonah and Dr. Breed, Miss Pefko, a secretary to one of the scientists, utters the word “magic” when the receptionist “[turned] on the many educational exhibits that lined the foyers walls” (36). In Dr. Breed's response, he divulges a sense of the institution of science's ideology concerning technology: “I'm sorry to hear a member of the Laboratory family using that brackish, medieval word [. . .] Every one of those exhibits explains itself. They're designed so as *not* to be mystifying. They're the very antithesis of magic” (36). Unconvinced, Miss Pefko responds that Dr. Breed “couldn't prove it by [her],” leaving him “just a little peeved,” for Miss Pefko cannot fully espouse this pragmatic, empirical ideology of science, and Dr. Breed's pragmatism cannot explain away her proclivity to unrealistic wonder (36). This exchange to which Jonah is merely privy as a bystander sets up the temperament of the ideological aspect of this institution through Dr. Breed. Whereas Dr. Hoenikker epitomized the detached, inquisitive intellectual, Dr. Breed is very much an attached, conscious proponent of the institution.

Highly defensive of science—and, thus, Dr. Hoenikker—Dr. Breed becomes “very sore” when Jonah's questions appear to accuse the institution of “[being] criminal

accessories to murder most foul” (39). Here, Vonnegut slips in this indictment through the voice of Dr. Breed, perturbed that Jonah is not an explicit admirer of Dr. Hoenikker:

All your questions seem aimed at getting me to admit that scientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all. (39)

Consequently, Vonnegut allows Dr. Breed a defense of his institution, wherein Dr. Breed proceeds to argue for the fruits of its pragmatic ideology and technology. He proudly posits that the General Forge and Foundry Company is “one of the few companies that actually hires men to do pure research,” claiming that other scientific laboratories are merely nominal research institutions (41). Devoted to discoveries of knowledge, Dr. Breed attempts to vindicate its ideology, exemplifying one of Dr. Hoenikker’s research projects for a Marine general “who was hounding him to do something about mud” because the Marines were tired of it and “were sick of carrying cumbersome objects” (43). In Dr. Hoenikker’s “playful way, and *all* his ways were playful,” Dr. Breed continues, he believed that it could be possible to find a “single grain of something [. . .] that could make infinite expanses of muck, marsh, swamp, creeks, pools, quicksand, and mire” into solid substances (43). This sets the stage for the introduction of the paradigmatic representative of this ideology—an instrument of the impending apocalypse—juxtaposed with the lighthearted image of its being born out of “playfulness.”

Pressing for information, Jonah receives a didactic mouthful of science as Dr. Breed delves into the “several ways [. . .] in which certain liquids can crystallize—can freeze—several ways in which their atoms can stack and lock in an orderly, rigid way” (44). However, Dr. Breed’s lesson takes a hypothetical tone, discussing a particular

“seed” as a “theoretical villain,” or “tiny grain of the undesired crystal pattern” that revolutionizes the way atoms “stack and lock, to crystallize, to freeze” (45). Throughout his explanation, the narrative tacitly endorses the validity of Dr. Breed’s tone, highlighting his diction during the core of his hypothetical track:

“Now suppose,” chortled Dr. Breed, enjoying himself, “that there were many possible ways in which water could crystallize, could freeze. Suppose that the sort of ice we skate upon and put into highballs—what we might call *ice-one*—is only one of several types of ice. Suppose water always froze as *ice-one* on Earth because it had never had a seed to teach it how to form *ice-two*, *ice-three*, *ice-four*. . . ? And suppose [. . .] that there were one form, which we will call *ice-nine*—a crystal as hard as this desk—with a melting point of, let us say, one-hundred degrees Fahrenheit, or, better still, a melting point of one-hundred-and-thirty degrees.” (46)

In the hands of the Marines—“a seed of *ice-nine*, a new way for the atoms of water to stack and lock, to freeze”—this technology would permit them to “rise from the swamp and march on,” once the *ice-nine* made contact with and froze the inconvenient liquid (48). Thus, *ice-nine* epitomizes the ideal of scientific research, claiming an endurance within the realm of theory, and reflects Vonnegut’s own experience with scientific postulation, inspired by the story from General Electric.

