

Exposing Social Constructions in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* through Metareligion

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ABSTRACT

Bokononism is a fictional religion Vonnegut brings into his narrative, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), to create a self-conscious novel known as metafiction. This innovative mode of writing narratives, along with providing a critique of their own methods of construction, deals with the external real world to examine some established structures of the human society like religion. By exposing the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, Vonnegut's novel gives readers an opportunity to think about the possible fictionality of the world structures outside the literary fictional text. The novel tries to reorder the world perception of readers through rearranging the values and conventions of the fiction he produced. Vonnegut's fourth novel, *Cat's Cradle*, is the first mature work which, in its use of metafiction, presents ideas about the nature of truth, dealing as it does with science and religion as its main topics. A novel telling the story of its writing shifts its metafictional focus on writing process to social concern of the novelist by means of those very metafictional strategies. What the study refers to as *metareligion* is an ideological product of metafictional writing which Vonnegut introduces in his novel. The same as metafiction that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact", Vonnegut's *metareligion* exposes the metaphor of its own duplicity and simulacrum not pretend any longer to pass for the reality of what human being keep as a sacred religion. As a metafictional novel, *Cat's Cradle* aims at leading readers to question whether the world systems in general and religion in particular could be as constructed as the novels they are reading.

Keywords: *Cat's Cradle*, Grand narratives,
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INTRODUCTION

In Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction (1985), Patricia

Waugh defines the term metafiction, first coined by American critic William Gass in 1970. To her “metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (p. 2). By employing a selection of metafictional strategies metafiction “[...] not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (p. 2). Metafiction seeks the solution to this never ending dispute in turning inwards to examine the fundamental structures of its narrative fiction, in order to study the relationship between fictional and social structures.

Although the term was coined in the second half of the 20th century, it is a concept that is not new to literature or an offspring of postmodernism. The fiction described can already be found in much older works such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and massively in Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Today, metafiction is also common in other creative genres and is primarily associated with postmodernism, which developed during the 1960s. Self-reflexive narrators appear significantly in the works of postmodern writers such as Vladimir Nabokov, John Fowles, B. S. Johnson, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Jorge Luis Borges, and Julian Barnes (Knuth, 2005, p. 1). The prevalence of metafiction in the 20th century also relates to some social and cultural aspects of the age.

To Waugh “The present increased awareness of ‘meta’ levels of discourse and experience is partly a consequence of an increased social and cultural self-consciousness” (p. 12). The impact of the world outside the text, therefore, would find footsteps in the creative product, for the fiction, as an instance here, and the culture out of which that fiction arises are in a mutual interaction in showing the level of self-consciousness.

Vonnegut, like other practitioners of metafiction by questioning the traditional frames of narrative writing, offers analogous models for understanding the world as human-made constructions. In Vonnegut’s novel *Cat’s Cradle*, violating the traditional form of biographic writing by an intruding author who plays the role of a professional biographer, brings readers a new insight into the artificial nature of such stories to which Waugh refers to as ‘artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems’(p. 9). In fact, the explicit use of metafictional technique, as Waugh describes it, stems from the modernist questioning of consciousness and reality. Waugh comments that “contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history is provisional: no longer a world of external verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures” (p. 7).

This paper aims to display the way writers of metafiction in general and Vonnegut in particular bring an understanding of the construction of grand narratives of religion and art in the world outside novels. The understanding lays bare the truth that “we are

all trapped in our systems for measuring and understanding the world” and metafiction comes to regulate our system of measuring (Forrest, 1973, p. 4).