When Jonah asks for the second time whether “there really *isn’t* such a thing” as *ice-nine*, Dr. Breed’s disposition becomes vehement:

“I just told you there wasn’t!” cried Dr. Breed hotly. “Felix died shortly after that! And, if you’d been listening to what I’ve been trying to tell you about pure research men, you wouldn’t ask such a question! Pure research men work on what fascinates them, not on what fascinates other people.” (49)

Here, Dr. Breed’s argument reveals a flaw: Dr. Hoenikker is, arguably, the purest of “research men,” for Newt’s letter to Jonah portrayed his father’s extreme inclination to becoming fascinated by anything and everything puzzling in nature—he just purely was not fascinated by other people themselves. Pressing the matter, Jonah inquires into the

consequences that this technology could have: “if the streams flowing through the swap froze as *ice-nine*, what about the rivers and lakes the streams fed [. . .] And the oceans the frozen rivers fed [. . .] And the springs feeding the frozen lakes and streams, and all the water underground feeding the springs?” (49-50). Thus, Dr. Breed is forced to admit the snowball effect of *ice-nine* toward total chaos—“they’d freeze, damn it!”—culminating in its alterations to rainfall: “when it fell, it would freeze into hobnails of *ice-nine*—and that would be the end of the world!” (50).

However, pulling also from his knowledge of Bernard’s climate experiments—wherein scientists took passive theorization to active experimentation on the earth—Vonnegut does not allow Dr. Breed to shield science’s ideology behind conjecture for long. Having been kicked out of Dr. Breed’s office, Jonah reveals its reality:

Dr. Breed was mistaken about at least one thing: there was such a thing as *ice-nine*. And *ice-nine* was on earth. *Ice-nine* was the last gift Felix Hoenikker created for mankind before going to his just reward. He did it without anyone’s realizing what he was doing [. . .] He had made a chip of *ice-nine*. It was blue-white. It had a melting point of one-hundred-fourteen-point-four-degrees Fahrenheit. (51)

Jonah then informs the reader not only that the sole persons aware of this technology are Angela, Frank, and Newton Hoenikker but also that they “had divided the *ice-nine* among themselves” (51). Therefore, aligning *Cat’s Cradle* with the realm of science fiction, the narrative existence of *ice-nine* connects Vonnegut’s speculative dialogue with scientific experimentation. Given the ultimate outcome of this technology on the earth, stated by Dr. Breed, *ice-nine* facilitates Vonnegut’s satirical commentary on this institution’s misuse of “playful” ingenuity to irrevocably altering the natural world with its experiments on technology. From here, *Cat’s Cradle* begins to function on an interrogative level, hypothetically journeying through a world prone to the results of the

technological endeavors of science, wherein *ice-nine* exists and is tangibly waiting to be unleashed. Vonnegut frames Jonah's impending journey that will connect him with the three surviving Hoenikkers within the contemporary context of scientific exploits, and he directs his questions toward the "human side" of the ideological aspect of technology. At the forefront of this unavoidably science fiction narrative are Vonnegut's ethical and moral concerns for the institution of science that, when neglected, unanswered, or ignored, can have catastrophic consequences not only those who devise these technologies but also for humanity.

The epitome of science's ideology is research and knowledge, paralleling the epitome of Wall Street's ideology in Melville's "Bartleby," which is monetary success and material possessions. These are the meaning and purpose of the institutions of science and Wall Street. However, Melville satirizes this through the narrator's inability to understand Bartleby and the lawyer's inability to connect with Bartleby through offerings of the Wall Street ideology, for Bartleby cannot find purpose in working or meaning in possessions. Likewise, Vonnegut is calling into question the ideology of science, conveyed best by Dr. Breed, that "new knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth [. . .] the more truth we have to worth with, the richer we become" (41). *Cat's Cradle* satirizes this idea through *ice-nine*—parallel to currency in the Wall Street institutional construct—a product of "new knowledge" that will ultimately destroy not only the institution of science but humanity, the earth, as a whole. The very values of both Wall Street and science, ironically, serve as blinders limiting the institutions and the societies they permeate to provincial worldviews, unable to perceive the ultimate impotence of wealth and knowledge for finding meaning in human existence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Humor and Postmodern “Religion” in *Cat’s Cradle*

“Humor is a way of holding off how awful life can be, to protect yourself.”
—Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* (2005)

Based on the previous chapter’s understanding of science in *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut’s satire is linked to the novel’s realism. This chapter situates the novel in a new context from which to analyze Vonnegut’s literary art: *Cat’s Cradle*’s origin in postmodern America. Tally posits that “the world [Vonnegut] depicts in his novels is decidedly postmodern,” and that Vonnegut’s oeuvre forms “a comprehensive image of American experience in the postmodern condition of the late twentieth century” (xii). *Cat’s Cradle*, “drawing on anthropological and sociological observation,” specifically points to the postmodern attitudes toward science and religion and, ultimately, knowledge itself (xvii). An understanding of the postmodern ideas at play in the novel is integral to an appreciation of *Cat’s Cradle*’s overall meaning, for as “Vonnegut takes aim at those grand sense-making systems,” he ameliorates the suffering of the human condition with humor (53). The setting of the postmodern world, and worldview, contextualizes the novel’s optimistic wisdom for human life combined with its critical commentary. Here, I will demonstrate how postmodernity informs his social satire, yet, unlike “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Vonnegut’s novel overcomes debilitating black humor and, ultimately, confers a profound sense of optimism for human life.

However, there is no dearth of academic interpretations of and debates over the elusive term, “postmodernism.” Jochen Schulte-Sasse writes that equivocation can be avoided “as long as it is understood that postmodernity and postmodernism refer to qualitative changes in society and their cultural manifestations” (6). Conventionally, the end of World War II, wherein the succeeding “manifestations” of society and culture lost a sense of cohesion, marks this paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism. The loss of unity has to do with the postmodernist perception of the pervading world in light of the atrocities of the War. According to Christopher Butler, “a great deal of postmodernist theory depends on the maintenance of a sceptical attitude,” and he cites the famous postmodern philosopher, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s concept of ““master narratives”” (13). “In crisis and in decline,” during the postmodern world,

These narratives are contained in or implied by major philosophies, such as Kantianism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, which argue that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate us, and that all knowledge has a secret unity. The two main narratives Lyotard is attacking are those of the progressive emancipation of humanity—from Christian redemption to Marxist utopia—and that of the triumph of science. Lyotard considers that such doctrines have “lost their credibility” since the Second World War [. . .]. (Butler 13)

Lyotard essentially expresses the profound disjuncture between humanity and their narratives for informing human life, which are predominantly religious faith or scientific research, in postmodern society. Lyotard argues that humanity has lost its ethos in subscribing to these main narratives of science and religion precipitated by the warfare atrocities of World War II. Warfare technology and overall crimes against humanity discredited “these narratives,” or cultural referents, and left the postmodern world in a state of fragmentation, unable to recognize any underlying unity.

Kurt Vonnegut's proximity to the Second World War brought him close to the treachery of human ingenuity, and Lyotard's ideas are relevant to *Cat's Cradle's* depiction of human life. Claims for "these narratives" of knowledge are satirized in the novel, as *Cat's Cradle* "shows that even the most innocent or well-intentioned efforts to discover or impose meaning in the world are misguided, even dangerous" (Tally 53). In characterizing science, Vonnegut looks sharply at Dr. Hoenikker's cavalier utilization and Dr. Breed's commoditization of knowledge. Tally expounds on the postmodernist skepticism of knowledge, connecting the plot of *Cat's Cradle* with Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

In their critique of modernity in the wake of the Second World War, these Frankfurt School critics famously turn conventional wisdom on its head, suggesting that the very forces of humanistic progress led to the atrocities lately observed. That is, they reasoned, it wasn't that barbarism had briefly triumphed over civilization, but that civilization itself contained such elements of barbarism. (54)

In actuality, this so-called "humanistic progress," advancing humanity through new knowledge is anything but "humanistic," for civilizations ultimately deploy the products of their ingenuity barbarically against one another. Thus, humanity has become anything but humane, and civilizations anything but civil. Recalling Hiroshima, the novel's inception invokes an indelible image of death and destruction, driven by these "forces of humanistic progress" that damage the very fiber of humanity. Accordingly, Vonnegut impugns the value of knowledge as currency, for the "new knowledge" of which Dr. Breed speaks ends up being an instrument of barbarism. Ultimately, *Cat's Cradle* epitomizes this dialectic of human enlightenment. Yet going beyond the dialectic, Vonnegut's own observation of the tragedy of Dresden drives his narrative "toward ethics, which ultimately infuses all his work" (Tally 54).

Wary of knowledge, *Cat's Cradle's* epigraph holds that “nothing in this book is true”—reflecting the postmodernist “skepticism about the claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation” (Butler 15). By not making any definitive claims on certainty, Vonnegut demonstrates an ethical treatment of truth in the postmodern context. Jonah's narrative begins immediately with a claim on fact, and he grounds his motives on the accumulation of truth relative to physical events. While the psyche of postmodernism inhabits a fragmented narrative, the postmodernist idea of deconstruction, which “depends on relativism [. . .] that truth itself is always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks of the judging subject,” explains the individual's mentality in relating to such a narrative (Butler 16). As Jonah narrates *Cat's Cradle*, his delivery of facts, truths, and events relates to this postmodernist concept of deconstruction: he assembles different viewpoints, and a more complete portrait of the postmodern world results from the fragments. My previous chapter evidenced one of these instances through Jonah's collection of points of view—Newton Hoenikker's and Dr. Asa Breed's—as he tried to discern the truth about Dr. Felix Hoenikker, Vonnegut's caricature representative of science. Ultimately in pursuit of truth respective to the factual event of Hiroshima, Jonah's interviews with peoples' religions will show the futility of sense-making in *Cat's Cradle*.