Todd Davis, in his book *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, illustrates how the American novelist (Vonnegut) manages to keep his status as one of the figureheads in postmodern literature while remaining socially conscious and humane. Against the postmodernist call for autonomous literature, Davis admires Vonnegut as “our leading literary pragmatist” (Davis, 2006, p. 9). By the way, as one of the most prominent techniques in writing postmodern novels, metafiction tries not to hold a mirror up to human nature or reality; instead, it avoids this traditional mimetic illusion by putting a mirror up to the art of novel writing itself. In *Metafiction* Mark Currie quotes that John Barth defines metafiction as a “novel that imitates a novel rather than the real world” (Currie, 1995, p. 161). While some critics used to relate metafiction only to the creative process with the purpose of showing how narratives create worlds independent from reality and consequently expose themselves and reality as human constructs, others like Linda Hutcheon (in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*) claims that metafiction does have a social side as it obviously establishes links with reality. Her emphasis on the social role of metafiction to the extent that she argues, “If self-reflecting texts can actually lure the reader into participating in the creation of a novelistic universe, perhaps he can also be seduced into action--even direct political action” (p. 155).

In drama, the “alienation effect” or “*verfremdung*” of Bertolt Brecht has also close aesthetic goals with slightly different political and social tendencies. Hutcheon compares metafiction with Brecht's theory in her essay “Postmodern Paratextuality and History” and concludes that they “can have the effect of interrupting any illusion, of making the reader into an aware collaborator, not a passive consumer” (p. 8). Alienating devices like masks, visible stage machinery, glaring lights, and various metadramatic techniques help Brecht to flaunt the pretentious nature of his drama. They create an ‘alienation’ effect within the audience in a way that the stage turned to a social motivator instead of a dramatic art scene. The key distinction of metafiction and *the alienation effect* as introduced by Brecht is that the former does not intend to detach the reader completely by focusing on political and social end that the latter has especially planned for. Metafiction does not aim to sacrifice the pleasure of literature for the sake of social propaganda; rather, it serves a conscious interaction of fiction with the external realities.

As self-consciousness plays a fundamental role in metafiction, the representation of the external world realities shares high degrees of awareness and observation. The focal point of difference in such kind of writing with other modes is the efforts of metafictional writers to bring readers into an unbiased challenge of comparing and recognizing the dividing line between the real and the constructed. The impact of the world outside the text, therefore, would find footsteps in the

creative product, for the fiction and the culture out of which that fiction arises are in a mutual interaction in showing the level of self-consciousness. Hutcheon appreciates metafiction for the revolutionary newness of its demands on a reader by its self-consciousness in the way that, in her words, it makes the reader “read with his imagination and ordering faculties alert and at work” (1980, p. 82).

Metafiction then reflects its self-reflexiveness that is speaking to us powerfully about real political and historical realities. Hutcheon again makes use of a quotation from McCaffery and continues: “It has thus become a kind of model for the contemporary writer, being self-conscious about its literary heritage and about the limits of mimesis...but yet managing to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page” (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 5). The self-consciousness of the literary text that passes the limits of mimesis connects readers to the realities of the world outside and remains as the central discussion here. In *Cat’s Cradle*, metafiction, as a formal juxtaposition of fiction and reality, presents a religion with a fictional sphere that brings into the core of all the debates in the novel the necessity of consciousness.

Vonnegut wants to make writing an “act of good citizenship or an attempt, at any rate, to be a good citizen” (Davis, 2006, p. 5). Vonnegut deconstructs and demystifies the “grand narratives” of the American culture while offering provisional narratives—*petites histoires*—that may serve as tools for daily living. The consciousness finds

practical underpinnings in the stories of Vonnegut as a postmodern novelist. Vonnegut tries his best to transmit his social consciousness to his readers by the help of provisional narratives.

CONSTRUCTED WORLDS IN *CAT’S CRADLE*

Kurt Vonnegut is perhaps the most popular and widely read American novelist of the past century, who was continually challenging narrative strategies/ tactics in his work. From the early unsuccessful novels of the 1950s, with his first and second novels *Player Piano* (1952) and *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), respectively, to his rise in popularity in the late 1960s, with his masterpiece *Slaughterhouse Five*, he never ceased to use innovative techniques to improve his writing. Among the many critics who have studied the works and ideas of Vonnegut, Jerome Klinkowitz summarizes him thus, “Vonnegut’s real intent is to reorder our perception of the world, to revalue our basis for meaning” (p. 51).