This ineffability of meaning is bolstered and mirrored by the novel's overall structure, which fragments its own narrative into brief, seemingly senseless anecdotes. The novel's impressionistic style paradoxically reveals meaninglessness through its coherency. Viewed as a unified whole, *Cat's Cradle* shows a humorous absence of purpose in alignment with postmodern human life:

The work of postmodernists was deliberately less unified, less obviously “masterful,” more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the processes of our understanding than with the pleasures of artistic finish or unity, less inclined to hold a narrative together, and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation, than much of the art that had preceded it. (Butler 5)

As Jonah continually represents the “judging subjects” viewpoints, his narrative is a journalistic, anthropological account of humanity, surrendering *Cat’s Cradle* to subjectivity—“certain of its uncertainty”—with which Melville’s narrator could not contend (Butler 2). Presented in fragments, its overarching structure masterfully expresses *Cat’s Cradle*’s postmodernist playfulness toward truth that the narrator in “Bartleby” sought to pin down. Whereas my previous chapter focused on the congruities between Melville’s “A Story of Wall-Street” and Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle*, this chapter will delve into their incongruities concerning Melville’s and Vonnegut’s responses to the institutions and ideologies. In the lawyer’s anatomizing Bartleby and Bartleby’s pointless death, “Bartleby” is a narrative of human failure to embrace a sense-making system. In contrast, *Cat’s Cradle* embraces the human condition through the reification of religion in Vonnegut’s characterization of Bokonon, whose sentiments for survival are dependent on humor.

I. *Christianity vs. Bokononism*

Throughout the novel Vonnegut constantly calls to attention the, almost, futile nature of knowledge as it relates to religion. While Jonah’s narrative immediately introduces science—the atomic bomb—in relation to apocalypse—Hiroshima—his imperative “Call me Jonah” also calls to mind Christianity:

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 bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there. (1)

Initially tied to his writing a book—“*The Day the World Ended*”—this association points to Christianity’s complicity in potential destruction, “foreshadowing disaster on a biblical scale” (Shields 177). However, it is Jonah’s statement: “it was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then,” that parallels religion with science in relation to Jonah’s pursuit of his “factual” book (1). Christianity, from the postmodernist perspective, has “lost [its] credibility” as a unified, “master narrative” for human life. Like science, its narrative has been rent in the wake of the War—no longer able to account for humanity’s nuanced barbarism. Thus, Jonah does not expound on his transition from Christianity to Bokononism, a made-up religion originating from the fictional island of San Lorenzo. In light of the postmodern context of *Cat’s Cradle*, he simply dismisses it as a failed narrative and espouses a new religion, accounting for humanity through his Bokononist frame of reference. He occasionally divulges contrasts between the way Christianity would have informed his view of an event with the way Bokononism permits him to perceive the same event, highlighting the futility of both but the folly of the latter. However, in contrast with *Cat’s Cradle*’s central attitude toward scientific knowledge, Vonnegut does not reject the medium of religion for presenting a higher knowledge. Rather, he moderates it, making it a benign source of satisfaction for the individual and harmless toward humanity.

This sense of optimism is seemingly covert. Prophesying a bleak message of humanity, *Cat’s Cradle* “presents the apotheosis of man’s ingenuity, the ability to destroy the world itself and everyone in it” (Tally 55). Estranged from Christianity, Jonah is “a

Bokononist now,” by the start of his narrative and “would have been a Bokononist then, if there had been anyone to teach [him] the bittersweet lies of Bokonon” (2). The grand narrative of the religion of Bokononism holds “that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing,” and appears a negatively uninformed worldview (4). Here, it is difficult to see past Vonnegut’s cynical derivative of Christianity, yet there is nothing wrong with trying to discern God’s ultimate plan. However, “Bokonon simply observes that such investigations are bound to be incomplete,” for the absolute coherency ascribed to God’s narrative for human life is indiscernible to humankind (4). In a postmodernist world overcome with skepticism toward universal claims on truth, Bokononism endorses the espousal of one’s own “*foma*,” or “harmless untruths,” that sustain bravery, kindness, health, and happiness (Epigraph). Reflecting Butler’s description of deconstruction, truth is in the eye of the beholder, and Bokononism finds this subjectivity useful for humanity. Rather than ascribing a set notion of truth, Bokononism invites the individual to those that promote positive themes within life’s narrative. That the truths of science have not been “harmless” is an understatement, and thus, as his ethical concerns informed his treatment of scientific knowledge, Vonnegut “also develops a religion appropriate to such a world” (Tally 55). Bokononism is Vonnegut’s paradox—and parody—of truth as incomplete, subjective knowledge.

Through Bokononism, Vonnegut implicitly claims that there is something fundamentally positive, capable of sustaining life, in the ideology behind religion that science lacks. Jonah introduces his audience to his narrative referent: “*The Books of Bokonon*,” wherein there is a “parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to

understand” (4). This sets the stage for Vonnegut’s juxtaposing the aims of Christianity with those of Bokononism:

I once knew an Episcopalian lady [. . .] who asked me to design and build a doghouse for her Great Dane. The lady claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly. She could not understand why anyone should be puzzled about what had been or what was going to be. And yet, when I showed her a blueprint of the doghouse I proposed to build, she said to me, “I’m sorry, but I never could read one of those things.” “Give it to your husband or your minister to pass on to God,” I said, “and, when God finds a minute, I’m sure he’ll explain this doghouse of mine in a way that even *you* can understand.” She fired me. I’ll never forget her [. . .] she was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing [. . .]. (4-5)

Comparable to the Bible, Vonnegut uses Bokononism to display a grand narrative of religion through its very own book of parables and aphorisms by which Bokonon informs human life. This religion appreciates the fragmented state of postmodernity by neglecting claims on absolute truth. This religion is one that provides sustenance for human life while simultaneously poking fun at the concept of the very understanding which religion is supposed to provide. Here, the futility of knowledge exonerates humanity from the burden of trying to perceive meaning in its futile existence. Given Jonah’s “Bokononist warning” that “anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either,” the narrative progresses toward the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company (7).

II. *Religion and Humor*

Picking up the narrative where my previous chapter left it, Dr. Breed’s secretary, Miss Faust, escorts Jonah from the Research Laboratory—but not before he persuades her to let him see Dr. Hoenikker’s personal laboratory. It has been preserved since his death. Jonah’s exchange with Miss Faust, a Christian, is a piquant example of Vonnegut’s

attitude toward religion, encompassing Christianity and Bokononism. She divulges her knowledge of the deceased Dr. Hoenikker:

I don't think he was knowable. I mean, when most people talk about knowing somebody a lot or a little, they're talking about secrets they've been told or haven't been told. They're talking about intimate things, family things, love things [. . .] Dr. Hoenikker had all those things in his life, the way every living person has to, but they weren't the main things with him. (54)

Rendering the paradigm of reason inscrutable, Miss Faust subsequently states, "Dr. Breed keeps telling me the main thing with Dr. Hoenikker was truth [. . .] I don't know whether I agree or not. I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person" (54). She goes on to tell Jonah about a conversation she had with Dr. Hoenikker "where he bet [she] couldn't tell him anything that was absolutely true," and that her response to his claim was, "God is love" (54). When asked, in return: "What is God? What is love?" by Dr. Hoenikker, Miss Faust is unable to answer, yet remains unshaken, "but God really *is* love, you know [. . .] no matter what Dr. Hoenikker said" (55). This conversation emphasizes the optimistic sentiment that truth can be found independent of certainty, which Bokononism will draw from Christianity. Bokononism uses this Christian idea in a way in which Christianity does not, for Bokonon relishes in uncertainty and fiction. Informing human life in a world where attempting to do so has detrimental consequences for humanity (i.e. through Dr. Hoenikker's understanding of truth-based knowledge), Bokononism provides optimistic truths founded on humanity's absolute lack of certain knowledge through humor.

Thus, in the midst of this conversation, Jonah tells the reader that "Miss Faust was ripe for Bokononism" when she cannot understand Dr. Hoenikker's ability to sate his life with truth alone (54). She infuses her truth with her Christian faith in the same way that

Bokononism infuses truth with faith in humor. In contrast with the parable about the Episcopalian woman, Miss Faust expresses this notion of faith in her acceptance of an absolute truth that she knows she cannot explain, and Vonnegut uses this idea throughout his depiction of the Bokononist religion—which perceives absolute senselessness and responds with humor. He relays the merits of her kind of truth, unsupported by facts, in harmony with Bokononist ideology:

The first sentence in *The Books of Bokononism* 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. (5-6)

These two statements are highly significant, for they make claims both on the entirety of the Bokononist religion and on the entirety of the novel itself in relation to truth and understanding. Butler writes: “the instability of the fictional ‘world’ in which we find ourselves, and the difficulty of our coming to know it in any reliable way, is obvious in many such postmodern fictions” (69). This is especially obvious in *Cat’s Cradle*, although, Vonnegut finds optimism in this instability. The “fictional ‘world’” of the novel encourages the individual to rely only on the very state of fragmentation, and, accordingly, the reader has no choice but to progress from one chapter fragment to the next. This reveals Vonnegut’s covert optimism, for the Bokononist outlook takes the factual, fragmented state of life as an invitation for finding one’s own truths in the cracks. Thus, Vonnegut affirms Miss Faust’s sentiments toward truth and expands on this inkling of subjectivity to sanction an alternative means for interpreting an inscrutable reality.