To reorder the world perception of readers, he needed to rearrange the values and conventions of the fiction he produced. The way people see and understand the realities of the world is the focal point in both the fictional and non-fictional works of Vonnegut. He specifically examined the potential of fiction to devise an acceptable literary method of presenting his ideas which he willingly calls part of his commitment and responsibility to his readers. This sense of duty directs Vonnegut to change the way people perceive

reality through his incomparable way that opposes the conventional style of "old-fashioned storytellers". They used to "make people believe that life had leading characters, minor characters, significant details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Vonnegut, 1973. p. 209).

While Vonnegut used a variety of literary techniques in his early novels, he tried to develop a method that would allow him to surpass the restrictions of literary conventions, i.e. realism. The most viable literary innovation that Vonnegut follows is that of offering a new perspective of reality by presenting moral and social concerns in the form of amusing fictional worlds governed by metafictional strategies. In short, metafiction and metafictional strategies display the status of fiction in a way to rearrange and refresh the perspectives of reality in and outside the fictional world for readers. Exposing the conventions of realism, metafiction helps fiction to carry thematic points without didactic authorial intrusion.

Vonnegut's fourth novel, *Cat's Cradle*, is the first mature work which, in its use of metafiction, presents ideas about the nature of truth, dealing as it does with science and religion as its main topics. The authorial concerns of Vonnegut also find a new perspective by exposing the challenges to writing in the novel. After years of experimenting with self-conscious writing in his early novels, Vonnegut takes a considerable deviation from conventional

novel writing and tries to approach the kind of metafiction which may deal with the themes and reality of the outside world. No matter what label critics use for his writing, he pushes forward and gives priority to pursuing his ideals for responsible literature. The point is that Vonnegut usually tends to blend the exploration of his main idea with a fictional context that reserves an aesthetic balance for the self-conscious narrative with all its violating mediums. Though the balance of aesthetic and thematic concerns is a distinguished talent Vonnegut enjoys in the novel, the priority of ideas is difficult to be concealed.

Cat's Cradle (1963) opened up a new path for Vonnegut by choosing to fictionalize his writing career to find answers to the questions he was challenged with in *Mother Night*, about the harm a writer may do to his readers. A novel telling the story of its writing, *Cat's Cradle* is supposed to be what the author calls *foma* or harmless untruths. Mingling an intricate literary device, metafiction, with moralistic themes leads to fiction appreciated by both ordinary readers and rigid critics. It is in *Cat's Cradle* that Vonnegut, for the first time, offers a deliberate view of constructedness by subverting the conventions of fiction and self-conscious narration. The novel, presenting ideas through metafiction, traces the story of John or "Jonah" as he asks the reader to call him. John is the narrator of the novel who seeks to write a book called "The Day the World Ended"; it is about what important Americans were doing on the day of the Hiroshima bombing, 6 August 1945.

As John, the narrator, examines the background for his book, he becomes interested in Dr Felix Hoenikker, the father of the atomic bomb. It is in fact John's familiarity with the story of the fictional character, Dr Felix Hoenikker, and his interactions with his family, that push the plot of *Cat's Cradle* forward. He finally makes contact with Dr. Hoenikker's family as he travels to the fictional Caribbean island of San Lorenzo, which is ruled by a dictator called "Papa" Monzano. On San Lorenzo, all Dr. Hoenikker's siblings gather in the final stage of the story and John realizes that each of the Hoenikker children has a crystal of ice-nine, a new mass destruction weapon.