Having encountered knowledge through two Christian perspectives—the Episcopalian woman and Miss Faust—and a glimpse of Bokononism, *Cat’s Cradle* presents understanding with humor through Lyman Enders Knowles, elevator operator at

the Laboratory. However, this comical depiction is a cautionary one, and it qualifies Vonnegut's stance on useful humor. Knowles offers an anecdote from his day when "Man" told him that the elevators at the Laboratory are "Mayan architecture" inspired:

I never knew that till today. And I says to him, "What's that make me—mayonnaise?" Yes, yes! And while he was thinking that over, I hit him with a question that straightened him up and made him think twice as hard! [. . .] I said to him, [. . .] "This here's a *research* laboratory. *Re*-search means *look again*, don't it? Means they're looking for something they found once and it got away somehow, and now they got to *research* for it? How come they got to build a building like this, with mayonnaise elevators and all, and fill it with all these crazy people? What is it they're trying to find again? Who lost what?" Yes, yes! (59)

Knowles—as his very name seems to suggest—provides a comic parody of knowledge, though Jonah is nearly certain he "was insane" (58). His subversion of the initial pronouncement of fact, ascribed inclusively to "Man," mocks human reason with his own seemingly logical response, which extends to the Research Laboratory, the very institution of science and reason. However, through Knowles, Vonnegut depicts a nonsensical mentality—"Dr. Hoenikker—he ain't dead [. . .] just entered a new dimension [. . .] yes!"—that fails to inspire optimism in the reality of human life (60). Although he is the picture of comedy, like Dr. Hoenikker and science, Vonnegut warns against its existing in a vacuum.

Meanwhile, before his journey officially begins, Jonah acquaints the reader with Sherman Krebbs, the man who inhabited his apartment "during [his] trip to Ilium and to points beyond—a two-week expedition bridging Christmas" (77). Krebbs is a poet and, like Knowles, represents another of Vonnegut's caveats. Leaving the apartment in utter shambles, "wrecked by a nihilistic debauch," Krebbs wrote a poem, "in what proved to be excrement [. . .]: 'I have a kitchen. / But it is not a complete kitchen. / I will not be

truly gay / Until I have a / Dispose-all.” (78). Informed by Bokononism that Krebbs is “a person who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, with the example of the *wrang-wrang*’s own life, to an absurdity,” Jonah declares:

I might have been vaguely inclined [. . .] to go from there to the meaninglessness of it all. But after I saw what Krebbs had done [. . .] nihilism was not for me. Somebody or something did not wish me to be a nihilist. It was Krebbs’s mission, whether he knew it or not, to disenchant me with that philosophy. Well done, Mr. Krebbs, well done. (78-79)

Therefore, Krebbs offers a negative, extremist perspective—harmful in the way that Knowles was harmless. Krebbs’ position of the absolute void of knowledge or meaning parallels with that of the Episcopalian woman, who expresses the antithesis of the nihilist extreme. Thus, what Vonnegut calls for in *Cat’s Cradle* is an amalgam of the qualities in Miss Faust and Knowles, both of whom moderate their respective counterparts.

Intertwining their perspectives, Vonnegut portrays a useful religion’s relationship to useful humor. In the context of the novel, Miss Faust’s Christian mentality is “useful” in the sense that her beliefs inspire truths for her life even though she makes no absolute claim on them as facts. Likewise, Knowles provides the example of humor in the face of misunderstandings in such a way that he calls attention to man’s folly and, subsequently, is able to make light of it. In conjunction, Vonnegut assembles the Bokononist understanding of the world.