All the natives of San Lorenzo practise the new religion of Bokononism, which helps them to tolerate their poverty. While the religion is outlawed by the state, everyone on the island, including the governor "Papa" Monzano, is a Bokononist. The religion openly admits that its teaching is based on lies. There are special terms coined by the founder of the religion, which are used frequently through the novel and imply a critical view of the nature of religion and religious beliefs in the society. John's survival of the initial disaster caused by the new weapon gives him time to live through the final chapter "The Day the World Ended", which is in fact the completion of his diaries, discovered to be the text of the novel *Cat's Cradle*.

Following *foma*, while being aware of its artificial nature, is a lesson given by the fictive religion of the novel and shows to the reader the innovative strategies

of metafiction with the same goals. The significant experience in the novel takes place around an invented religion, Bokononism, which is totally based on "shameless lies", according to its founder. The novel seems to be about several topics; however, what makes it metafiction is traceable by focusing on the presentation of the fictional religion, its thematic results, its principles' impact, and the analogy with the rest of the events.

METARELIGION

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut's use of the invented religion *Bokononism* works as a lens to unmask the truths under the veil of fabricated realities. Hanuman in his article, "Hope and Despair: A Carnavalesque Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*", offers a carnivalesque interpretation of the novel which deals with the challenges human has with religion and science. Vonnegut, "using the carnival features of parody and the dehumanization projected through war," unveils the untold realities through literary devices (p. 2).

Bokononism is a religion that promotes both metafictional doctrines and Vonnegut's ideal, desiring of "artists as agents of change" (Allen, 1988, p. 5). Basically founded on *foma*, harmless untruths, the religion enjoys qualities that receive Vonnegut's praise and criticism. The same as the metafiction that reveals its artefact, the novel exposes religion by articulating *Bokononism*. The religion that the novel presents discloses its constructedness from within and through the novel to the extent

that even their followers are fully aware it consists of lies. The exhibition of such a human-made religion deserves to be labelled *metareligion* by the study, after the name metafiction. *Metareligion*, then, may be defined as a religion that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact following the definition of metafiction.

Cat's Cradle raises *Bokononism*, passing from three layers of storytelling as a part of the metafictional strategy of a narrative within a narrative. John the narrator, in the first layer, is assigned to do a story in San Lorenzo where he meets the only scholarly book ever written about the island - *San Lorenzo: The Land, the History, the People*. Throughout the novel, John refers to this book, as the second layer of the narrative within a narrative, by quoting from The Books of *Bokonon*, *Bokononist* poems or *Calypso*, and the principles of the religion. The Books of *Bokonon*, with no recognized copy, is the third layer of narrative, the *Bokononism* story.

As bringing metafiction into the narrative of the religion displays its artefacts, the doctrines of *Bokononism* foreground the merits and demerits of the religion in particular, and all human religions in general. The novel draws the reader's attention to the artificiality of the new religion by saying, "They aren't printed. They're made by hand." Such a religion could not have a complete copy "since *Bokonon* is adding things every day" (*Cat's Cradle*, p. 128). *Cat's Cradle* implies the same as all existing religions that *Bokononism* relies on no

established foundation and follows the interests of their authors. "Drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book", here, the novel portrays the religion as a book including a self-conscious narrative (Waugh, 1984, p. 3).

Young Lionel Boyd Johnson, known later as *Bokonon*, has been a carouser interested in the "outward trappings of organized religion", stepping in San Lorenzo, with "a self-educated, idealistic Marine deserter named Earl McCabe" (*Cat's Cradle*, pp. 73-75). They dreamed of making San Lorenzo a Utopia, therefore McCabe "overhauled" the economy and the laws and Johnson "designed" a new religion (p. 90). The novel provides a biography of the two major personalities of the island and the new religion to establish the next steps for introducing *Bokononism* in detail.

The novel obviously displays what kind of product *Bokononism* is by linking the act of overhauling the economy and law with designing a new religion. This is almost the same as the warning of the novel's narrator John when he informs the reader of the nature of his story and all other stories people may believe in. John's warning is that all the true things he is about to tell us are in fact shameless lies. It is also the first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon*, recast in the form of the narrator's advice about all religions, "anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. So be it" (*Cat's Cradle*, p. 4).

The design of the new religion is founded on pure lies, on a floating axis

acknowledging its own fallibility, its own constructedness. By the way, it satisfies the needs of its followers by concealing the bitter realities they do not like to know about. Praise of the new religion in the novel is in fact a criticism of religions outside the realm of narration, for neglecting the mental delight of their followers. What is supposed to be the main duty of religion, satisfaction, is provided by *Bokononism*, which turns into a model very much resembling Christianity, a caricature of which is offered through another character, the Christian minister, Dr. Vox Humana, who is also, metaphorically, a caricaturist in the novel. Awarded by “the Western Hemisphere University of the Bible of Little Rock, Arkansas”, Humana’s system of values is revealed in the motto he prepared for the university and is very close to the “Dynamic Tension” of *Bokonon*. The presence of clearly defined evil, Papa Monza and his power, which haunts the prophet *Bokonon*, makes the religion very attractive, the same as Jesus Christ and the brutal Romans of his age. *The motto of the University was “MAKE RELIGION LIVE!”* (*Cat’s Cradle*, p. 135).

Against the absolutism of worldly belief systems, *Bokononists* used to whisper, “Busy, busy, busy” whenever they thought of how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is (*Cat’s Cradle*, p. 46). The religion does not prevent its followers from discovering the limits of their *karass* (people with the same inclinations) or the nature of the work the God Almighty has had them do; rather it offers a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand (*Cat’s Cradle*, p.

3). It encourages the narrator of the novel to convert to *Bokoninism* and changes the course of his book that was to be Christian. In addition, the invented religion of the novel has the basic tenet of all religions in its proposing utopian ends. In a famous *Calypsos* (the religion’s equivalent of prayer) that Castle’s book quotes from *Bokonon*, there is obvious celebration of the fallacy:

*I wanted all things
To seem to make some sense,
So we all could be happy, yes,
Instead of tense.
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise.*

(*Cat’s Cradle*, p. 90)

The fictional religion of the novel, which is based on convenient lies while directing the reader to the self-conscious status of reading narratives, carries a warning to fulfil the social responsibility of Vonnegut as an artist. The novel brings ideas for examination, the same as objects in the research laboratory of Dr Hoenikker. Religion, like “Every one of those exhibits explains itself” in the metafictional laboratory of Vonnegut, for “They’re designed so as-not-to be mystifying” (*Cat’s Cradle*, p. 25).

Reading *Cat’s Cradle* as a metafiction, with a variation of techniques and strategies, calls attention to the fictionality of the narrative. This situation, by means of

metafictional displacement, increases the reader's awareness of the realities of our own world, which are discussed in one way or another in the novel. While autobiography and referring to historical events give authenticity to classic realism by sustaining Coleridge's notion of the willing suspension of disbelief, *Cat's Cradle* moves in exactly the opposite direction by stating that "Nothing in this book is true" (p. 4). By drawing the reader's attention to the status of the novel as an artefact, Vonnegut leads his readers to the border line of fiction and reality to illuminate that, in contrast to common expectations, novels could take part in the process of bringing changes into societies by giving awareness about the issues people regard as truth.

Such truths, coated in the form of ideologies, are the focal point in the novel, which has received diverse labels from the critics reviewing Vonnegut's novels. To Waugh, they are 'subjectivity', whereas Todd Davis speaks of grand narratives. Patricia Waugh, the main theoretician of the study, labels them as the "subjectivity in the world outside novels", which is pursued by metafiction through its self-exploration. To her, such a pursuit takes place by "drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book, but often recasting it in terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic, or literary theory" (Waugh, 1984, p. 3). Todd Davis, on the other hand, refers to the ideologies in Vonnegut's novels as "America's grand narratives" on which the nature of his metafiction exhibits "the most basic tenet of Lyotard's celebrated definition

of postmodernity: an incredulity toward grand narratives" (Davis, 2006, p. 43 & 59).