III. *Vonnegut: Humor and Meaning*

In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut discusses his own relationship to humor as a useful response to life and, specifically, within the context of destruction relevant to *Cat’s Cradle*: “I saw the destruction of Dresden [. . .] the city before and then came out of

an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward, and certainly one response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief" (3). The postmodernist world of *Cat's Cradle* necessitates such "relief." Vonnegut explicitly elucidates *Cat's Cradle's* intentional comedy:

It's damn hard to make jokes work. In *Cat's Cradle*, for instance, there are these very short chapters. Each one of them represents one day's work, and each one of them is a joke. If I were writing about a tragic situation, it wouldn't be necessary to time it to make sure the thing works. You can't really misfire with a tragic scene. It's bound to be moving if all the right elements are present. But a joke is like building a mousetrap from scratch. You have to work pretty hard to make the thing snap when it is supposed to snap. (128)

His entire narrative on the systems for knowing is riddled with comedy, but what deters the "snap" of his jokes is the scope of *Cat's Cradle's* content. The tragedy is the human condition, and within it each day, in a sense, is its own tragedy. However, what sets this novel apart from the black humor associated with tragic events—such as characterizes his Dresden novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*—is Vonnegut's palate for comedy. He "used to laugh [his] head off at Laurel and Hardy. There is terrible tragedy there somehow. These men are too sweet to survive in this world and are in terrible danger all the time," and it is from these men that Vonnegut studied comedy (*A Man Without a Country* 4). He is able to appreciate the comedy of tragic or dire circumstances, perceiving optimism and the human comedy as a source of laughter.

Cat's Cradle is Vonnegut's attempt to incite laughter in response to Lyotard's understanding of "these narratives," the loss of which renders humanity at the mercy of the tragedies of its own making. Vonnegut specifically calls attention to humanity's agency in worsening the human condition through attempts for knowledge: the guiding narrative of science enabled its destruction, creating a world which the guiding narrative

of religion—especially Christianity—fails to explain. He turns this tragedy into a comedy:

Cat's Cradle organizes reality into this joke-world, where the attempt at mastery of the natural world, for example, is really an attempt to “get” the joke [. . .] This is the theory of the novel as well. How does one organize and order the various elements of existence into an aesthetically coherent work that can most effectively be used to understand ourselves and our relations to the world? Vonnegut's position [. . .] is that, in an utterly meaningless world, the most meaningful way to approach this task is through humor. (Tally 56)

The fact that these jokes were initially lost on many readers is common in Vonnegut's works: “if all Vonnegut's works tend to show us that we humans are the butts of one great cosmic joke, they also usually suggest that we ourselves are the jokers” (Tally 55). However, this is not a negative image. As the “jokers,” humans have the power over laughter, to put humor to good use, such as Vonnegut attempts in *Cat's Cradle*. Vonnegut poignantly states: “All I really wanted to do was give people the relief of laughing” (130).

The key joker in *Cat's Cradle* is Bokonon himself, for he gets and is able to accept the “great cosmic joke.” On the inside of this “cosmic joke,” Bokonon is free to provide relief to those struggling to understand life, “cynically and playfully” inventing Bokononism for the inhabitants of the fictional San Lorenzo (172). Jonah learns about Bokonon's background when he arrives on the impoverished island:

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)

Bokonon, then, perceives the meaninglessness of life and embraces the opportunity to fictionalize this condition, apportioning the truths that can ameliorate suffering through the narrative of *The Books of Bokonon*. Writing himself as the outlaw of this narrative of

humanity at San Lorenzo, “he asked McCabe [the president] to outlaw him and his religion, too, in order to give the religious life of the people more zest, more tang” (173). That every inhabitant of the island practices Bokononism speaks to his success in this endeavor: Bokonon himself, along with his narrative of Bokononism, is the ultimate example of the “harmless untruths” that provide positive effects on the quality of human life in the futile condition of being human. Never truly an outlaw, “Bokonon went into cozy hiding in the jungle [. . .] where he wrote and preached all day long and ate good things his disciples brought him” (173).

Herein lie the ethical and moral qualities of Vonnegut’s commentary on religion as a knowledge system, for, although Bokonon is spreading untruths whilst science is promulgating facts, the former is not doing any harm to humanity, and the latter is derailing it. Every time Bokonon “escaped” persecution, he provided the people with hope: “Miracle!” (174). Bokonon could not wholly succeed in curing humanity—“the truth was that life was as short and brutish and mean as ever”—but, nevertheless, his actions provide the moral fiber relevant to this circumstance:

But people didn’t have to pay as much attention to the awful truth. As the living legend of the cruel tyrant in the city and the gentle holy man in the jungle grew, so, too, did the happiness of the people grow. They were all employed full time as actors in a play they understood, that any human being anywhere could understand and applaud. (174-75)

Choosing not to subscribe to the tragic “truth” of life, his subjective take on his world allowed him to harmlessly promote the bravery, kindness, health, and happiness enabled by such freedom of interpretation. To understand the value of Bokonon’s lies, one has to be open to fictionalizations and, ultimately, to perceive the utility of comedy. From this historical and biographical context of Bokonon, Jonah concludes, “so life became a work

of art” (175). Thus, this image of life as art, as an understandable play or narrative, is Vonnegut’s simple answer to humanity’s trying to make sense of life’s tragedies. Taken individually—in day-to-day experiences—these tragedies are easily overlooked. As *Cat’s Cradle*’s chapters demonstrate, Vonnegut calls attention to individual instances, turning their tragedy into comedy such that the underlying quality of life is improved. Through this, the narrative of life is bolstered by a moral awareness and augmented by an ethical use of laughter to result in a humanity worthy of applause.

Lacking the misuse of technology and scientific knowledge, this aspect of art allows for the individual subject’s imposition of meaningful form on life. As *Cat’s Cradle* does for Vonnegut, art is a way of ordering the pieces of an inscrutable, meaningless life in a way that enables one to create and record one’s own meaning. Upon meeting the owner of the one hotel in San Lorenzo, Jonah is asked, “are you an aspirin salesman?” by Philip Castle (153). Jonah informs him: “I’m not a drug salesman. I’m a writer,” and Castle responds with another question: “what makes you think a writer isn’t a drug salesman?” (153). Here, Vonnegut puns on relief for the ultimate human condition with relief for a human physical condition, and this highlights the novel’s relationship to the character of Bokonon and humor. In *A Man Without a Country*, after divulging his goal of laughter, Vonnegut states that “humor can be a relief, like an aspirin tablet” (130). Thus, Vonnegut draws out the essential characteristic of Bokononism as a religion: its relationship to fiction. Bokononism—its relationship to narrative and humor—can take the human spirit where the truths of science and the doctrines of religion cannot because it ultimately embraces fiction, or lies. Like fiction, Bokononism turns life into art,

offering the beholder the chance to espouse meaning, to make sense of the artwork which he had no hand in creating.

This sense of perceiving someone else's creation is highly significant, for Bokonon explains that humans are powerless for understanding God's ultimate purpose. This, for Vonnegut, is a highly moral and ethical divergence from Christianity in the context of the human condition, for, as Jonah exclaims: "My God—life! Who can understand even one little minute of it?" (182). The answer provided is: "Don't try [. . .] just pretend you understand," and Bokonon poetically explains this phenomenon in *The Books of Bokonon* as

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand. (182)

This is a significant scene in the text for understanding Vonnegut's purpose in the entire novel, for the title, *Cat's Cradle*, and its relationship to the joke-themed disposition of the book is then made explicit. Newton Hoenikker's sneering response to this Bokononist quote is "Religion! [. . .] See the cat? [. . .] See the cradle?" (183). What Newton means by this he defined previously in the novel, discussing the cat's cradle string game his father showed him on August 6, 1945: "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*" (166). This is Vonnegut's attempt at demonstrating not only how futile and empty humanity's attempts to explain the world truly are but also the harm that these senseless endeavors can have

on the human spirit, led to believe there's an answer that is, in reality, unattainable and nonsensical—much like the cat's cradle in the web of string.

This interpretation of the cat's cradle is significant for Vonnegut's commentary on science, for it comes from Newt, who was introduced to this string game by his father—the father of the atomic bomb and Vonnegut's representative of science. For all the truth, reason, and facts that Dr. Hoenikker had to work with, the knowledge he found did not help him understand life or make it any more meaningful—for his children or for humanity. Tally articulates that the schism between knowledge and morality, according to Vonnegut, “seems almost inevitable”:

After all, Felix Hoenikker was not a bad man—far from it—but he was unable to distinguish between the knowledge for knowledge's sake of his own “pure” research, and the ethical behavior required in order to lead a happy life (hence his obliviousness toward his wife and children, for example). (Tally 71)

Where Hoenikker's knowledge lacks in ethics, Bokonon's spreading of knowledge that is really fictional provides an ethical sense of uplifting happiness to the people around him. Hoenikker, the caricature of science as an island, was unable to bestow such “meaning.” Though both systems, science and religion, have their respective pitfalls—in the sense that neither can provide any universal notion of explanatory truth about the universe for Vonnegut—the postmodern world and all its confusion is best combated with a sense of humor in the face of meaninglessness and attempts to understand it. Vonnegut demonstrates his willingness to espouse this system of humor in understanding the world in his very composition of *Cat's Cradle* the novel, aligning pursuits of knowledge amidst 127 serial jokes. As Freese relays, *Cat's Cradle* is one of the novels that replaced “the traditional satirist's faith in the efficacy of satire as a reforming instrument [by] a more

subtle faith in the humanizing value of laughter” (2). This is exactly the kind of faith Vonnegut subscribes to in understanding humanity.

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