CONCLUSION

Cat's Cradle is, more than anything, about the grand narrative that may be most central to American culture - *religion* (Davis, 2006, p. 84). Vonnegut espouses his main focus with other grand narratives of American culture, especially the narrative of scientific progress and power manipulated in the form of metafiction. Known as 'reflexive' or 'self-conscious' fiction, *Cat's Cradle* exposes its constructedness through metafictional techniques like frame-breaking, a story within a story, play, and the intrusion of an intruding writer, John, who plays the role of a genuine writer. It is the first time that foregrounding the act of writing or what Sukenick calls "the truth of the page" or showing that there is a writer sitting there writing the story, appears in a Vonnegut novel (quoted in McHale, 1987, p. 198).

While Vonnegut's fourth novel stands on the first step of Vonnegut's metafictional experience, the strategies it uses nurture an acceptable status among the pioneers of the genre. The intruding voice of the author, in the words of a narrator, John, in chapter one of the novel, leaves readers with an ambiguous connection between Jonah, as the double and fictitious author of the book in chapter 34 *Vin-dit*. Jonah, here, submits that the screwy name on the pedestal is his last name, declares the fictionality of the fiction.

The self-consciousness of the act of writing in the novel shifts to thematic

reflection on the ideological spheres of religion and power. The plot of the novel displays the interaction of these two areas in the form of a system that is defined theoretically by *Bokonon* as ‘Dynamic Tension’. It is a priceless equilibrium between good and evil, which are religion and power on San Lorenzo Island. *Bokonon*, bosom friend of Corporal McCabe, the ruler, had come to be an outlaw in order to give the religious life of the people more zest more tang (*Cat’s Cradle*, pp, 95-121). The novel is successful in explaining the complicated web of power entangled in the physical and spiritual lives of the inhabitants of the fictional Island of San Lorenzo.

Meanwhile, exposing the artificiality of the novel forces the reader to recognize the reality of reading the novel as it admits its situation. *Cat’s Cradle* transfers the reader from a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ to an active and conscious consideration of the truths of life, in the same way they are conscious of ‘the truth of the page’. This time, the page is part of ‘the world as book’ in a modern representation of the sphere they live in.

Selecting the relation between religion and power shows that as Vonnegut describes the writer figure in his fifth novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965), he himself is the only one who talks about what simple big ideas may do to us. In *Cat’s Cradle*, he practically shows us what tremendous misunderstandings may do to us through his metafiction as an expression of the artificial and complicated nature of many of the belief systems of our world. The novel says and

shows that the character in the novel playing a cat’s cradle, a child’s game, is only playing with strings.

The followers of *Bokononism* must believe the religion’s doctrines. Thus, they believe the lies, and all the while they are aware of the falsity of their beliefs. This is the sharpest part of Vonnegut’s criticizing religion, which is discussed in detail under the title of *metareligion*. Such a strategy could also be explained with postmodern terminology, as Todd Davis refers to in his book, *Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade; or How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism*. Davis believes that “the nature of Vonnegut’s postmodernism exhibits the most basic tenet of Lyotard’s celebrated definition of postmodernity: an incredulity toward grand narratives” (p. 41). Discussing the morality in *Cat’s Cradle* and the postmodernism of the work, he states that “Vonnegut demystifies and decenters the grand Narratives of America while beginning to offer inevitably provisional answers, the only kind there are to the question of a postmodern condition” (p. 58).

Though religion is the first narrative of importance in the grand narratives of American culture in *Cat’s Cradle*, it is the exposure of fundamental basis of social beliefs that comes into consideration for the study. Selecting religion as a significant and touchable sample helps the novel to extend its sphere to a vast range of topics not only in the setting of contemporary debates, but on a historical representation of believers and ideologies. What people find as an established mode of belief may be

regarded as fictional as the invented religion of the novel.

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